

SAINT JOHN  
AND THE BOOK OF REVELATION

FROM ESSENES TO END-TIMES



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by John and Gloria Ben-Daniel



Beit Yochanan  
Jerusalem

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To “those who keep the Commandments of God  
and have the Witness of Jesus” (Rev 12,17)



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## *Preface*

A large part of our lives over the last 30 years has been dedicated to the study of the Book of Revelation and its setting in the New and Old Testaments. The more we spoke about our researches to others, the more we came to realize that lack of credibility was one of the main obstacles to comprehension. How can we begin to relate to the Book of Revelation if we do not believe what it seems to say? With the Book of Revelation, perhaps more than any other book in the Bible, there is a need to have faith in what it claims to be: 'the Word of God and the Witness of Jesus' (Rev 1,2), whose words are 'faithful and true' until the fulfillment of all its visions at the end of history (Rev 19,9; 21,5; 22,6).

Although this faith is to be regarded as a divine gift, there are many ways to help it on its path to accepting and understanding the Book of Revelation: familiarity with the text by reading it often, prayer to open the eyes of the soul, and scholarly commentary to explain its language and imagery. As we see it, there is also a need for brushing away the obstacles—all those prejudices and presumptions that have accumulated over the centuries. And this is the task we hope to achieve with these essays.

Most of the essays in this book have taken shape over the last 3 years and, except for the first, are presented in the same order as they were written. A quick glance will show that they progress naturally like an introductory course on the Book of Revelation, starting with the basic ABC's of author, background and composition, and ending with the more complex issues of symbolism and significance. So, although the essays are self-contained and can be read in any order, they will probably make more sense if read in the order they are presented.

Every piece of research has the potential to stimulate enquiries in related fields. This is what generated the first chapter in this book, which was written last of all. The modern presumption that 'the apostle John, a fisherman's son from Galilee, could never have become the writer of an apocalypse like the Book of Revelation, or of a gospel such as the Fourth Gospel', prompted the search for a radical explanation.

It has been known for some time that John's Apocalypse has a profound affinity with the writings of Enoch and, in particular, with a

pre-Christian 'ascent apocalypse' called the Parables of Enoch (*1Enoch* 37-71). From internal textual clues, a majority of specialists have agreed in recent years that the Parables of Enoch was produced towards the end of the first century BCE, in eastern Galilee. The local Israeli archaeologist, Mordechai Aviam, is more specific, and through echoes of the ancient landscape in the text, and vice versa, locates it to Magdala, the lakeside fish-processing town, recently excavated and now a popular archaeological site. This would certainly explain an early link with John for, as the son of a fishing-boat owner, he and his brother James would have made frequent crossings to Magdala to sell off surplus fish for processing and marketing. These visits to Magdala could easily have led to discussions over the prophecies of Enoch and especially the messianic prophecies in the Parables of Enoch. A deep interest awoken in the young John, in this way, would then explain why he became a disciple of John the Baptist before joining Jesus of Nazareth.

But there is more to it than that. As an industrial fish-processing centre, Magdala was not the best environment for the Scriptural study and contemplation that produced the Parables of Enoch. Everybody who knows the location will agree that the ideal place for that is Mount Arbel, with its spectacular views over the lake, its mountainous rim and Mount Hermon in the distance. In fact, it may be no coincidence that Mount Hermon and its surroundings form the earthly setting for the opening vision of the Book of Watchers, the book that precedes the Parables of Enoch in the *First Book of Enoch*.

A 'eureka moment' follows the discovery that at least 120 caves in the cliffs of Mount Arbel have been found with signs of inhabitation in antiquity, and of these many contain plastered cisterns and ritual baths (*mikva'ot*). In some, all that remains of these installations are fragments of plaster that can be dated back to Hasmonean times (167-63 BCE). History says that only robbers, rebels and refugees inhabited these caves when fleeing from the authorities and that, when the trouble had passed, they moved elsewhere. But the finding of *mikva'ot* and cisterns in many of the caves points to permanent and extensive occupation by a religiously observant community, not by outlaws or refugees. So, who were these residents?

The archaeological input to date amounts to two superficial surveys conducted in 1989 and in 2007. A more probing excavation of

particular sites could confirm the suspicion that this ‘cave-village’, as it is called, was home to the Essene scribal community responsible for a large number of intertestamental writings, including the Parables of Enoch, after they had separated from the branch that settled at Qumran. If this ‘hypothesis’ is confirmed, it will transform our understanding of the Essenes, the social setting of their literature, Second Temple Judaism and Early Christianity. Last but not least, it will also help to explain how members of the local population at that time, even humble fishermen like John, were introduced to the prophetic and apocalyptic literature of the Essenes. So, just as this first chapter arose as a ‘spin-off’ from the others, we hope that it too, in its turn, will stimulate interest and research in related areas.

Finally, we hope that the contents of these essays will not only help to throw light on the past, but also on the present and future, for the Book of Revelation embraces every age and all time, with a clear emphasis on the end of time and history. The last two essays, in particular, examine the way the Book of Revelation speaks about the consummation of history and the eschatological transformation of life, which is yet to come. Its final visions offer the glimpse of a future that is nowhere else to be found and enjoyed—a future of abundant life, blessing, peace and health in the presence of God and Christ.

Thanks are due to many individuals, scholars, priests and institutions for their critical support in this work, and especially to the staff of the École Biblique et Archéologique Française for their incomparable library service in Jerusalem. Above all, thanks and praise to him who ‘rebukes and chastens the ones he loves’ and then ‘stands at the door and knocks’ to see if he can ‘come in and eat with us’ (Rev 3,19-20).

John and Gloria Ben-Daniel  
Jerusalem  
September, 2019



## *Introduction*

The purpose of these seven essays is to prepare the reader for a fresh reading of the Book of Revelation by returning to the sources in a review of its remote setting, authorship, immediate background, composition, imagery and narrative. These subjects are all related to the making of the Book of Revelation and are therefore valuable for attaining greater understanding.

The first essay (*Lakeside Galilee and the Essene Caves Hypothesis*) describes the very special religious and cultural setting into which the author of the Book of Revelation was born and brought up. It presents an original account of Essene history and a new hypothesis about their presence in the Arbel cave-village near the Sea of Galilee, from about 100 BCE.

The next essay concerns the historical dispute about 'authorship'. The author of the book says his name is John and proceeds to speak to the churches with authority, as one who is known as a leader. The apostle John is the only leader of that name recognized by the tradition of the early Church. So, when his successors in these churches specifically identify the author as the apostle John, it is perfectly reasonable to accept their testimony, even though the author does not spell out his apostolic status. On the contrary, if any other opinion regarding authorship is to be accepted, the burden of proof lies on the challenger. In our view the case against the traditional attribution to the apostle John is very shaky indeed and should not be given priority over the tradition. The second essay in this collection (*The Author of the Book of Revelation*) therefore defends the traditional position on authorship and supports it with new evidence. This view is reinforced by the third essay (*The Johannine Question Answered*) which highlights the poverty of evidence against the traditional view and the blind alleys into which it leads.

In the fourth essay we revisit the book's 'historical background', which is tied to the date of authorship. Again, Church tradition gives us a precise date, which is entirely consistent with the historical evidence from the text itself. There are no grounds for doubting this evidence, so again we take the traditional date of 95-96 CE and piece together, from various sources, the events of that time (*The Historical Background to the Book of Revelation*). As we do this, we see how

rejection of the traditional date has obscured the quest for important background information. A drama of Shakespearian proportions was unfolding at the time, at the seat of imperial power in Rome, and the outcome was especially challenging for Christians. The Book of Revelation was given to the churches to help with this challenge, though up to now very few scholars are aware of this.

'Composition' is another area where progress has been stymied by refusal to recognize the authorship and authenticity of the text. The author tells us clearly that, like the ancient prophets and visionaries, he received his revelation by supernatural and mystical experience, and so investigation of the composition of his book should take this into account. In the fifth essay we explore this path and, with the help of other scholars, arrive at a deeply satisfying explanation of how the text was composed and structured (*The Composition and Structure of the Book of Revelation*).

The last two essays are about the imagery and symbolism in the Book of Revelation, the original medium of the text: the first of these sets out to identify the dominant imagery in St. John's visions, before examining its hermeneutical significance (*Imagery in the Book of Revelation and its Dominant Theme*). The second probes the narrative symbolism of the second part of the book and finds that although it can be traced back to ancient Middle-Eastern myth, its true focus is on the end-historical events surrounding the second coming of Christ (*Myth, History and End-Time Prophecy in Revelation 12-22*).

None of this would have been possible without the contributions of innumerable churchmen and scholars, down the ages, to whom appreciation and gratitude are always due. However, there is an unhealthy tendency in the academic world today to reject the tradition *a priori*, without carefully reviewing the evidence. The result is that scholars living 2,000 years after the writing of the Book of Revelation presume to know more about the book and its author than those witnesses, known for putting a high value on the truth, who lived where the author lived and within living memory of his presence, namely Justin Martyr who lived in Ephesus c.130 CE and Irenaeus who was born and raised in Smyrna c.125-130 CE. Both have independently stated for the record that the author of the book was John the apostle.

A recent example is called for. When Craig R. Koester, in his 2014 commentary on Revelation, writes "Since Justin and Irenaeus valued Revelation, it would be natural for them to assume that 'John' was the

apostle”,<sup>1</sup> one wonders whether this scholar seriously thinks Irenaeus and Justin were only stating an ‘assumption’ about the author, just as a modern scholar would do. Did Koester evaluate the evidence or is he projecting his own mental reasoning on to the statements of ancient churchmen? This becomes clearer later, when he is discussing the date of authorship: “it is unlikely that Irenaeus preserves reliable historical information. His comment about the date is linked to his assumption that the author was the apostle. If this assumption is incorrect, there is little reason to think that he was accurate about the date”.<sup>2</sup> So yes, he really does think that Irenaeus’ statements about authorship and date are only based on assumptions! Writing nearly twenty centuries later, he overlooks all the local knowledge that gave Irenaeus the certainty that John the apostle was the author—all the eyewitnesses, including Polycarp, Papias and even his own family and church community, from whom Irenaeus had learnt the facts. Repeating the same academic prejudice again and again does not make it true. It is an insult to the earliest witnesses, an embarrassment to scholarship and an obstacle to making further progress. Only by challenging these widely accepted and much-repeated presumptions and prejudices of scholarship, and by returning to the sources, can true progress be made.

May these essays be a small contribution. For further work on our new approach to the Book of Revelation, please take a look at [www.newtorah.org](http://www.newtorah.org).

<sup>1</sup> Craig R. Koester, *Revelation: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, The Anchor Yale Bible, New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 2014; 66.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* 74.

## CHAPTER 1

### Lakeside Galilee and the Essene Caves Hypothesis

#### Introduction

This research began with a simple question concerning the apostolic authorship of the Book of Revelation: How could the apostle John, a fisherman born by the Sea of Galilee around 10 CE, ever have become the writer of an apocalypse like the Book of Revelation, or of a gospel such as the Fourth Gospel? The explanation has been so elusive that many scholars nowadays assert that “this Gospel cannot come from a Galilean fisherman”,<sup>1</sup> and that “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”.<sup>2</sup> With these denials by some of the most prominent biblical scholars of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the subject needs to be reviewed in a new way.

A new direction is suggested by looking at works of the same genre that may have been known by the author of the Book of Revelation. George Nickelsburg affirms that one work stands out among the rest: “In its form as an apocalypse in which the seer is taken to heaven to see the events relating to the coming judgment, this work [the Book of Revelation] offers the closest first century Christian analog to the Parables of Enoch. A number of other Enochic elements are present as well”.<sup>3</sup> A dedicated study has also recently confirmed that, of all the

<sup>1</sup> Martin Hengel, *The Johannine Question*, Eng. Trans John Bowden, London/Philadelphia: SCM Press/Trinity Press International, 1989; 130.

<sup>2</sup> David Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, Word Biblical Commentary, Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1997; Vol 1, lvi.

<sup>3</sup> ‘Where is the Place of Eschatological Blessing’, *Things Revealed: Studies in Early Jewish and Christian Literature in Honour of Michael E. Stone*, eds. E. Chazon, D. Satran and R. Clements, Leiden: Brill, 2004; 70.



pre-Christian apocalypses, the author of the Book of Revelation was closest to the collection of writings called *1Enoch*, and especially to the book at the centre of that collection called the Parables of Enoch (*1Enoch* 37-71).<sup>4</sup>

Quite separately, over the last 20 years, the Parables of Enoch has been the subject of intense research and discussion by scholars from around the world. At a meeting at Camaldoli, Italy, in 2005, forty-four specialists met to discuss this work<sup>5</sup> and out of their discussion came general agreement that it was written towards the end of the first century BCE. James Charlesworth goes so far as to suggest that it was composed in eastern Galilee and was known to Jesus and his early followers.<sup>6</sup> Charlesworth published his thesis in greater detail in 2013<sup>7</sup> and, in the same book, the local Israeli archaeologist, Mordechai Aviam, argued that its birthplace was the ancient town of Magdala, or Tarichaea in Greek.<sup>8</sup>

At this point, it is difficult to ignore a spatial and temporal connection with the early life of John the son of Zebedee, future apostle of Jesus Christ. As the owner of at least one fishing boat, Zebedee would

<sup>4</sup> 'The Apocalypse of John, I Enoch, and the Question of Influence', by Loren Stuckenbruck and Mark Mathews, *Die Johannesapokalypse*, Tübingen, Mohr Siebeck, 2012; 191-234. The authors conclude that apart from Exodus, Daniel, Isaiah and Ezekiel, whose importance for the Book of Revelation is the greatest, the influence of *1Enoch* is comparable to that of the other canonical books of the Bible. Regarding the relation between *1Enoch* and the Book of Revelation they write: "The largest number of significant parallels (...) suggesting the possibility of Enochic influence on Revelation has to do with the *Book of Parables* (six). This signifies an affinity that can be explained by the relative contemporaneity of the *Book of Parables* with Revelation or by the use of one by the other, with the direction of influence most likely being from the *Book of Parables* to Revelation" op. cit. 233.

<sup>5</sup> The 3<sup>rd</sup> Enoch Seminar on the topic "Enoch and the Messiah Son of Man", whose proceedings were later published in "*Enoch and the Messiah Son of Man: Revisiting the Book of Parables*", ed. Gabriele Boccaccini, Grand Rapids, MI/Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 2007.

<sup>6</sup> James H Charlesworth, 'Can We Discern the Composition Date of the Parables of Enoch?', *Enoch and the Messiah Son of Man*, 450-68.

<sup>7</sup> James H. Charlesworth, 'The Date and Provenience of the Parables of Enoch', *Parables of Enoch: A Paradigm Shift*, eds. Darrell L. Bock and James H. Charlesworth, London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2013; 37-57; id. 'Did Jesus know the Traditions', *Paradigm Shift*, 173-217.

<sup>8</sup> Mordechai Aviam, 'The Book of Enoch and the Galilean Archaeology and Landscape', *Parables of Enoch: A Paradigm Shift*, 159-69.

have sent his surplus fish for processing in Magdala, and so it is more than likely that his sons, John and James, made regular and frequent crossings to that town. There, they certainly would have come to know and discuss religious matters and one of the more important matters would have been the Parables of Enoch. This was a messianic prophecy that had been written only a generation before, either in Magdala itself or, more likely, in the vicinity—for the large population, the constant industrial activity and the strong smell of fish in Magdala itself would have deterred all but the briefest of visits by the contemplative scribe or scribes who wrote this book.

So, if not in Magdala itself, the 'birthplace' of the Parables of Enoch was somewhere in the vicinity, at a place that remains to be identified with greater precision.

#### Arbela, Mount Arbel and the Caves

In the *Book of Enoch* (*1Enoch*), the Parables of Enoch (*1Enoch* 37-71) are preceded by an older work called the Book of Watchers (*1Enoch* 1-36), whose narrative is set on top of, and at the foot of, Mount Hermon in north-eastern Galilee, a mere 50-60 kms due north of Magdala. However, because of its low level by the lake, Mt. Hermon is barely visible from this town. Nevertheless, wonderful views of Mount Hermon can be seen only 2 kms to the west of Magdala, from the summit of the mountain with a very distinctive profile, aptly called Mount Arbel. This mountain is famous for its long range of cliffs, which tower 300 meters above the ancient route (a side branch of the *Via Maris*) that runs along Wadi Arbel (נהל ארבל), before entering the Ginnosar plain and arriving at Magdala by the Sea of Galilee.

The name Arbel is derived from the biblical 'Beit Arv'el' (בית ארבאל; Hos 10,14), composed of the word 'arav' which means 'a place of ambush' and 'El' who is God. So Arbel literally means 'a place where God waits in ambush' or, in other words, 'a place of divine judgment'. As divine judgment for some means divine redemption for others, it is surely no coincidence that an ancient tradition claims that divine redemption will begin on the plateau above the mountain, called the 'plain of Arbel' (בקעת ארבל). On this plain, a few hundred meters southwest of the northern-most tip of Mount Arbel, a town called Arbela in Aramaic (Arbel in Hebrew) was established in ancient times, sometime between 120-100 BCE. The town had an impressive synagogue

at its centre and grew to a population of about 2,500 souls, until it was destroyed by a powerful earthquake in 747 CE. It is now an archaeological site (הורבת ארבל) adjacent to a modern farming community, or 'moshav', of the same name.

An archaeological investigation of the area from 1987-1989, conducted by the archaeologist Dr. Zvi Ilan, included a survey of the innumerable caves etched into Mt. Arbel's range of cliffs, a few hundred meters to the north and east of Arbela.<sup>9</sup> The topography is important because the archaeologist concluded that there appeared to be a temporal relationship between the ancient town above and the caves in the cliff, which he calls a "cave-village". Noting that some of the caves were hewn and adapted for human inhabitation at about the same time as the town was built, sometime during the Hasmonean era (167–63 BCE), he wrote: "The archeological finds indicate that the built and hewn settlements existed simultaneously: the built settlement may have been founded a short time prior to the cave village, and its inhabitants may have been the hewers of the stone shelters".<sup>10</sup> In all, he found evidence of human habitation in about 100-120 caves along the cliffs of Mt. Arbel, dating from the Hasmonean era and continuing up until the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, when the Druze overlord of Lebanon and Galilee, Fahr a-Din II, built many of the previously inhabited caves into a walled fortress known as Qala'at Ibn Ma'an.

The archaeologist reports two striking discoveries in his survey of the 'cave-village'. The first was the finding of at least "twenty plastered structures: most of them were used for storing water, but at least three of them were *mikva'ot*, ritual baths, furnished with steps".<sup>11</sup> Analysis of the plaster and the style of the cisterns and ritual

<sup>9</sup> The survey is amply described by Zvi Ilan, in English, in 'Reviving a 2,000-Year-Old Landmark', *Eretz Magazine*, Winter 1988/1989; 61-69, and briefly also in *Excavations and Surveys in Israel*, 1989, in Hebrew:

14-15, 1989, ירושלים, צד, "חדשות ארכיאולוגיות", סקר בכפר המערות, ארבל-סקר בכפר המערות, ירושלים, 1989, 14-15.

<sup>10</sup> *Eretz Magazine*, Winter 1988/1989; 68.

<sup>11</sup> *Eretz Magazine*, Winter 1988/1989; 67. A more recent survey by a cave research team (Shivtiel and Boslov, 2005-7) has increased the number of cisterns to 50, and *mikva'ot* to 5 (cf. Reported in Yinon Shivtiel and Amos Frumkin, 'The use of caves as security measures in the Early Roman Period in the Galilee: Cliff Settlements and Shelter Caves', *Caderno de Geografia*, vol.24, no.41, 2014; 81-94, accessible at academia.edu). We know that several more *mikva'ot* were destroyed when a large number of caves were incorporated into the 17<sup>th</sup> century Druze fortress, so the total number of *mikva'ot* may have been around 10 or even more.

baths confirm a Hasmonean dating, which matches the finding of a Tyrian coin that was in use between 138-96 BCE. Plaster fragments and structural modifications found in the Druze fortress point to the previous existence of more cisterns and ritual baths within the many caves incorporated into the fortress, when it was built in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century.

The second striking discovery was described by Dr. Zvi Ilan as follows: "East of the caves, near the beginning of the main trail leading down to Nahal Arbel, were the remains of another cave fortress; to the best of our knowledge, this fortress had never been mentioned before in any of the archaeological literature or historical accounts".<sup>12</sup> He goes on to describe a massive hall carved into the cave, 75 meters long, 14 meters wide and 10-12 meters high, with the remains of a wall built to cover the entrance of the cave, and including several hewn rooms on different levels in its middle part.<sup>13</sup> Apart from noting a resemblance between the remains of the wall and the fine masonry of fortresses from the Hasmonean and Herodian periods, the archaeologist is at a loss to identify and even to date this structure, as pottery finds range from the Iron Age through to the early Arab period. Interestingly, the author feels it necessary to stress that there was no sign of Christian occupation from the Byzantine period and there were no finds from the Crusader period. "Therefore, we do not accept the possibility that the complex was a church or a monastery", he concludes, implying that these are what it most resembles.<sup>14</sup>

Curiously, 10 *mikva'ot* were also found at Qumran, prompting John J. Collins, who was echoing the archaeologist Magen Broshi, to write that "the abundance of *mikva'ot* is highly compatible with the view that the site was inhabited by a religious sect" and is "the strongest archaeological reason for defining Qumran as a religious site", *Beyond the Qumran Community: The Sectarian Movement of the Dead Sea Scrolls*. Grand Rapids MI/Cambridge UK: Eerdmans, 2010; 205. I suggest we can already say the same about the findings in the Arbel cave-village.

<sup>12</sup> *Eretz Magazine*, Winter 1988/1989; 68 col 2.

<sup>13</sup> It is very probable that Josephus had this gigantic cave in mind when he refers to the cave-village as the 'village of the Cave of Arbela' (*Life* 188; cf. *Jewish War* 2.573), suggesting that this Cave gave its name to the cave-village. He refers to Arbela on the plateau above the cliff as the village of Arbela (*Life* 311).

<sup>14</sup> *Eretz Magazine*, Winter 1988/1989; 68 col 3. He may have been thinking of the ancient Byzantine monasteries in the Judaeian desert, such as Mar Saba in Wadi Kidron, St. George of Koziba in Wadi Kelt, and the Mount of Temptation.

With plans to go back and excavate the second fortress, Dr. Ilan's survey ended in 1989 and the next year, in February 1990, he died at the age of 53. The archaeological work to determine the origin and use of this mysterious cave-building has never been completed. Nevertheless, the theory that he advanced to explain the existence of this building, and indeed the entire cave-village, has remained the accepted doctrine: "Recent research has revealed that several settlements prepared refuges for themselves in nearby caves in times of war. In Ein Gedi and Jericho, for example, documents were found which belonged not only to refugees from distant places, but also to local residents".<sup>15</sup> To support this hypothesis, he then lists the finding of hewn refugee caves shielded by front walls in several other parts of Galilee, before relating these findings to the report by Josephus that he himself had fortified several caves around the Sea of Galilee including those at Arbel. Dr. Ilan concludes "It seems that every settlement in the area around the Sea of Galilee had hewn refugee caves, protected by their very location on cliffs and by front walls which blocked the openings." And regarding the mysterious second fortress, he has already stated "At the moment, however, we should not rule out the possibility that the fortress was built as part of the preparations for self-defense at the site at the end of the Second Temple period, perhaps with subsequent changes and additions".<sup>16</sup>

Dr. Ilan's theory has been widely adopted and further developed by later investigators, being well articulated by the speleologists Yinon Shivtiel and Amos Frumkin, in a recent article entitled 'The use of caves as security measures in the Early Roman Period in the Galilee: Cliff Settlements and Shelter Caves'.<sup>17</sup> They sum up their survey of the Arbel caves with the words "The elaborate network of this cave

<sup>15</sup> *Eretz Magazine*, Winter 1988/1989; 68-69.

<sup>16</sup> *Eretz Magazine*, Winter 1988/1989; 68.

<sup>17</sup> Yinon Shivtiel and Amos Frumkin, 'The use of caves as security measures in the Early Roman Period in the Galilee: Cliff Settlements and Shelter Caves', *Caderno de Geografia*, vol.24, no. 41, 2014; 77-94, accessible at academia.edu. The section on the Arbel caves can be found on pp. 81-84 (corrected page numbers). Shivtiel has also written a useful summary of his recent work entitled 'Artificial Caves Cut into Cliff Tops in the Galilee and Their Historical Significance', in *Hypogea 2015- Proceedings of International Congress of Speleology in Artificial Cavities, Rome, 11-17 March 2015*; 67-75 (via academia.edu).

shelter system, together with its excellent state of preservation, reveals a clear picture of planning for times of trouble.”

However, when the authors come to their ‘Final Considerations’, the theory that these cave systems were built purely as defence from besieging armies takes a tumble, especially regarding Arbel. Not only does this theory fail to explain the laborious remodelling and installations within the cave system at Arbel, but it also fails to explain how the occupants could expect to be saved from a determined army. The authors admit that hiding in caves would offer little defence against the Romans: “Knowing or assuming that the Roman army would not leave an unliquidated enclave behind, the Galileans could presume that their chosen method of defense would only delay the Roman invaders, blocking their progress until they had eliminated the last of the defenders in the shelter caves. Perhaps their goal was merely to put obstacles in the way of the invading army, and to delay it as long as possible from advancing on further targets—the main one being Jerusalem”.<sup>18</sup>

Furthermore, from the time Galilee was conquered by the Hasmoneans in 104 BCE, there was no external military threat until the first Jewish revolt against the Romans in 66 CE. Regarding the caves of Arbel, which show clear signs of occupation by Jews from at least 100 BCE, there is only one recorded episode of an army besieging the caves and that was in 39 BCE, when King Herod’s army cleared them of the rebel supporters of his rival to the throne, Antigonus II.<sup>19</sup> The defenders were sheltering temporarily from Herod’s forces, whom they had just attacked on the open plain of Arbel and, in the event, the caves offered little safety. On the contrary, they became a trap. In the war against the Romans from 66-70 CE, Josephus does indeed mention his fortification and supplying of the Arbel Cave village, in case of need, but there is no report of any fighting around the caves when Titus and the Roman army arrive.<sup>20</sup> Instead, the defenders of Magdala attempted to escape by sea. It would seem that they already knew the caves offered little or no defence against the Romans. It is quite likely, though, that unarmed civilians from the nearby villages did use the caves for shelter during the two revolts against the

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. 91-93.

<sup>19</sup> Josephus, *Jewish War* 1.305-315; *Antiquities* 14.415-430.

<sup>20</sup> Josephus, *Life* 188; *Jewish War* 2.573; 3.461f.

Romans (66-70 and 132-135 CE), but this would have been for short periods only, whilst military forces were passing through their area.

It is clear, therefore, that another theory is needed to explain the existence of the Arbel 'cave-village' from the time of its first occupation by Jews around 120-100 BCE. Without denying that some of these caves were sporadically occupied by robbers, rebels and refugees, the evidence of the extensive remodelling of so many caves, with in-built cisterns and ritual baths from this early date, indicates their permanent occupation by a relatively large number of people, evidently members of a religiously observant Jewish community. Yinon Shvitiel edges towards the same conclusion: "Perhaps we may attribute the preparation of *mikvas* to groups of *cohanim* (priests) who were living in the Galilee before the Great Revolt, or to a group for whom questions of defilement and purification were an inseparable part of their lives".<sup>21</sup>

### The Essene Cave Residents

In addition to the low level of protection afforded to cave-dwellers from a besieging Roman army, the caves would also have been an inhospitable and dangerous home for raising children. Due to the mortal danger of falling from the cliff-face, as well as the difficulty of access and of obtaining supplies of food and water, routine family life in this environment can be discounted. This was not a suitable living space for women, children, the elderly or infirm. The presence of *mikva'ot* and cisterns not only confirms the occupants were religiously observant Jews with a preoccupation for ritual purity, but also that they were long-term residents rather than transient refugees, robbers or rebels, who would certainly not have been so concerned with ritual purity. The installation of cisterns and *mikva'ot* implies the need for frequent and regular ritual bathing by members of this community, from which it can be inferred that they were either temple priests, or that they had applied priestly purity norms to their own daily lives.

From various late third century CE sources, literary and inscrip-tional, scholars have reconstructed an ancient list of the heads of the twenty-four priestly courses (corresponding to the list at 1Chron

<sup>21</sup> Shvitiel in his contribution to *Hypogea 2015–Proceedings of the International Congress of Speleology in Artificial Cavities–Rome, 2015*; 75.

24,7-18) with the names of Galilean villages attached to each course. The town of Arbel is linked to the priestly course of Jeshua, the ninth of the twenty-four courses. Although of uncertain origin and significance, scholars have suggested that the list represents the settlement of priestly families in Galilee after the first or second Jewish revolts. This interpretation of the list is now widely accepted. However, it has recently been challenged on logistical grounds by Uzi Leibner and on historico-literary grounds by Richard Bauckham, with the conclusion that the list was either an exercise in nostalgia and historical imagination (Leibner) or that the arrival of the priests in each village coincided with the Hasmonean conquest of Galilee (104 BCE) and involved one or two families at the most (Bauckham).<sup>22</sup> So, if indeed there was a priestly migration to Arbel, it was either too late (post 70 CE) to match the occupation date of the cave-village around 100 BCE, or too small to explain its extent and complexity at that early date. Furthermore, as representatives of the ruling powers, there would have been no need for them to construct an elaborate priestly refuge in the cave-village in the cliffs below the town. They would have been free to live in peace, and in security, alongside the other religiously observant Jews in the town of Arbela, which had a flourishing *Beit Midrash* by this time.<sup>23</sup>

Having rejected the proposal that a community of temple priests were the main occupants of the cave-village, the only other possibility is a 'priestly community'—a group of Jewish males living in an organized religious community that had adopted, for its members, purity regulations of a kind that normally applied to priests. At this point, it is no longer possible to ignore the Essene party,<sup>24</sup> one of the three main organizations of Jewish religious life in second temple times,

<sup>22</sup> Thanks to Prof. Richard Bauckham for directing me to his analysis of this list in ch. 10 of *Magdala of Galilee: A Jewish City in the Hellenistic and Roman Periods*, ed. Richard Bauckham, Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2018; 287-305; also Uzi Leibner, *Settlement and History in Hellenistic, Roman, and Byzantine Galilee*, Texts and Studies in Ancient Judaism 127, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009; 404-19.

<sup>23</sup> *The New Encyclopedia of Archaeological Excavations in the Holy Land*, Ephraim Stern et al, Israel Exploration Society/Carta, Jerusalem, 1993, Vol 1; 87.

<sup>24</sup> Josephus tells us the Essenes had to take a ritual bath twice a day before meals, *Jewish War* 2.129, 132.



about whom both Josephus and Philo wrote detailed accounts.<sup>25</sup> In particular, both accounts estimate their total numbers at 4,000, living in towns and villages throughout the country, while at Qumran there was space to accommodate only 100-150 male members on a permanent basis. All the spatial and temporal features of the 'cave-village' at Arbel considered so far would support the identification of the occupants with a community of male Essenes, including the date of foundation around 100 BCE, the ritual installations found in the caves, the laborious modelling of the cave environment, and also the large community hall at the eastern end, in the second as yet unexcavated and unidentified fortress.

It hardly needs to be said that these caves, with their splendid views over the Plain of Ginnosar, the Sea of Galilee and of Mt. Hermon in the distance, would have provided perfect conditions for study and contemplation, being relatively isolated from the hustle and bustle of daily life. Although the cave-dwellers would have lived an extremely austere and ascetic life, there was no risk of nutritional deficiency, as the surrounding country and nearby lake produced an abundance of fresh food all the year round.<sup>26</sup>

There is another feature of the location that would have made it ideal for a male Essene community, who were known not only for their study and contemplation, but also for their writings. Only a few miles to the north of Mt. Arbel lies Lake Huleh, a large swampy lake that was the only place outside Egypt where the papyrus plant grew abundantly. This could have been easily harvested, stored and made into papyrus scrolls for the scribes to write upon. As yet no evidence of papyrus manufacture or use has been uncovered in the caves, but if ever this can be found, it would be the first time that papyrus writing material has been shown to be manufactured outside Egypt.<sup>27</sup>

So, having considered how theoretically suitable this location would have been for occupation by a male Essene scribal community, it is time to focus on the historical facts. What are the historical indications that an Essene community ever resided in this area?

<sup>25</sup> Josephus, *Jewish War* 2.119-61; *Antiquities* 18.18-22; Philo of Alexandria, *Quod Omnis* 75-91 and *Hypothetica* 11,1-8.

<sup>26</sup> Although there was a famine in the year 25 BCE, causing great hardship among the local population.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Alan Millard, *Reading and Writing in the Time of Jesus*, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000; 25.

### Further Evidence of Essene Presence

For more evidence of an Essene presence in the 'cave-village', further archaeological investigation would be necessary, as planned by the late Dr. Zvi Ilan, but with the addition of tests specifically aimed at detecting hidden recesses, scribal writing materials, or heavily degraded papyrus. However, there is another reliable source of evidence, based upon Dr. Ilan's observation, stated above, that "The archaeological finds indicate that the built and hewn settlements existed simultaneously: the built settlement may have been founded a short time prior to the cave village, and its inhabitants may have been the hewers of the stone shelters".<sup>28</sup> If, as it certainly appears from these findings, the earliest inhabitants of Arbela were the founders and builders of the cave-village, it is reasonable to assume that they belonged to the same Essene community that, soon after, settled in the cave-village they helped to build. It is a small step to suggest that members of the Arbela community continued thereafter to serve and maintain those members who had moved to the cave-village. In practice, the cave-village residents would have received their supplies of food and clothing, and any other necessities of life, from the community dwelling above the caves, in the town of Arbela. In brief, the cave-dwelling community was dependent upon the inhabitants of Arbela for the basic necessities of living, and both communities belonged to the Essene party. This being so, evidence for an Essene presence in the town of Arbela would go a long way to confirm Essene presence in the caves as well. Various pieces of evidence for an Essene presence in Arbela are presented below, in order of increasing weight.

Reflecting ancient farming practices, Arbela became known in late Roman times for its cultivation of flax and production of linen, reported in only one other place in the whole country, Beit She'an. It can therefore be no coincidence that linen was the fabric used by the Essenes for their clothing. It could also have been used to make the ropes that were needed to reach some of the caves from above or below. Although nowadays linen is also used as a writing medium, there is no evidence of it being used as such in antiquity.

<sup>28</sup> *Eretz Magazine*, Winter 1988/1989; 68.

The large two-story synagogue recently excavated at Arbela has been dated to the 4<sup>th</sup> century CE and is unusual in several respects:<sup>29</sup> it was erected at the centre of the settlement and not at the highest point; the southern wall is crammed up against higher ground, suggesting that the building has been secondarily enlarged and extended to give it a north-south axis facing Jerusalem; although built of pale limestone there are many dark basalt elements in its construction indicating secondary use; the internal arrangement of benches is unique; in the north wall there is a charity chest carved out of a single stone and accessed from the outside; finally, and most significantly, the frame of the main entrance is not only exceptionally carved out of a single rock, but is also located on the east side, close to the back of the present building and facing onto an ancient paved courtyard. This monumental entrance may originally have served a smaller transverse edifice, with an east-west orientation. Such an orientation would suggest Essene influence and design, for their early morning prayers were not directed towards the temple in Jerusalem, but rather to the sun rising in the East.<sup>30</sup>

It is said that Nittai (or Mattai) the Arbelite (*m. Pirke Avot* 1:6), vice-president of the Sanhedrin during the high priesthood of John Hyrcanus, resided in Arbela from c.130-120 BCE where he is said to have established a *Beit Midrash* and brought to the area a reputation for Torah study and learning. It is claimed by some that he was born in Arbela, but this is unlikely as the region was ruled by pagans until conquered by the Hasmoneans in 104/3 BCE. As a prominent member of the Pharisee party, mentioned in the Mishnah, it is almost certain that he found shelter in Arbela after being expelled from Jerusalem when the ruler and high priest, John Hyrcanus, turned against the Pharisees, cancelled their rulings and expelled them from Jerusalem.<sup>31</sup> According to Josephus, Hyrcanus reacted in this way when a certain Pharisee raised doubts about his legitimacy. Now under threat of persecution, Nittai and the Pharisees would have found themselves allies of the Essenes, whose rejection of the Hasmonean claim to the high

<sup>29</sup> *The New Encyclopedia of Archaeological Excavations in the Holy Land*, 87-89.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Josephus, *Jewish War* 2.128.

<sup>31</sup> Josephus, *Antiquities* 13.288-296; Roland Deines, in *Galilee in the Late Second Temple and Mishnaic Periods, Vol 1: Life, Culture, and Society*, Eds. Fiensy and Strange, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014; 83-84.

priesthood defined their stance from the outset. They would have had no objection to an Essene presence in Arbela and may have actually encouraged it. Indeed, the saying for which Nittai the Arbelite is remembered in the Mishnah has a very Essene ring to it: “Keep thee far from an evil neighbour and consort not with the wicked and lose not belief in retribution” (*m. Pirke Avot* 1:7, cf. *The Community Rule*, 1QS V,10-19). It would appear that Arbela numbered both Pharisees and Essenes among its inhabitants and could therefore have represented an attempt to repair the rupture, just a few decades previously, between the *Hasidim* who became Pharisees and recognized the Hasmonean high priesthood of Jonathan Maccabee, and those who did not and were known as Essenes.<sup>32</sup>

For the same reason that Nittai and the Pharisees found Arbela a suitable location following their expulsion from Jerusalem and Judaea in the days of John Hyrcanus, the Essenes may also have taken advantage of this location as a political safe-space, being inveterate critics of the Hasmonean high priesthood. As Roland Deines puts it, this border territory of Galilee “became attractive for those who wanted to stay below the radar of the Hasmoneans in Jerusalem”, those who “needed or wanted to escape the political hornet’s nest of Jerusalem and its surroundings without going abroad”.<sup>33</sup>

According to Josephus, Herod and his army fought a battle in Arbela in 39-38 BCE, against supporters of his rival, Antigonus II, the last Hasmonean king, who ruled from 40-37 BCE, with Parthian support.<sup>34</sup> It is often imprecisely stated that Herod was fighting “Hasmonean loyalists [who had] fortified themselves in Arbela”,<sup>35</sup> but it is clear from Josephus’ account that, far from attacking these rebels at Arbela, he actually sent an advance party to establish a camp there, from which

<sup>32</sup> One could even propose an old friendship between Nittai and the Essene leaders, according to the historical setting elaborated later in this essay: if the original split between the Essenes and Pharisees took place in 152 BCE and the expulsion of Pharisees took place fairly early (130-125 BCE) during the reign of John Hyrcanus (134-104 BCE), then it is clear that only 25-30 years had passed since the two groups had been united in the same community of *Hasidim* in Jerusalem. This meeting between Nittai and the Essene leaders from Damascus could indeed have been a joyful reconciliation and restoration of friendship.

<sup>33</sup> *Galilee in the Late Second Temple and Mishnaic Periods*, 83-84.

<sup>34</sup> Josephus, *Jewish War* 1.305-315; *Antiquities* 14.415-430.

<sup>35</sup> *The New Encyclopedia of Archaeological Excavations in the Holy Land*, 87.

his army could then remove the rebels from the caves nearby. However, when Herod and the rest of his army arrived at Arbela 40 days later, the rebels attacked them there in force—probably aiming to drive them over the cliff. Instead, the rebels were routed by Herod’s army and expelled from the area. What this account shows is that the residents of Arbela provided hospitality to Herod and his army for many weeks. As most of the local people despised Herod and supported his Hasmonean rival Antigonus II,<sup>36</sup> the support of the Arbela residents for Herod was exceptional and goes a long way to confirm they were Essenes, with whom Herod already had a good relationship.<sup>37</sup> For their hospitality on this occasion, it appears Herod rewarded them with the Essene Quarter in Jerusalem (at the back of his Palace) and other privileges, when he finally deposed King Antigonus II in 37 BCE.

The support of the Arbela community for Herod on this particular occasion may also help to explain why the Essenes became known pejoratively as ‘Herodians’ among the local Galileans, which in turn explains this use of the term for the Essenes in the Gospels of Mark and Matthew, both based on the accounts of local Galileans (Peter and Matthew).<sup>38</sup> These New Testament sources are also good evidence of the presence of Essenes in Capernaum (Mk 3,6; Mk 8,15 in P<sup>45</sup>) and in Jerusalem (Mk 12,13; Mt 22,16), describing them as working together with the Pharisees to entrap Jesus.

According to Josephus’ reports, soon after Herod had defeated the rebel attack on open ground, on the plain of Arbel, he stayed there longer to direct his troops in the removal of the rebels sheltering in

<sup>36</sup> Cf. Josephus, *Antiquities* 14.450.

<sup>37</sup> Josephus, *Antiquities*, 15.372-379; cf. Philo of Alexandria, *Quod Omnis* 90-91; Peter Richardson, *Herod: King of the Jews and Friend of the Romans*, First Fortress Press edition, Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999; 256-59.

<sup>38</sup> Anyone who doubts that the Herodians refers to the Essenes should read Joan Taylor’s cogent analysis in “*The Essenes, the Scrolls and the Dead Sea*”, Oxford: OUP, 2012; 109-30. Evidence comes from other sources too: on the basis of the Essene ordination ceremony described in the *Temple Scroll* (11QT), Yigael Yadin perceptively relates the “yeast of the Herodians” (Mk 8,15 in P<sup>45</sup>) to the teaching of the Essenes and to Jesus’ feeding miracles (*The Temple Scroll: The Hidden Law of the Dead Sea Sect*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1985; 80-83).

the Mt. Arbel caves below, despite other important commitments.<sup>39</sup> It is difficult to comprehend Herod's almost obsessive concern to clear out the rebel occupation of the Arbel caves with his somewhat merciful attitude towards the rebel cave-dwellers, as it appears in Josephus' *Jewish War* and especially in his *Antiquities*.<sup>40</sup> On the one hand Herod invests a disproportionate amount of time, resources and effort to remove the rebels from the caves, and on the other hand he is willing to offer them clemency if they leave voluntarily.<sup>41</sup> If Josephus is accurate about this, it would appear that Herod's main aim is not so much to eliminate or punish the rebels, as to clear the caves for their normal occupants, and this would only make sense if the normal occupants were his friends the Essenes. It is not too farfetched to suggest they had requested help from Herod to clear the caves, so they could continue their scribal activities in peace. Indeed, Josephus hints at this when he writes that Herod "then started on a campaign against the cave-dwelling brigands who were infesting a wide area and inflicting on the inhabitants evils no less than those of war".<sup>42</sup>

Finally, there is an ancient tradition that some less familiar biblical personalities are buried in the cemetery at Arbela, namely Seth, the son of the first Adam, and Dinah, the daughter of Jacob, and several of her brothers.<sup>43</sup> It may not be a coincidence that these figures are protagonists in two popular pseudepigrapha, written towards the end of the first century BCE and attributable to the Essenes: the *Life of Adam and Eve* (or *Apocalypse of Moses*), in which Seth is one of the main characters, and the *Testament of Levi* (one of the *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*), in which Dinah's brother, Levi, ascends to the throne of God and receives a divine commission to take revenge on the local Canaanites for raping her. Both these works seem to be based on the personal account of the biblical protagonists, so the legend of their burial and presumed prior residence at Arbela could have arisen in order to explain how these writings came to be written there.

<sup>39</sup> He not only had to depose his rival Antigonus II from the seat of power in Jerusalem, but also to fulfil a request to help Mark Anthony at the siege of Samosata, cf. Josephus, *Antiquities* 14.439-447.

<sup>40</sup> *Jewish War* 1.305-15; *Antiquities* 14.415-17; 421-30.

<sup>41</sup> *Antiquities* 14.427; 430.

<sup>42</sup> *Jewish War* 1.304, Loeb Classical Library translation by H. St. J. Thackeray et al.

<sup>43</sup> Cf. *The New Encyclopedia of Archaeological Excavations in the Holy Land*, 87.

The mention of the literary output of the Essene scribal community living in the Arbel cave-village brings us back to the question about the provenance of the Parables of Enoch, with which this enquiry began. It is widely known that the Parables became the central work in the *Book of Enoch (1Enoch)*, and that this collection of writings was a foundational text for the Essene party, so it is a simple step to identify the author of the Parables with an Essene community. Accepting the arguments of James Charlesworth and Motti Aviam that this author wrote Parables of Enoch in an area of eastern Galilee, in or close to Magdala,<sup>44</sup> at the end of the first century BCE, then it is another simple step to identify him as a member of the Essene scribal community dwelling in the Arbel cave-village at this time. The question of provenance is solved and there is no need to look any further. However, it does raise the larger historical question of how the Essenes arrived at Arbel, and how they came into being in the first place.

Before moving on to give an outline of the history of the Essenes, it is necessary to extinguish a potential cause of confusion. The scholars were aided in identifying the Parables of Enoch with this region of north-eastern Galilee by its frequent repetition of thinly disguised criticism of Herod, his unjust policies and his wealthy Roman patrons and clients. The Parables repeatedly denounces the ruling class for oppressing the local farmers, seizing not only their income through heavy taxation, but also their land, forcing them to become tenant farmers or day-labourers. They are sternly warned of future retribution, “when the Son of Man comes” in judgment.<sup>45</sup>

These prophetic denunciations of the ‘mighty’ rulers and landowners have caused the same scholars to label the Parables as an ‘anti-Herodian polemic’,<sup>46</sup> implying the author was ‘anti-Herod’ and engaged in a campaign against him. This would then contradict the evidence, presented above, that the author was an Essene, for the

<sup>44</sup> James H. Charlesworth, ‘The Date and Provenience of the Parables of Enoch’, *Parables of Enoch: A Paradigm Shift*, eds. Darrell L. Bock and James H. Charlesworth, London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2013; 37-57; Mordechai Aviam, ‘The Book of Enoch and the Galilean Archaeology and Landscape’, *Parables of Enoch: A Paradigm Shift*, 159-69.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. James H Charlesworth, ‘Can We Discern the Composition Date of the Parables of Enoch?’, *Enoch and the Messiah Son of Man*, 459-465 and id. ‘The Date and Provenience of the Parables of Enoch’, *Parables of Enoch: A Paradigm Shift*, 48-53.

<sup>46</sup> E.g., James H Charlesworth, *Parables of Enoch: A Paradigm Shift*, 53.

Essenes supported Herod and were nicknamed 'Herodians' for good reason, as we saw above. However, the assertion that the author must be 'anti-Herod' is a confusion of politics and prophecy. The author wrote this denunciation because it was divinely inspired and not because of his own, or his community's, political affiliation. His work is not a polemical or political statement against Herod or anyone else, but a religious message exhorting faith in divine justice and judgment. The Essenes may indeed have supported Herod politically, but they saw no contradiction between this support and their obligation to correct his injustices and warn of the spiritual consequences.

Nevertheless, the author seems to be realistically aware of political repercussions, for he writes under the pseudonym of a biblical figure who lived in the distant past (Enoch) and couches his denunciation in general terms and expressions, never identifying individuals. Furthermore, the writings of the Essenes were closely guarded by the community.<sup>47</sup> With all these layers of camouflage, the author did not have to worry unduly about painful reprisals from the 'mighty ones' he is denouncing.

Writing from his cave set high in the cliffs of Arbel, the author of the Parables of Enoch only had to raise his eyes to north and he would see the snow-capped Mt. Hermon in the far distance, glowing majestically in the rising or setting sun.<sup>48</sup> This entrancing view of Mt. Hermon took him back, day after day, to contemplate the Book of Watchers, to which his Parables of Enoch became a sequel. However, the Book of Watchers had been written around 250 years previously by an author sitting 'by the waters of Dan' at the foot of that sacred mountain, on which the rebellious angels had descended in order to plant evil and corruption among men (*1Enoch* 6:6;13:7,9). This spiritual and literary

<sup>47</sup> However, this does not mean they had to be kept secret from non-members. The oath taken by the new members, to keep the Essene teaching secret (Josephus, *Jewish War* 2.139-142), does not mean that their books also had to be kept secret. *4Ezra* 14:44-47 indicates that the seventy non-canonical books (which surely included the *First Book of Enoch*) could be given, with discretion, to the 'wise among the people', i.e. to those outsiders considered worthy and responsible. The Essenes were clearly not just writing for themselves.

<sup>48</sup> Both Charlesworth (*Parables of Enoch: A Paradigm Shift*, 184-5, 189) and Aviam (op.cit. 159, 168-9) understand the mystical power of Mt. Hermon, and the memory of its former associations, to connect the author to his spiritual forerunners, the original authors of the writings in *1Enoch*.



affinity, skipping over two-and-a-half centuries, prompts us to consider, in outline, the religious and historical background of this Essene scribal community.

### Known Religio-Historical Background

Following the return of the Jews to Judaea from their exile in Babylon and Mesopotamia (c. 520 BCE), there were many literate priests and scribes who did not acknowledge that the exile had come to an end. They were strongly inspired by the eschatological visions of divine redemption prophesied by Ezekiel (Ezek chs. 40-48) and could not see the realization of these visions in the return of the Jews to their homeland under Persian governance. Therefore, many of these priests did not return to the homeland, but remained in Mesopotamia, at the head of their communities, or they made the journey as far as Damascus and settled there. They would have been deterred from returning to Jerusalem, not only by the stressful hardships facing the returning community, but also by the shameful poverty of the newly rebuilt second temple on Mt. Zion. To make matters worse, the leading body of priests in Jerusalem ruled that only those priests who could prove their priestly lineage could serve there. So, unable to prove their priestly credentials, the undocumented priests remained in exile and, from afar, they disputed the legitimacy of the second temple and its priesthood. Over subsequent years, they were joined in their dissent by other priests who had, for one reason or another, been rejected by the ruling authorities at the temple in Jerusalem. Wherever they were, in Egypt, Mesopotamia or in Damascus, they meditated over the Scriptures and looked forward to the ideal restoration of the Jewish commonwealth, as they thought it *should* be.<sup>49</sup> They were the religiously

<sup>49</sup> The historical outline given here agrees largely with that of G. Boccaccini (*Beyond the Essene Hypothesis: The Parting of the Ways between Qumran and Enochic Judaism*, Grand Rapids MI/Cambridge UK: Eerdmans, 1998; 70-79), except in one point: it is unrealistic to suppose that the priestly dissent group, identified as Enochian Jews, lived in Jerusalem along with the ruling priestly group, the Zadokites (op. cit. 77-78). Religious tensions would have been high enough to cause bloodshed, not forgetting that criticism of the temple and God's holy things was blasphemy—a capital offense. If there were no signs of conflict in Jerusalem at that time, it is because the dissenting group continued to live in exile, in Damascus or in Mesopotamia.

observant anti-Zionists of their time, not unlike so many of the Anti-Zionist *Haredim* in the world today.

In the 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE, the Ptolemaic Greeks replaced the Persians as overlords of the temple state of the Jews. In 260 BCE approximately, King Ptolemy II of Egypt restored the ancient Israelite temple at Dan, which was at the foot of Mt. Hermon and at the northern limits of his territory. Damascus and all the land to the south were under Ptolemy's control at this time, but in order to prevent the territorial encroachments of the Seleucids from the north, he needed to increase his presence in this fertile northern border area, probably in the form of a military garrison. By restoring the temple at Dan, he may have had in mind something like the former frontier settlement of the Jews at Elephantine/Jeb, in Upper Egypt. As this would have been anathema to the temple priests of Jerusalem, he naturally turned to the members of the dissenting priestly community in exile. The proximity to Mt. Hermon makes it entirely possible that they were based in or near Damascus, which was under Ptolemy's control at the time.<sup>50</sup>

While sitting 'by the waters of Dan' in the mid-3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE, one of these priests wrote a section that was to become part of the Book of Watchers (*1Enoch* 6-16). It was an explanation for the origin of evil that bore some relation to a passage in the Book of Genesis (Gen 6,1-4), and together with the Astronomical Book written earlier in Mesopotamia, it forms the most ancient part of a collection that developed over the next 250 years, through the editing of the original texts and the addition of new ones, into the collection of writings that is nowadays called *1Enoch*.<sup>51</sup> The Parables of Enoch is one of the last of these writings to be added. In retrospect, then, *1Enoch* is regarded as the foundational text of the loosely affiliated scribal movement that is

<sup>50</sup> For the geographical sites and their significance, see George Nickelsburg, 'Enoch, Levi, and Peter: Recipients of Revelation in Upper Galilee', *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 100/4 (1981), 575-600; and David Suter, 'Why Galilee? Galilean Regionalism in the Interpretation of 1Enoch 6-16', *Henoah*, Vol XXV, 2003; 167-212. Suter also examines the connections of the text with local mythology and spiritual practices in the early 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE, and is the first to propose this section of *1Enoch* could have been a foundational text for the newly restored Israelite temple at Dan, established by priests who did not qualify for service in the Jerusalem temple.

<sup>51</sup> For *1Enoch* as the constitutional document of Enochic Judaism, see Boccaccini, *Beyond the Essene Hypothesis*, 12-15.

known as 'Enochic Judaism', aptly described as giving voice to "groups of priests and scribes who feel marginalized and even disenfranchised vis-à-vis the ruling priests in Jerusalem",<sup>52</sup>

One of the main issues distinguishing this dissenting group from its priestly rival in Jerusalem was its dispute over the modalities of temple restoration. It was a dispute that dated back to the Babylonian exile, and in particular to the prophet Ezekiel's plan of restoration (chs. 40-48), which the dissenters wanted to realize as written, but the Jerusalem priests did not or could not do, saying it contradicted the Torah of Moses and must await the Messiah.<sup>53</sup> Mindful of the continued absence of God's glory in the earthly temple (cf. Ezek 43,1-7), not to mention the corruption of the ruling priests, the dissenters focused their attention on the heavenly temple, which had been revealed to some members along with the gift of divine knowledge and instruction received directly from God's throne. In this way, the Enochic movement came to embody the ancient Israelite prophetic tradition at a time when the ruling priestly authorities had declared prophecy to have ceased and been replaced by priestly and scribal functions.<sup>54</sup> These differences in relating to God, the source of all authority, lay at the root of the tense rivalry that developed between the visionary Enochic and pragmatic Zadokite movements.

A century later, after Seleucid rule had replaced that of the Ptolemies in all of Judaea (198 BCE), the Seleucid kings gradually implemented a policy to Hellenize Jerusalem along with its priesthood and temple. This activity reached its peak during the reign of Antiochus

<sup>52</sup> G. Boccaccini, *Roots of Rabbinic Judaism: An Intellectual History from Ezekiel to Daniel*, Grand Rapids MI/Cambridge UK: Eerdmans, 2002; 99, quoting Benjamin G. Wright III.

<sup>53</sup> Cf. Boccaccini, *Beyond the Essene Hypothesis*, 76: "The disagreement and therefore the emergence of two distinctive parties would occur only later, after the return from exile, and would concern the modalities of the restoration. While the Zadokites claimed that God's order had been fully restored with the construction of the second temple, the Enochians still viewed restoration as a future event and gave cosmic dimensions to a crisis that for the Zadokites had momentarily affected only the historical relationships between God and Israel."

<sup>54</sup> Cf. Martin Hengel, 'The Scriptures and Their Interpretation in Second Temple Judaism', *The Aramaic Bible: Targums in their Historical Context*, Eds. D.R.G. Beattie and M.J. McNamara, JSOT Series 166, Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994; 161-64; Joseph Blenkinsopp, *A History of Prophecy in Israel*, Louisville/London: Westminster/ John Knox Press, 1996; 222-26.

Epiphanes IV (167 BCE), when the ruling priesthood gave way and the temple was used for pagan worship for three years, from 167-164 BCE. Not surprisingly, the pagan desecration of the temple met with widespread opposition among the Jewish population and provoked the Maccabean revolt led by Judas Maccabee (a nickname meaning the 'Hammer'). With the departure of the traditional family of priests (the Oniads), other religiously observant groups, broadly called the Pious, or *Hasidim* (1Macc 2,42-43), joined forces with Judas Maccabee and successfully fought to remove the pagan incursions. *For those who had been critical of the temple institution, there was now a rare opportunity for reform.* The main leadership positions were taken, in turn, by the surviving leaders of the revolt, all members of the priestly, but not *high*-priestly Hasmonean family, nicknamed the Maccabees. Over the next 50 years, using a combination of diplomacy and warfare, they succeeded in establishing Judaea as a strong and independent theocratic state, extending its borders, towards the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE, by conquering new territories, including Idumaea in the south, Samaria in the centre and Galilee in the north.

After the deaths of Antiochus Epiphanes IV and Alcimus, his appointed high-priest, but before the subsequent appointment of Jonathan Maccabee as the high-priest and leader of the Jews (i.e. from 159-152 BCE), there is hiatus in the list of high priests which has not been satisfactorily explained. According to the wording of the last letter of King Demetrius to Jonathan at this time, it appears there was a high priest during this period (1Macc 10,32.38), but his name has since been lost or scrubbed. This is also precisely the time to which Josephus refers when he introduces the three main 'factions' in Judaism: the Sadducees, the Pharisees, and the Essenes. It is the first time we hear of the Essenes, but apart from four exceptional Essenes profiled by Josephus,<sup>55</sup> they are barely mentioned again in the historical records. However, in their accounts of the Essenes, both Josephus and Philo describe their beliefs and communal way of life in the present tense, at the time of writing, thus testifying that they continued to exist until at least the end of the first century CE.<sup>56</sup> The only other source of

<sup>55</sup> Judas (*Antiquities* 13.311-13), Menahem (15.373-8), Simon (17.345-8) and John (*Jewish War* 2.567).

<sup>56</sup> On the question of Essene survival after 70 CE, 'lack of evidence is not evidence of non-existence' is the stance of Martin Goodman, who then writes: "If the

information about them, and about their history, comes from the often cryptic writings found from 1948-1956, in caves near Qumran and named the Dead Sea Scrolls. Most scholars now agree that the ruined buildings discovered at Qumran were occupied by a community of 100-150 male Essenes, from about 100 BCE until 68 CE, when they were killed or dispersed by the Romans during the first Jewish revolt.<sup>57</sup>

Hidden away in some of the caves in the cliffs near the Qumran buildings, the Dead Sea Scrolls are thought to have been community's working library, containing their own writings as well as those composed in their formative period, before their arrival at Qumran. A remarkable feature of the collection of scrolls and fragments is that, after about 100 BCE, the estimated time of their arrival at Qumran, none of the more important works attributed to the Essenes are to found (e.g., *Epistle of Enoch*, *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*, *Parables of Enoch*) and, reciprocally, none of the works composed by the Qumran community are to be found outside of the caves (*Pesharim*, *War Scroll*, *Thanksgiving Hymns*, *Temple Scroll*, etc.).<sup>58</sup> Between the Qumran community and other non-Qumran communities, there appears to have been no exchange of writings in either direction, as one would have expected among members of the same religious movement. This total

hypothesis is correct that the sages after 70 just chose to ignore other Jewish groups, Sadducees and Essenes after 70 may have flourished just as much as the sages did, each group turning in on itself, unconcerned about the others. I do not see that anything prevented such groups from continuing to exist in the land of Israel or elsewhere until the end of the second century, or even the third, until the time when Epiphanius in the fourth century explicitly declared them a phenomenon of the past. In the intervening centuries, Sadducees and Essenes will have cropped up in the world of the rabbis only intermittently, to be classified under the general heading of *minim* (as I suggested above may have been the case of *b. Sanh. 91a*), in 'Sadducees and Essenes After 70 CE', *Crossing the Boundaries: Essays in Biblical Interpretation in Honour of Michael D. Goulder*, Eds. S. Porter, P. Joyce and D. Orton, Leiden/New York/Köln: Brill, 1994; 347-356.

<sup>57</sup> The most recent and reliable archaeological evaluation dates the construction of the main communal buildings at Qumran to around 100 BCE (Jodi Magness, *The Archaeology of Qumran and the Dead Sea Scrolls*, Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 2002; 63-9); for a fulsome account of the archaeological work at the site and the history of its interpretation, see John J. Collins, *Beyond the Qumran Community*, 166-208.

<sup>58</sup> Cf. G. Boccaccini, *Beyond the Essene Hypothesis*, 129-149 (for the books missing); 156-159 (for the non-appearance elsewhere).

freeze on the exchange of literature, into and out of Qumran, is strong evidence of schism: the Qumran community had separated from the other 'mainstream' Essene communities and was charting its own course in intellectual and physical isolation. This evidence is reinforced by the uniquely rigid determinism and extreme dualism expressed in the Essene literature from Qumran, marking a clear and irreversible divergence from the teaching of God-given human freedom and responsibility expressed in the writings of non-Qumran Essenes.

Although the destruction of the second temple and the Qumran community by the Romans in 68-70 CE was devastating, most of the mainstream, non-Qumran, Essene communities would have survived, with the notable exception of the Essene quarter in Jerusalem, which became the camp of the Roman 10<sup>th</sup> Legion garrison. A great many of these non-Qumran Essenes would have become Christians and, judging from their writings (*4Ezra, Apocalypse of Abraham*), those who did not were forced to reflect deeply upon Jerusalem's destruction, while continuing to await messianic restoration and reconstruction. What is clear, though, is that none of the surviving Essenes returned to rebuild and inhabit Qumran, or reclaim its vast library, showing again that their ties with Qumran had been broken long before. Qumran had been a marginal, minority sect, isolated and cut off by their own extreme ideology, not only from the Jewish people and temple, but also from the main body of their own Essene party.<sup>59</sup>

Returning now to the Parables of Enoch and other works not found at Qumran, Gabriele Boccaccini observes: "But no evidence has been found in the Qumran library of the three most important documents of Enochic Judaism written in the first century BCE (the Epistle of Enoch, the Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs, and the Similitudes of Enoch). The absence 'suggests that the [Enochic] corpus was transmitted and developed in at least one context other than Qumran'."<sup>60</sup> This 'one other context', we propose, is the Essene scribal community residing in the Arbel cave-village, near to Arbela, in eastern Galilee.

<sup>59</sup> Cf. Boccaccini, *Beyond the Essene Hypothesis*, 150-156; a reading of Boccaccini's entire book *Beyond the Essene Hypothesis* is highly recommended for those who wish to go more deeply into the issues.

<sup>60</sup> Boccaccini, *Beyond the Essene Hypothesis*, 131, quoting G.W.E. Nickelsburg, 'Enoch, First Book of', in the *Anchor Bible Dictionary* 2.515. The 'Similitudes of Enoch' is a synonym for the 'Parables of Enoch'.

Not surprisingly, the accepted 'mainstream' history presented above does not explain how the Essenes came to Arbel. Our main sources from this period are the two books of the Maccabees and the writings of Josephus, both of which are written by authors who were patriotically loyal to the ruling powers, whether the Maccabees, the ruling Hasmonean dynasty or indeed the Romans. The Essenes were not only a semi-secret religious movement, largely detached from the ruling powers, but at times they even became victims of those rulers, condemned to execution, execration or expulsion. We should expect, therefore, a somewhat different picture to emerge from their own writings, especially those of the Dead Sea Scrolls. With the help of the scholars, we will proceed to identify the main historical allusions in the Scrolls before going on to reconstruct, with some reading between the lines, what happened to the Essenes before and after the Maccabean Revolt.

### Evidence from the Dead Sea Scrolls

The Damascus Document (CD) provides the starting point for this enquiry, because the greater part of this rule-book was written before the final break in the Essene movement, as it regulates for members in monastic communities as well as for those 'lay-members' living in contemporary society.<sup>61</sup> In the opening section it is related how the community began 'in the age of wrath, three hundred and ninety years after God had given the Israelites into the hand of the King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon'. At this time, God called a group of pious Jews, priests and laymen, to a holy life of repentance and 20 years later sent them a leader called the 'Teacher of Righteousness' (CD [A], I, 5-12). After a while, the 'Teacher' was deserted by a substantial faction of these pious Jews, who are then described as 'seekers of smooth things' and accused of religious laxity and infidelity to the law. In fact, it appears they turned away in order to follow another leader variously called the 'Scoffer', 'Liar' or 'Spouter of Lies'. The increase of tensions between the two groups caused the 'Teacher' and

<sup>61</sup> All the references, translations and much of the historical commentary in this section are from *The Complete Dead Sea Scrolls in English*, 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary rev. ed. by Geza Vermes, London: Penguin, 2011. The evidence so far suggests that the Essene community that finally settled in Qumran engaged only very minimally with Essene lay-members (*pace* Vermes, *The Complete Dead Sea Scrolls*, 43-45).

his faithful followers to go into exile 'in the land of Damascus' where they entered into a 'new covenant', and where the Teacher eventually died. His justification for going to Damascus was the counter-intuitive interpretation of a prophecy of Amos (5,26; CD [A] VII,15),<sup>62</sup> in which God promises to send Israel into exile 'beyond Damascus', as a punishment for their idolatry. The deliberate alteration of 'beyond Damascus' in the citation (i.e. to Nineveh/Babylon/Mesopotamia) to 'Damascus', as if to explain why they came there, persuades us that Damascus should be interpreted literally in this context, and not figuratively as Babylon or any other exilic location.<sup>63</sup>

Meantime, the group that had followed the other leader kindled the anger of God, led Israel astray and profaned the temple in Jerusalem. The text then expresses several stern warnings to those who abandon the new covenant, 'who again betray it and depart from the fountain of living waters' (CD [B] I,1), before giving the impression that a further departure of the teacher's followers had already occurred, among other things because 'they returned again to the way of the people in small (or 'a few') matters'. Here the departure of 'the house of Separation (*Peleg*)', as the parting members are called, is still fresh, for these individuals are invited to appear before the council and be reconciled or judged, before the Glory of God returns to Israel and it will be too late (CD [B] II, 8-12; 23-27, cf. 4Q169 IV,1). The stated reasons for the internal division are various: rejecting or criticizing

<sup>62</sup> The interpretation is counter-intuitive because the previous paragraph makes it clear that the prophecy is not understood here as a punishment, as in the original context, but as a 'protection' from 'the sword': "When the two houses of Israel were divided, Ephraim departed from Judah. And all the apostates were given up to the sword, but those who held fast escaped to the land of the north." The extreme manipulation (reversal) of the sense of these citations from the prophets indicates that they must have come from someone in authority in the community, most likely from the Teacher himself.

<sup>63</sup> The literal interpretation of 'in the land of Damascus' is not new, but dates back to the time when the Damascus Document was the only literary evidence of the sect (cf. *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 1st edition, Jerusalem: Keter, 1972; Vol 5, cols 1238, 1248 and 1249). It has been revived recently by Michael Wise in *The First Messiah*, San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1999. Nevertheless, most scholars nowadays take it as a code word for either Qumran or Babylon. For a brief overview, cf. John J. Collins, *Beyond the Qumran Community*, 29-30. The importance of Damascus as a base for the 'anti-Zionist', 'anti-second temple' Enochic tradition has been mentioned above. The Teacher's decision to stay 'in the land Damascus' suggests an intention to get closer to this Enochic Jewish community.



the precepts, having idolatrous desires and 'walking in stubbornness', but in the context of so much regulation on 'departing from the people', 'separating from the sons of the Pit', 'distinguishing between the clean and unclean, the holy and profane', 'keeping apart from every uncleanness according to the statutes relating to each one', the charge against those who 'returned again to the way of the people' is redolent with disagreement on matters of purity and avoidance of fellow Israelites (the people).<sup>64</sup>

Following the death of the 'Teacher' in Damascus, about 40 years would pass before the demise of all those who originally deserted the 'Teacher' and became violent enemies of his followers (CD [B] II,14-15). Interestingly the period of 40 years appears again in the Commentary on Psalms (Ps 37) as the time remaining until final judgment: 'Interpreted, this concerns the wicked. At the end of the 40 years they shall be blotted out and no evil man shall be found on the earth' (4Q171 II,10).

More detailed allusions to the same events and characters are given in *Pesher Habbakuk*, where specific mention is made of three groups of people who show unfaithfulness to the 'Teacher': those who 'were unfaithful together with the Liar' in Jerusalem, those 'unfaithful of the new covenant' made in 'the land of Damascus', and those who will be unfaithful at the end of days, 'who will not believe when they hear what will happen to the final generation from the 'Priest', to whom God has given the understanding to interpret all the words of his servants the Prophets' (1QpHab I,1-10,). If this does indeed refer to the 'Teacher of Righteousness' (cf. 1QpHab VII, 5), then it helpfully informs us that the 'Teacher' was a priest, a fact that is stated even more explicitly in the Commentaries of the Psalms (Ps. 37; 4Q171 III,15).

*Pesher Habbakuk* has much to say about the Priest's, i.e. the Teacher's, chief antagonist who is here called the 'Wicked Priest', in addition to his other epithets (Scoffer, Liar and Spouter of Lies). Implying that he was at first friendly to the Teacher and his disciples, the

<sup>64</sup> Gabriele Boccaccini states it thus: "The Damascus Document also reveals that the catalyst of the schism between the parent movement and the teacher of righteousness was his decision to call for stricter segregation from the rest of Israel, whom he considered under the dominion of Belial" *Beyond the Essene Hypothesis*, 150.

*Pesher* states the Wicked Priest 'was called by the name of truth when he first arose' to rule over Israel, but then 'his heart became proud and he forsook God and betrayed the precepts for the sake of riches', robbing everyone and 'heaping sinful iniquity upon himself' (1QpHab VIII, 8-13). The finding of some fragments of a Poem to 'King Jonathan' in the Scrolls (4Q448) indicates that the ruler of Israel called the Wicked Priest may have been Jonathan Maccabee, who led the revolt after the death of his brother Judas in 160 BCE and was appointed high priest by the Greek ruler Alexander Balas in 152 BCE.

One dramatic encounter in 'the land of Damascus' is mentioned in the *Pesher* Habbakuk, when the Wicked Priest 'pursued the Teacher of Righteousness to the house of his exile that he might confuse him with his venomous fury', confusing his community and causing them to stumble while they fasted on the Essene Day of Atonement (1QpHab XI,6-8). On that occasion, it is recalled that 'the House of Absalom and the members of its council were silent at the time of the chastisement of the Teacher of Righteousness and gave him no help against the Liar who flouted the Law in the midst of their whole congregation' (1QpHab V,9-12). Because of his wickedness against the Teacher and his elect, the Wicked Priest was later delivered into the hands of his enemies 'to be humbled by means of a destroying scourge, in bitterness of soul' (1QpHab IX, 9-12), by 'inflicting horrors of evil diseases and taking vengeance upon his body of flesh' (1QpHab IX, 2-8). 'As he himself plotted the destruction of the Poor, so will God condemn him to destruction' (1QpHab XII,5). Two important historical details are added by the Commentary on Psalms (Ps 37): firstly that the Wicked Priest planned to slay the Teacher of Righteousness, 'because of the ordinance and the Law (Torah) which he sent to him', and secondly that he was himself delivered 'into the hands of the nations, that they may execute upon him judgment' (4Q171 IV,5-11). The same work refers to the opponents of the Priest (the Teacher) and his Council as the 'wicked of Ephraim and Manasseh', who appear in a later work, the *Pesher* Nahum, in contexts that identify the House of Ephraim as the Pharisees and the House of Manasseh as the Sadducees. The Essenes frequently identify themselves as the glorious House of Judah.

In the much later work, *Pesher* Nahum, neither the Teacher nor the Wicked Priest are mentioned, for attention shifts to the 'furious young lion', a leader of the Jews who took revenge and hanged alive

(crucified) the Pharisees who conspired to invite King Demetrius of Greece to be the ruler in Jerusalem (4Q169 I,1-8). However, 'from the time of Antiochus until the coming of the rulers of Kittim, God did not permit the city to be taken by the Kings of Greece' (4Q169 I,3-4). Both here and in *Peshar Habbakuk*, the Kittim refer to the Romans as the agents appointed by God to despoil and punish the 'last Priests of Jerusalem' (1QpHab IX,5-7; II,10-14; III,1-13; 4Q169 I, 3-4).

Mention should finally be made of the Temple Scroll (11QT), which displays several features signifying it had a special or 'canonical' status in the community of the Teacher, who was probably its original author. Above all, it presents itself as a compendium of Law concerning the Temple, given by God to Moses, thereby providing a much-needed reference for the building and regulation of a new man-made temple, for the messianic age. With near certainty it can be identified as the 'Book of Meditation (*Hagu*)' to be studied by the priests and judges in this age (CD X,4-6; XIII 2-3; XIV 6,7) and by all the community in the messianic age (1QSa I,6-8) and as the Law, or Torah, that the Teacher sent to the Wicked Priest, prompting him to plan the Teacher's murder (4Q171 IV, 5-11). As a work of major religious significance and provocative impact, the Temple Scroll should be considered a document of some historical importance.<sup>65</sup>

#### Postulated Reconstruction of Essene History

Most will agree that there are many historical allusions in the Dead Sea Scrolls, especially in the Damascus Document (CD) and in some Commentaries (*Pesharim*). In fact, at first glance, the *Pesharim* appear to be more of a commentary on contemporary affairs, from the Essene point of view, than on the original Scripture. Having said this, though, the allusions are often opaque and need to be deciphered.

<sup>65</sup> Its role in the events described in this essay has been seriously underestimated, I suggest. For a re-evaluation of its religious significance, Yigael Yadin is an excellent guide in *The Temple Scroll: the Hidden Law of the Dead Sea Sect*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1985; esp. 112-117, 218-232. "Whatever the origin and the prompting, the fact remains that we have here in the scroll an extraordinary Temple Torah in which God the law-giver speaks as a master-architect, providing precise instructions on the design of each unit and article", op.cit. 117. See also Molly M. Zahn, 'New Voices, Ancient Words: The *Temple Scroll's* Reuse of the Bible', in *Temple and Worship in Biblical Israel*, ed John Day, London and New York: T & T Clark International, 2005; 435-54.

With the help of the late Geza Vermes in particular, we will attempt to reconstruct the history of the Essenes with an interpretation of events and characters that, although based on facts in some respects, is highly speculative in others.

The origin of the Essenes is traced to an 'age of wrath' 390 years after the exile in 586 BCE, which comes to 196 BCE (cf. Ezek 4,5). All the scholars agree that this is inaccurate, but only by a few years. The 'age of wrath' places the origins squarely during the 'Hellenistic crisis' when the Greek rulers, in concert with the high priests, were imposing their Hellenizing policy on the Jews. A fair estimate would be around 185-180 BCE. The Pious (*Hasidim*) predecessors of the Essenes were leaderless for 20 years until they were joined by the Teacher of Righteousness around 160 BCE. This date corresponds well with the period (159-152 BCE) for which there is a gap in the record of high priests, suggesting the Teacher may have been the serving high priest when he became the leader of the Pious. As observed above, 'for those who had been critical of the temple institution, there was now a rare opportunity for reform', following the successes of the Maccabean revolt. The Teacher attracted a large number of *Hasidim* around him, because he appears to have had an ambitious plan for religious reform. It is likely, in my view, that this plan is represented by the contents of the Temple Scroll (11QT), which would have created a temple institution worthy of Ezekiel's vision of restoration yet, at the same time, observant of the Mosaic Torah. Not only would this have reconciled the dissenting 'Enochic' group, who remained in exile, with the central 'Zadokite' authority in charge of the temple institution, but on completion it would also have led to the appointment of a high priestly 'Messiah of Aaron' and a princely 'Messiah of Israel'. In brief it was a plan for the messianic age, which Daniel had prophesied for 490 years (seventy weeks of years) after the exile, i.e. around 90 BCE. If implemented in 160-150 BCE, when the 'Teacher of Righteousness' presented it to the *Hasidim*, it could have been completed in time for Daniel's prophetic date to become true (i.e. 60-70 years later).

With such an ambitious plan, it is highly probable that the Teacher presented it also to the leader of the revolt at that time, Jonathan Maccabee. In view of the opening praise for the Wicked Priest (1QpHab VIII, 9) and the Poetic Eulogy mentioning his name (4Q448), it appears that Jonathan initially responded positively towards the Teacher's plan. But sometime before Jonathan was appointed high

priest by the Greek ruler in 152 BCE, he evidently changed his mind (1QpHab VIII, 10-13) and subsequently became the Teacher's most virulent enemy, no doubt because the latter was now a serious rival for the office of high priest.<sup>66</sup> Jonathan's hostility is then reflected in the Scrolls with the ubiquitous and derogatory titles Wicked Priest, Scoffer, Liar and Spouter of Lies. But Jonathan's change of mind, and his acceptance of the high priesthood from the Greek ruler Alexander Balas, is entirely comprehensible as a response to the details of the Teacher's plan, especially the extreme purity regulations it proposed<sup>67</sup> and the Essene solar calendar it endorsed, which conflicted irreconcilably with the luni-solar calendar imposed by the Greek king.<sup>68</sup> Jonathan's rejection of the Teacher's plan then brought about the first division among the Pious, or *Hasidim*, into those who 'separated' in order to be loyal to the high-priest and were called Pharisees (פרושיין from פרוש, to separate), and those who remained faithful to the 'Teacher of Righteousness' and continued to be called *Hasidim* in Hebrew, *Chasin* in Aramaic, or *Essenoi/Essaioi* in Greek.<sup>69</sup> This is indeed the time indicated by Josephus for the formation of the three main factions amongst the Jews (Essenes, Pharisees and Sadducees).

As Jonathan's prime competitor for office of high priest, and with a large following of those retaining the name of *Hasidim*, the Teacher's life was in danger. He had to flee to a place that was outside Jonathan's realm at that time, but not so far that he could not return if the

<sup>66</sup> There is a serious possibility, according to the narrative presented here, that the Teacher was the high priest in this period between the death of Alcimus (159) and the appointment of Jonathan (152 BCE). If he is indeed the author of the Temple Scroll, the knowledge of the temple and its laws would strongly support such a case. As noted already, 1Macc 10,32.38 denies that the position of high priest was vacant at this time, implying the name of the office holder from 159-152 has been scrubbed, perhaps by John Hyrcanus after his break with the Pharisees/*Hasidim* around 130-125 BCE. For further discussion, see James C. Vanderkam, *Calendars in the Dead Sea Scrolls: Measuring Time*, London and New York: Routledge, 1998; 113-116.

<sup>67</sup> For a sketch of the extreme purity laws it embraced, see Yadin, *The Temple Scroll*, 170-91.

<sup>68</sup> For a fuller explanation of the calendar conflict, see Vanderkam, *Calendars in the Dead Sea Scrolls*, 113-5.

<sup>69</sup> The etymology of the names of these groups appears to be a reflection of the split: the Pharisees are those who 'separated' from the Essenes, which is Greek for 'Pious' in Aramaic/Hebrew (*Chasin/Hasidim*). This implies that the Teacher took with him to Damascus the original group of *Hasidim* minus the Pharisees.

situation were to change. Damascus was ideal, not only because there was a substantial Jewish community there already, but also because many of those Jews were enthusiastic about his cause. Looking forward to the true post-exilic restoration of their people, they were the original dissenters of the temple institution, the founders of Enochic Judaism. The loss of the Pharisee party to Jonathan's side was suddenly more than compensated by the entry of the Enochians of Damascus. Accompanied by his followers, the Teacher settled in 'the land of Damascus' in the period immediately after Jonathan's appointment as high priest, around 152-151 BCE, and he remained there until his death, at unknown date.

The date of the Teacher's death can, however, be estimated approximately from the curious information that 'after the death of the Teacher, about 40 years will pass before the demise of all those violent men who originally deserted him' (CD [B] II,14-15). Elsewhere 'the period of the 40 years' is identified as the time remaining until final judgment (4Q171 II,10). Evidently, the Teacher's community recognized a timetable of events up to the judgment, seemingly based on the Danielic 490 years, putting the estimated time of the final judgment around 90 BCE.<sup>70</sup> 40 years before this year would date the death of the Teacher to c.130 BCE.<sup>71</sup>

Interestingly enough, towards the end of his high priesthood, Jonathan's military campaigns against King Demetrius (II Nicator) took him twice to Damascus (1Macc 11,62; 12,31), around 144-143 BCE. One of these visits could have been the occasion for the infamous

<sup>70</sup> I was alerted to this 'eschatological timetable' and its baneful effects by Kenneth Atkinson's excellent article 'Understanding the Relationship Between the Apocalyptic Worldview and Jewish Sectarian Violence: The Case of the War Between Alexander Jannaeus and Demetrius III', *The Seleucid and Hasmonean Periods and the Apocalyptic Worldview*, Eds. L. Grabbe, G. Boccaccini, and J. Zurawski, London and New York: T&T Clark, 2016; 45-57. For an overview of the diachronic interpretation of the 70 'weeks' of Dan 9:24-27, see William Adler, 'The Apocalyptic Survey of History Adapted by Christians: Daniel's Prophecy of 70 Weeks', *The Jewish Apocalyptic Heritage in Early Christianity*, eds. J. VanderKam and W. Adler, Assen: Van Gorcum/Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996; 210-238.

<sup>71</sup> According to the Damascus Document (CD), the history of the Teacher's community is tidily summarized as a final 100 years before the final judgment: 390 years after the start of the Babylonian exile, they wander without a leader for 20 years, then for 40 years the Teacher is with them, before he is 'gathered in' 40 years before the final judgment.

meeting between high priest Jonathan and 'the Teacher' (1QpHab), which seems to have marked the beginning of the division within the members of the new covenant, as described in the Damascus Code (CD). Again, as stated above, the main cause seems to have been the extreme purity regulations, which must have been especially impractical and burdensome for those members of the new covenant, the original Enochians, who had joined the Teacher's community in the land of Damascus. The death of Jonathan is then mentioned with *scha-denfreude*, but also recognizable fidelity to the facts recounted in the first book of Maccabees, describing how he was captured, imprisoned and killed by a foreigner, the Greek general called Trypho (1Macc 12,39-13,30).<sup>72</sup>

Following the Teacher's death around 130 BCE, it appears that internal strains and divisions within his community increased until a profound and enduring schism became inevitable.<sup>73</sup> The breakaway group may have started to make moves, at this stage, towards a rapprochement with the Pharisees, who were by now being expelled from Jerusalem and expunged from high-priest's administration, because of an accusation that he, John Hyrcanus, was conceived in rape while his mother was imprisoned by the Greeks.<sup>74</sup> Despite their popularity, Hyrcanus never reconciled with the Pharisees, leaving us to imagine they would have welcomed the restoration of ties with the more moderate Essenes, who in the 130-120's were about to break away from the hard-line followers of the Teacher, and were looking for a place to settle.

At exactly this time (c.130-120), most probably as a direct result of the ruler's expulsions, we hear that the vice-president of the Sanhedrin, a Pharisee named Nittai the Arbelite, takes up residence in Arbel in Galilee. Undoubtedly many Pharisees accompany him and he establishes a *Beit Midrash* in that place. Within a few years the breakaway Essenes arrive and establish their community in the same town

<sup>72</sup> A comparison between this version and that of the Dead Sea Scrolls demonstrates the hostility that had grown between the two figures and their respective followers. Seeing that the Hasmonean legacy was so great and admired, it is really not surprising that, if the Teacher was the high priest from 159-152 BCE, his name was scrubbed from the official list of office holders.

<sup>73</sup> Again, see Boccaccini, *Beyond the Essene Hypothesis*, 150-156 for a penetrating analysis of this Parting of the Ways.

<sup>74</sup> Josephus, *Antiquities*, 13.288-296.

and set to work on preparing the caves for their scribal community. In the meantime, around 100 BCE, Galilee is conquered by Aristobulus I (104-103), the successor of John Hyrcanus, enabling the immigration of the entire Essene scribal community and their colonization of the Arbel cave-village. Here, they would have become more contemplative, abandoning the Teacher's plan of temple restoration (11QT) and seeking God in his heavenly temple instead, just like the ancient Enochians 250 years before.<sup>75</sup> The views of Mt. Hermon must have helped them to restore their link with these spiritual predecessors. Their creativity and literary output became a phenomenon in itself, witnessing to the spiritual fecundity of their new conditions, nurtured no doubt by their newly restored relationship with the Pharisees, with whom they may have cooperated to produce the *Targumim*, the complete translation of the Hebrew Scriptures into Aramaic. During the first century BCE, the cave-village became the birthplace of innumerable pseudepigrapha and apocalypses, including the important Essene works that never entered the Qumran library. Towards the end of that century, contemplation of Daniel's Son of Man prophecy in the Enochian tradition produced the Parables of Enoch, the work that did most to prepare the ground for the missions of John the Baptist and Jesus of Nazareth. It was certainly no coincidence that Jesus' messianic mission began right here, within sight of the Essene cave-village of Mt. Arbel.

Although we have closed the circle and arrived at a factually consistent, though very speculative, reconstruction of the presence of the Essene scribal community at Arbel, we have not yet considered the fate of the group they left in Damascus, the group that remained faithful to the Teacher.

As a group with a mission and a plan to bring about the radical restoration of the temple institution (11QT), the Teacher's loyalists in exile would have had a particular focus on the dating of the final judgment to around 90 BCE, according to Daniel's 490-year prophecy. They had to be ready and close to Jerusalem to seize any opportunity to enact their messianic plan. Quoting Isaiah's proclamation "to

<sup>75</sup> It would appear that their contact with the Enochian Jews of Damascus, and with their literature, gave the Arbel Essenes a very satisfactory 'way out' of their failed attempt to bring about a worthy restoration of the temple institution, based upon the Teacher's Temple Scroll (11QT). They flourished as a result.



prepare in the wilderness the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a path for our God" (Isa 40,3; 1QS VIII,15), they built their community at Qumran around 100 BCE and settled there, within one day's journey of Jerusalem.<sup>76</sup> Their writings show a detached awareness of the bloody civil war stirred up by the Pharisees in Jerusalem, during the reign of Alexander Jannaeus, king and high-priest, which included a conspiracy with Demetrius III, the king of Syria, to attack and depose Jannaeus. As planned, the invasion went ahead in 90/89 BCE and the armies of Demetrius, which included a few thousand renegade Jewish troops (according to Josephus), completely demolished the forces of Jannaeus at Shechem (Nablus), but instead of entering Jerusalem to take power, he went back to Syria. Josephus explains this curious denouement by saying that the Jews that were fighting with him felt pity for their defeated King Jannaeus and changed sides, making it risky for Demetrius to proceed. In an important article on this invasion, Kenneth Atkinson argues that this is an implausible explanation. In the light of numismatic finds and other sources, he suggests that Demetrius got news of the death of Antiochus X Eusebes (89/88 BCE) and returned to fight his brother Philip over possession of the late king's territories.<sup>77</sup> More importantly, Atkinson proposes a connection between this devastating civil war, which is said to have started at the water pouring ritual on a feast of Tabernacles,<sup>78</sup> and the apocalyptic worldview of the Pharisees, especially their adherence to the Danielic 490 years with its expectation for messianic intervention at precisely that time (90/89 BCE). Clearly the apocalyptic component has been airbrushed out of the story by later historians, including Josephus. Whatever the truth of the matter, the Pharisaic conspiracy with Demetrius to bring about a regime change in Jerusalem, not to mention the chaotic conditions that may have allowed a fulfilment of Daniel's prophecy, were unsuccessful. The messianic age had to be postponed yet again. Instead, the furious judgment of the nearly-deposed King Jannaeus fell upon the hundreds of Pharisees and their

<sup>76</sup> Perhaps it is no coincidence that they seem to have settled in Qumran more or less at the same time (100 BCE) as the breakaway community settled in the Arbel cave-village.

<sup>77</sup> Kenneth Atkinson, *The Seleucid and Hasmonean Periods and the Apocalyptic Worldview*, 45-57.

<sup>78</sup> Josephus, *Jewish War* 1.88-95; *Antiquities* 13.372-9; *M. Sukkah* 4:9.

families accused of treason, as narrated by Josephus and snidely mentioned in the *Peshar Nahum* of the Qumran community.

Reading the Qumran commentaries, or *Pesharim*, one finds a community that has become entirely self-referential and surrounded by enemies, one that looks into the ancient prophecies and sees only its own reflection there, its own detachment from reality.<sup>79</sup> When the Romans took control in 63 BCE, there was still a glimmer hope that God had sent them to judge those who had opposed their Teacher's plan for temple restoration. Only later, towards the turn of the millennium, did they realize the Romans were not the solution, but the problem. Far from being God's agents of revenge and retribution, they were allies of the devil, Beliar; they were the Sons of Darkness who would be defeated in the final battle by the armies of the Sons of Light (1QM).<sup>80</sup> The Qumran Community had become isolated, marginalized and ignored, even by their former community members, flourishing now at Arbela and in the Arbel caves.<sup>81</sup> Finally, in 68 CE during the first Jewish revolt, they were an easy prey for the Roman army; it is not known whether they were killed or just dispersed.<sup>82</sup> A few fragments of their writings were discovered at Masada, making it likely that some of the community managed to escape there. Perhaps others

<sup>79</sup> Boccaccini captures the mood well: "At the root of the Qumran community was a double frustration. In the aftermath of the Maccabean revolt, the Qumranites' parent movement failed in its political attempt to replace the Zadokite leadership. Internally the followers of the teacher of righteousness failed to gain the leadership of their movement. The double experience of failure brought about, along with a sense of impotence, an outburst of fanaticism", *Beyond the Essene Hypothesis*, 155-6.

<sup>80</sup> Pointed out by Vermes, *Complete Dead Sea Scrolls*, 56.

<sup>81</sup> But see Vermes (*Complete Dead Sea Scrolls*, 43-45) for the contrary view, and the sparse evidence of 'a living relationship' between the desert and town sectaries (monastic communities and Essene lay members), at the prescribed annual gatherings at Qumran. The evidence for a sustained relationship between these two forms of Essenism is not convincing in my view. At most, it may suggest a few mixed annual celebrations with lay members from a few neighbouring towns such as Jericho, Ein Falasha or Ein Gedi, but the numbers involved were small and do not contradict the overwhelming evidence for an enduring schism with the mainstream non-Qumran Essenes at Arbel, Jerusalem and many other towns and villages throughout the country.

<sup>82</sup> But see the report of Josephus, *Jewish War* 2.152-3, quoted by Vermes, *Complete Dead Sea Scrolls*, 66, which could be a description of the fate of the community at Qumran.

managed to cross to the other side of the Dead Sea and later move south into Arabia, for the ear that is tuned to their writings will hear more than a few echoes of their doctrines in the Quran, the Sacred Book of Islam.

### Summary, Acknowledgments and Conclusions

It would be premature to attempt to come to any conclusions about the Arbel/Essene Caves Hypothesis, presented above in substantial detail. At most, it can be recommended as providing a coherent narrative for many hitherto unexplained findings, literary, historical and archaeological. My feeling is that its capacity for explaining so many loose ends raises it almost to the level of historical fact, but again that claim would be premature and even presumptuous. Scholars from a variety of specialties will want to consider, criticize and correct the picture that emerges. Undoubtedly many of the details will need to be 'tweaked' and refined. Archaeology still has a great contribution to play in confirming, or indeed refuting, the Essene presence in the Arbel caves. A re-reading of the Dead Sea Scrolls in the light of this narrative may bring further adjustments. But the case has been made and a new level of comprehension has been reached.

Perhaps a word or two is needed on how we got there. At this point I have to acknowledge my debt to the devoted work of many scholars, but in particular that of Geza Vermes, Yigael Yadin and Gabriele Boccaccini. The works of these three scholars are the pillars which support the reconstructed historical narrative of the Essenes presented above: Vermes for his clear historical correlation of the various personalities and events mentioned in the Dead Sea Scrolls, Yadin for his perceptive elucidation of the religious significance of the Temple Scroll, and Boccaccini for his truly transforming analysis of the internal schism that tore apart the Essenes into a moderate (Arbel) and a radical branch (Qumran).<sup>83</sup> I have followed the work of these three scholars closely, welding them together with an interpretation resurrected from the early days of Scroll research: the literal interpretation of 'the land of Damascus'—the place of the Essenes' exile—as Damascus, or somewhere near. This has the virtue of explaining the newly-

<sup>83</sup> The works of these scholars, and those that follow, are the ones referenced in the text.

formed Essene party's contact with the Enochian Jews, who had been based in Damascus since the Persian times, according to my estimation. And perhaps more significantly, the exile in Damascus fills the chronological gap of about 50 years between the central conflict (Teacher versus Wicked Priest, around 152 BCE) and the Essene settlement of both Qumran and the Arbel cave-village (around 100 BCE, according to archaeological data). The Damascus exile was indeed a formative period for the Essenes, when they merged with the Enochians, adopted their literature and developed a healthy openness to direct religious experience. However, the period ended with a schism into two factions, moderate and radical, which was permanent to all intents and purposes.

The only other adjustment I have made, thanks to Yigael Yadin, is to give to the Temple Scroll the central role that it deserves in the conflict between the Wicked Priest and the Teacher of Righteousness, its likely author. This leads directly into a subject that has only recently come to the attention of scholars: the role of religion, biblical texts and messianic prophecies (apocalypses) in the events of this and subsequent periods. For introducing this topic into current scholarly discussion thanks are due to Kenneth Atkinson.

I must also acknowledge with gratitude the insightful works of James Charlesworth and Mordechai Aviam, who, through their ground-breaking studies on the Parables of Enoch, have created a firm theoretical basis for locating the non-Qumranic Essene scribal community in the Arbel caves. Credit is also due to the archaeologist Zvi Ilan for his survey of the caves in 1989, when he was the first to draw attention to the *mikva'ot* and cisterns inside, but whose untimely death in 1990 prevented him from following up on these findings.

I will conclude simply by saying that, if accepted more or less as presented above, this hypothesis places the Arbel cave-village at the centre of one of the most creative and prolific religious movements in Israel, and possibly in the world, at that time (first century BCE). One can expect this conclusion to have repercussions in many fields, extending well beyond the history of the Essenes and into Second Temple Judaism and the foundations of Christianity, not to mention its contribution to contemporary Galilean history and the origins and social setting of the Pseudepigrapha and Apocalypses. We can venture to assert that lakeside Galilee in those days would have been alive with biblical discussion and religious ferment, and was certainly not

the backwater of uneducated peasants it is often pictured to have been.

### Final Word

This last statement returns us to the starting point of this enquiry: How could the apostle John, a fisherman born by the Sea of Galilee around 10 CE, ever have become the writer of an apocalypse like the Book of Revelation, or of a gospel such as the Fourth Gospel? The simple answer is that he was a bright young Jew, with a biblical education and raised in an environment where messianic prophecies were written in the form of apocalypses and often discussed. It was a local tradition, originally associated with Mt. Hermon, and resumed in the first century BCE by the local Essene scribes. John, the son of Zebedee was brought up in this tradition, but of course that is not the whole story. An interest accompanied him throughout his life, which was reinforced by John the Baptist (a non-Qumran Essene, rather than an ex-Qumran Essene, in my view), transformed by faith in Jesus of Nazareth, deepened in the light of this faith while studying with a converted Essene scribe in Jerusalem, and then finally challenged by the post-70 CE Essene writings that were circulating in Ephesus, towards the end of his life (e.g., *4Ezra*).<sup>84</sup>

The Book of Revelation, which John wrote, but is more accurately called 'The Revelation of Jesus Christ' (Rev 1,1), can be understood as the divinely revealed fulfilment of the ambitious Essene attempts to write the transtemporal story—the past, present and future—of God's eschatological judgment and salvation. It was the culmination of John's early exposure to the Essene influence among the Jews of lakeside Galilee. John's Gospel and Letters are also an enduring witness to this influence. Paul's Letters, too, are similarly imbued with Essene resonances and contrasts, most probably acquired from his Christian formation in Damascus, where Essene influence was also strong.

Returning to the times of Jesus, Yigael Yadin relates another striking example of the diffusion of Essene influence.<sup>85</sup> At his Sermon

<sup>84</sup> John's scribal education will be proposed in ch. 2 of this volume, and his challenge by popular prophecies (including *4Ezra*) will be considered in ch. 4.

<sup>85</sup> In addition to the situation described in Mk 3,6, where we find the Essenes (pejoratively called Herodians) present outside the synagogue in Capernaum.

on the Mount, Jesus proclaimed to the lakeside crowd that followed him "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you..." (Mt 5,43-44). The command 'to hate your enemy' exists nowhere in Jewish law except in the Community Rule (1QS I,9-11; II,4-9) of the Essenes, and so Yadin aptly concludes "it is my opinion that the people he [Jesus] was addressing were familiar with this Essene injunction, having perhaps been close to the Essene sect and believed its doctrines, but who had now converted or were about to convert to the views of Jesus, and follow him".<sup>86</sup> The Essene influence was evidently strong in this area, even among the common people.<sup>87</sup>

So, there is no need to speculate that the apostle John, or Paul, ever became an Essene novice or took the 'oath of the new covenant'. In places where the Essenes associated with the Pharisees (e.g., Mk 3,6), and where Essene lay members were living 'in the villages', as in this area of Galilee, their writings and teachings became diffused and well-known even among the general public. The influence of their teachings had prepared the faithful to receive a heavenly 'Son of Man' Messiah, and this may explain why Jesus chose to base his mission here. And precisely because of this strong Essene influence in the birthplace of John, the son of Zebedee, those who say the Fourth Gospel or the Book of Revelation could not have been written by a fisherman apostle from Galilee should think again.

<sup>86</sup> Yadin, *Temple Scroll*, 241-2.

<sup>87</sup> In view of the oath taken by the new members of the Essene party, to keep their teaching secret (Josephus, *Jewish War* 2.139-142), one wonders how the teaching of the Essenes became so widespread. In fact, the oath probably applied just to certain intimate teachings of the community, such as the discernment of Spirits (CD III, 13-28). In note 47 above, we saw that the secrecy oath did not forbid the Essene writings from being read by 'the wise among the people' (*4Ezra* 14:44-47) and it would have been an odd development of the Torah if the oath had applied to the laws governing the daily life of Essene lay members. The strong Essene influence among the general public therefore indicates a thriving Essene lay membership in the towns and villages of the area, including Capernaum (cf. Mk 3,6).

## CHAPTER 2

### The Author of the Book of Revelation

#### Introduction

The identity of the author of any book in the New Testament is important for many reasons, not least because it can tell us more about the book itself: its witness about the people and events it describes, its social and historical background, its purpose and motivation, its literary and religious influences and so on. With the Book of Revelation, there is another important aspect, arising from its self-presentation as revealed prophecy (Rev 1,3; 22,7). As far back as the time when it was written, the first step in the discernment of every prophecy has focused on the fidelity and moral integrity of the prophet, as these characteristics are closely tied to the trustworthiness of the prophetic revelation (cf. 2,20-23; *Didache* 11). Only after establishing the *bona fides* of the author of the prophecy can the process of discernment move on to examine the contents and meaning of its message. Concerning the Book of Revelation, this discernment was performed in the second century CE, when the ecclesiastical authorities in the Western Church decided to include it at the end of the New Testament canon. We do not know the precise reasons for their decision, but it appears that awareness of its apostolic authorship, by John the apostle of Jesus, was the most important consideration. Regarding this particular book, then, the issue of apostolic authorship is of special importance, determining not only its evaluation as true prophecy, but also its inclusion in the canon.

In the present age of critical scholarship, these considerations have been superseded by others, reflecting more than anything else the prevailing literary and historical interests of biblical scholars. Following the lead of critics from the past, these scholars have reached a

consensus that denies that the Book of Revelation was authored by John, the Galilean apostle of Jesus. Consequently, apostolic authorship is almost universally rejected nowadays, even in ecclesiastical circles where, until recently, it was firmly held. Nevertheless, there are two historico-literary ‘facts’ that strongly oppose this ‘critical’ consensus, one negative and the other positive: the first is the absence of an identifiable author, apart from the apostle John, in the records of the early Church, a fact which contrasts starkly with the author’s self-presentation as a well-known Church leader who is familiar with at least seven of the local communities in Asia Minor. Secondly, and more significantly, is the overwhelming consensus in favour of apostolic authorship among the leading churchmen of the early Church—a witness that remained fairly solid for at least two centuries after the Book of Revelation was written.<sup>1</sup> This interpretation of the literary and historical sources formed a solid defence against the denial of apostolic authorship until about 150 years ago, but since then the ancient witnesses have been underestimated, new findings of doubtful significance have been promoted and the unsatisfying emptiness left by rejecting apostolic authorship has been overpopulated with a variety of improbable proposals. With groundless confidence, most scholars now agree that the author was not John the apostle, although they cannot identify who he was. The negative conclusions of biblical scholars have gained traction more by repetition than by the discovery of any new and convincing evidence.

In this situation, the effective response is either to challenge the reasoning by which the negative conclusions were reached, or to add new evidence supporting the original assertion of apostolic

<sup>1</sup> The first cracks in the consensus appear to date from around 250 CE, but did not come to the fore until the publication of Eusebius’ *History of the Church*, dated to 324 CE. Above all, it was the critical attitude of Eusebius in this book that turned the leaders of the Oriental Churches against the apostolic authorship of the Book of Revelation until at least the 7<sup>th</sup> century and in many places much longer. However, the Western Church was never swayed from accepting the traditional view during this time. For a brief and clear account of how the Book of Revelation was widely accepted, at first, by the vast majority of leading churchmen in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries, only to be widely rejected by the Eastern Church in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, including a discussion of the reasons for these dynamics, see Part 1 of *Andrew of Caesarea and the Apocalypse in the Ancient Church of the East: Studies and Translation* by Eugenia Constantinou, PhD thesis, Quebec: Université Laval, 2008 (available at [www.theses.ulaval.ca](http://www.theses.ulaval.ca)), especially pp. 31-114.



authorship. In this essay, we have attempted to do both. The approach taken below first presents the traditional case for apostolic authorship, largely based on the witness of the New Testament, and then examines the challenge to this case by two of the earliest orthodox opponents, both churchmen: Gaius of Rome, c.200 CE, and Dionysius of Alexandria, c.250 CE. Their denials of apostolic authorship eventually led to a serious split of opinion in the fourth century<sup>2</sup> and are as relevant today as they were then. Examination of their criticism proves fruitful, firstly in laying to rest the false accusation of pseudonymity and secondly in identifying a new source of evidence supporting apostolic authorship, namely the text's Galilean characteristics. This additional evidence removes many, if not most, of the objections to recognizing John, the Galilean apostle of Jesus, as author. The Galilean aspects of the author's personal background then open the way to a discussion of his preparation to write the Book of Revelation, his execution of this task and the way it was then copied and distributed. Based on the current state of knowledge of first century life in Galilee, Jerusalem and in Ephesus, there appear to be no discontinuities or improbabilities that might undermine the traditional view of the apostle John, son of Zebedee, as author of the Book of Revelation. In fact, new insights arise for consideration and future research.

#### The Traditional View

At the beginning and at the end of the Book of Revelation, the author has given us several details about himself: his name is John, from the Hebrew name Yochanan (Rev 1,1.4.9; 22,8). He is one of a community of servants of God (1,1; 22,6), a brother and companion of those whom he is addressing, who are suffering in the cause of Jesus and his kingdom (1,9). Some of his brothers are called prophets and fellow-servants of divine angels (19,10; 22,8). John tells us that he was on the Island of Patmos (1,9), when he saw visions 'in the Spirit' on the Lord's day. He was commanded by the angel of the Risen Christ to

<sup>2</sup> Cf. The situation is described by Eusebius in *The History of the Church* III, 24.18; III, 25.2-4, where he writes: "As to the Revelation, the views of most people to this day are evenly divided" between accepted and disputed. For this reason, he included it among the 'Spurious' books, in addition to listing it with the 'Recognized' (Eng trans by G.A. Williamson, revised by Andrew Louth, London: Penguin Classics, 1989; 88-89).

write all that he saw in a book (1,2.11.19) and then send it to seven named churches in the Roman Province of Asia Minor.<sup>3</sup> What he saw is called 'the Word of God and the Witness of Jesus Christ' (1,2) and the title of the book he wrote is 'The Revelation of Jesus Christ' (1,1).<sup>4</sup> The words of this book are a prophecy (1,3; 22,7) informing God's servants and prophets in the churches about events in the near future (1,1; 22,6.16), up to and beyond the second coming of Jesus Christ (22,7.12,20). When he writes the opening address he is no longer on the Island of Patmos (1,9), although he does not say where he is. He expects his message to be read aloud in the churches, as was done with letters from other Christian leaders (Rev 1,3; Col 4,16; 1Thess 5,27). This is all we know about the author from what he has written in the text. Further information derives from inferences from the text (internal sources) and from external sources and traditions.

After his humble and fraternal self-introduction, the author goes on to address the seven contemporary churches in Asia, as a Church leader, on behalf of the Risen Christ. Classical historians are able to confirm that the social profiles of the churches, as described in the seven messages (Rev 2–3), agree well not only with local archaeological findings, historical records and topographical characteristics, but also with the traditional date of writing around the end of the first century.<sup>5</sup> According to this information, there is therefore little doubt that the author knew the churches intimately and was well known among them. As these churches were among the largest churches in the province of Asia Minor, which was at that time one of the most

<sup>3</sup> In view of questions about the literacy of the apostles raised in first-century Galilee, to be considered later, it is important to note here that John was indeed asked to write, and was therefore 'grapho-literate', and that he was also asked to send his manuscript to seven churches, all at once, and not individually as Paul did. This raises the possibility that he had access to a 'scribal centre' at Ephesus, where multiple copies of manuscripts could be made simultaneously, by dictation, and then distributed onwards. This insight will be discussed at the end of this chapter.

<sup>4</sup> In sacred Scripture and in the Jewish scribal tradition the opening words of the text formed its title.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Colin J. Hemer, *The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia in their Local Setting*, JSNT series 11, Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1989; 2-7. For the traditional dating of 95-96 CE: Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, V, 30.3; *apud* Eusebius, *The History of the Church*, III, 18.3; V, 8.6. The date is dismissed by some, often in a most perfunctory way; e.g., Craig R. Koester, *Revelation: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Yale Bible, New Haven/London: Yale Univ. Press, 2014; 74.

important regions in the rapidly expanding Christian world, the author must have been a renowned figure in the Church at large. It would have been odd, to say the least, if there was no memory of such a person among the seven communities and beyond.

These inferences are therefore fully consistent with the tradition, which has come down through the Church, that this John is indeed John the apostle of Jesus,<sup>6</sup> who was raised in the Jewish faith, worked as a fisherman on the northern shores of the Sea of Galilee and was the younger brother of the apostle James. Their father, Zebedee, was a fishing-boat owner and, before being called by Jesus, they were fishing partners of Simon Peter and his brother Andrew (Mk 1,16-20; Lk 5,10). In view of this partnership, James and John may also have been natives of Bethsaida, as claimed by a pilgrim called Theodosius as early as 530 CE, and by many others ever since. After being called to be apostles, the Synoptic Gospels indicate that they were nicknamed "sons of thunder"<sup>7</sup> by Jesus (Mk 3,17) and together with Simon

<sup>6</sup> "So much external testimony to the personality of the author, traceable back to almost contemporaneous sources, is found in the case of almost no other book of the New Testament", Isbon Beckwith, *The Apocalypse of John: Studies in Introduction with a Critical and Exegetical Commentary*, New York: Macmillan, 1919; 351. The earliest testimonies are to be found in the 2<sup>nd</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> century writings of Justin Martyr, Papias (according to Andreas of Caesaria), Irenaeus, the Apocryphon of John, the Acts of John, Clement of Alexandria, Hippolytus, Hegesippus, Tertullian, Origen, Victorinus and the Muratorian Canon. The clearest and most concentrated expression of this tradition is to be read in *The History of the Church* by Eusebius (cf. III, 18.1; III,20.11; III,23.1-6; IV,18.8; V,8.4-7; VI,25.9-10), although it is in this book that Eusebius gives full exposure to the opinion of Bishop Dionysius that there were two Johns in Ephesus, and that it was the second John who wrote the Book of Revelation (III,39.4-7; VII,25). Eusebius appears to agree with Dionysius, but does not admit this explicitly, presenting instead the traditional view of apostolic authorship and allowing the readers to judge for themselves (III,25.2,4).

<sup>7</sup> Lit. 'Boanerges' which seems to be a Greek transliteration of the Hebrew appellation בני רוגז (*Bnay Rogez*) meaning 'sons of wrath' (cf. Lk 9,54) and, because of the association of wrath with thunder, 'sons of thunder'. What is interesting, here, is that this name is in Hebrew, unlike Peter's name 'Cephas' (*Kayfa*) which is in Aramaic. This would show that both languages were used by Jesus and the disciples. Going further, one could suggest that Jesus used a Hebrew name for James and John because they were more fluent in Hebrew, indicating they might have had closer ties with Hebrew speakers in Jerusalem, which in turn resonates with the statement that John was known by the high priest (Jn 18,15). It is of significance, too, that John, a 'son of thunder' was chosen to be the recipient of the revelation that prophesies the thunderous theophany (cf. Rev 4,5; 8,5; 11,19; 16,18;

Peter, they formed an inner circle around Jesus during his ministry (Mt 17,1; 26,37; Mk 1,29; 5,37; 9,2; 13,33; 14,33; Lk 8,51; 9,28). In the Acts of the Apostles, John is based in Jerusalem after the Resurrection and accompanies Peter on local missions, although there is no record of his preaching as he is probably still too young to speak publicly (Acts 3-5; 8,14-25).<sup>8</sup> His brother James was martyred by King Agrippa in Jerusalem in 42 CE (Acts 12,2). Paul describes meeting John in Jerusalem in 47 CE, when he refers to him as one of the 'pillars' of the early Church, along with Simon Peter and James the brother of Jesus, the official head of the community at that time (Gal 2,9; Acts 11,29-30). The leadership were also called 'the elders' of the Jerusalem church (Acts 11,30) or 'the apostles and elders' (Acts 15,6).

The last mention of the elders of the Jerusalem church, which probably included John, is just before Paul's arrest in 57 CE (Acts 21,18). According to the historian Flavius Josephus, James the brother of Jesus and some companions were martyred by the chief priest Ananias II in 62 CE,<sup>9</sup> but it is doubtful that John was among the victims, for there is a strong and enduring tradition that he spent the rest of his earthly life at Ephesus in Asia Minor. It appears that shortly before the start of the first revolt (66-70 CE), he joined the large emigration of Jewish and Hellenist Christians to Ephesus and became an elder of the church there.<sup>10</sup> It is said that he travelled around the churches in the region, guiding and strengthening the various communities. Towards the end of the first century, he was brought before the Roman Authorities for his preaching and was punished with exile to the Island of

10,3-4) and wrathful judgments of God at the end of history (cf. 6,16; 11,18; 14,10; 15,1; 16,1-21; 18,8; 19,2.15). One could not imagine a more appropriate name for the author of the Book of Revelation than 'son of thunder' (cf. Jn 12,28-29).

<sup>8</sup> A fair guess would be that John was born in 12 CE and died in 98 CE, at the age of 86. He would have been 18 at the start of Jesus' ministry (around 30 CE), making him the youngest of the 12 apostles. A man was not permitted to enter public life before the age of 30 years. In Asia Minor at that time, it was not unknown for a man to live into his eighties (e.g., Polycarp, and most probably Aristion also).

<sup>9</sup> Flavius Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* (XX, 200), Eng trans William Whiston, Ware, UK: Wordsworth Editions, 2006; 877.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. F.F. Bruce, *New Testament History*, New York: Doubleday, 1980; 376. The exodus of Church leaders from Jerusalem to Asia Minor most probably embarked at Caesaria Maritima, and included Aristion, Justus Barsabbas, and Philip the evangelist with his three daughters (cf. Acts 21,8-9).

Patmos.<sup>11</sup> Eusebius notes that he was released on the death of the Emperor Domitian in 96 CE, and returned to Ephesus.<sup>12</sup> According to Irenaeus, he died towards the end of the century, during the reign of Trajan (98-117 CE), when he must have been about 86 years old.<sup>13</sup> The same tradition holds that in the last decade of his life, John not only wrote the Book of Revelation, but also the Gospel and the three Pastoral Letters in his name. Over his tomb, a large basilica was built in Byzantine times, which now lies in ruins.

<sup>11</sup> There were varying grades of exile, according to the severity (retention or loss of citizenship/property), duration (temporary/permanent) and place of exile (away from a city/or to a certain place, usually a remote island). In John's case, the exile was probably the less severe *Relegatio ad insulam*, rather than the more severe *Deportatio ad insulam* (cf. David E. Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, Word Biblical Commentary, Vol. 52a, Dallas: Word Books, 1997; 78-80). Nevertheless, the precise reason for John's conviction is not known, although John himself says it was "on account of the Word of God and the Witness of Jesus", i.e. his preaching (Rev 1,9). According to recent research, the aim of exile was to restrict the ability of influential, high-ranking, oppositional figures from exerting their influence against central or provincial government (Fred K. Drogula, 'Controlling Travel: Deportation, Islands and the Regulation of Senatorial Mobility in the Augustan Principate', *Classical Quarterly* 61.1 [2011]; 230-266). This would indicate that the provincial governor had interpreted the success of John's preaching as a threat to public order and had received written authorization from the Emperor to sentence him to exile. Only the highest-ranking members of Roman society (*honestiores*) were punished in this way (cf. *The History of the Church* III,18.1,5), implying that John was regarded by the governor as having a high status. In view of the curious remark by Bishop Polycrates' of Ephesus (c.190 CE) that John wore the 'petalon' (cf. *The History of the Church* V,24.2), the high-priestly gold plate on the forehead, it is possible that he was presented to the governor as a high priest of the Jews. In view of his position as the most senior leader of the Christian Church worldwide, and in view of *Didache* 13,3, this would have been no lie. The fact of exile on Patmos is good evidence that the author was so widely-respected and successful that he was considered a threat to the Roman administration and, had he not been considered high-ranking, he would almost certainly have been put to death. It securely identifies the author of the Book of Revelation as a very prominent figure, and not an incognito.

<sup>12</sup> Eusebius writes "After fifteen years of Domitian's rule Nerva succeeded to the throne. By vote of the Roman senate Domitian's honours were removed, and those unjustly banished returned to their homes and had their property restored to them. This is noted by the chroniclers of the period. At that time too the apostle John, after his exile on the island, resumed residence at Ephesus, as early Christian tradition records", *The History of the Church* III, 20. 8; Penguin Classics, 1989; 82.

<sup>13</sup> *Against Heresies*, II, 33.2; III, 3.4; *apud* Eusebius, *The History of the Church* III, 23.1-4.

## Opposition to the Traditional View

Despite widespread recognition of the author as John the apostle, and of his authority in the Christian community, there was also some opposition to the Book of Revelation in the early Church. It met resistance not only in the Roman Church at the end of the 2nd century CE,<sup>14</sup> but more significantly it was rejected by the Eastern Churches from the 4th to at least the 7th century CE, and even longer in many places. Henry Swete, the English Biblical Scholar, summed up this opposition by saying “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>15</sup> In these first few centuries, the main challenges to its acceptance took the form of attacks against its apostolic authorship, confirming that this was one of the main criteria leading to its inclusion in the New Testament canon. The same basic arguments are proposed by scholars up to the present day:

- a. The author John is not the apostle but merely a pseudonym for an anonymous author, who wanted the boost the authority of his work by attributing it to the apostle.
- b. The author John is not the apostle nor an anonymous author, but an unknown second-generation Christian prophet of the same name.

<sup>14</sup> The main opponents in the Western Church were Marcion, the *Alogoi*, and Gaius of Rome (see below); cf. H.B. Swete, *The Apocalypse of St. John: The Greek Text with Introduction Notes and Indices*, London: Macmillan and Co, 1906, cvi–cxiv.

<sup>15</sup> Swete, *Apocalypse of St. John*, cxiii. In this context, it is highly doubtful that “the key to the interpretation disappeared with the generation to which the book was addressed” (ibid, 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, otherwise it would be difficult to explain the following comment of Bishop Dionysius around 250 CE: “Some of our predecessors rejected the book and pulled it entirely to pieces, criticizing it chapter by chapter, pronouncing it unintelligible and illogical and the title false. They say that it is not John’s, and is not a revelation at all, since it is heavily veiled by a thick curtain of incomprehensibility”, *apud* Eusebius, *The History of the Church* VII, 25.1; Penguin Classics, 1989; 240.

The response to these challenges leads to clarifications that actually increase support for the identification of the author with the apostle John.

a. Except for parts of the prophetic books,<sup>16</sup> all the canonical writings of the Old Testament were either anonymous or pseudonymous. Most of the later non-canonical writings were pseudonymous and pseudonymity was once a defining characteristic of the literary genre called 'apocalypse'. For reasons that are still debated, it was the norm for authors to write apocalypse under the name of an important figure from the past.<sup>17</sup> These works often included an account of known historical events up to the author's time as if they were still to happen—the so-called literary device of *ex eventu* prophecy. It is most likely that these were ways of inspiring confidence in the authority and divine foresight of the newly composed apocalypse. Together with a lot of creative literary embellishment and editorial additions, the literary devices of pseudonymity and *ex eventu* prophecy actually give an impression that these works are not genuine revelations of heavenly mysteries, but rather imaginative literary inventions that aim to gain acceptance under false pretenses. For their effect, it appears that they relied heavily on the credulity of the readers and some degree of deception.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>16</sup> E.g., Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, Haggai and Zechariah.

<sup>17</sup> Among the proposed reasons: to lend authority to the work, to avoid censure and even persecution, in order to be heard in an age (after Ezra) when prophecy had formally ceased and 'prophets' were outlawed, in collective identification with the most celebrated exponent of a particular tradition, because it was the tradition in antiquity (even in Greco-Roman world), as a way of emphasizing divine origin and helping to maintain the esoteric nature of the work. For prophetic and apocalyptic works, attribution to a figure in the remote past allowed the author to give depth and meaning to his account of the present situation; when combined with *ex-eventu* prophecy, it helped to increase faith in the prophecy and overcome the prevailing second temple view that prophecy had ceased; cf. John J. Collins, 'From Prophecy to Apocalypticism', ch. 4 in *The Encyclopedia of Apocalypticism*, Vol 1, ed. John J. Collins, New York, London: Continuum, 2000; 135-6.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. John J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to Jewish Apocalyptic Literature*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Grand Rapids MI/Cambridge UK: Eerdmans, 1998; 40. For an apologetic stance, see D.S. Russell, *Divine Disclosure: An Introduction to Jewish Apocalyptic*, Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2007; 65-9; also John Barton, *Oracles of God, Perceptions of Ancient Prophecy in Israel after the Exile*, London: DLT, 1986; 211-13.

Against this background, it was, and still is, perfectly legitimate to question whether the Book of Revelation follows the same tradition of pseudonymity, since it is readily identified as a member of the same literary genre of apocalypses.<sup>19</sup> The resounding answer to this question, however, is negative, because the author writes as a contemporary and well-known leader of those communities he is addressing, not as a famous figure from the near or distant past. John's is the first apocalypse to break away from the tradition of pseudonymity and *ex eventu* prophecy, and return to the personal directness and candour of the ancient prophets.<sup>20</sup> With prophetic insight, John starts by addressing the contemporary situation in seven communities where he was well-known. Precisely because he was well-known, the author feels no need to mention his status or position in the Church, nor mention that he was an apostle or disciple of Christ. By contrast, an author writing pseudonymously under the name of the apostle John would have felt obliged to describe himself as an apostle or disciple of Christ, if that is what he needed to gain the attention of his readers.<sup>21</sup> He would also have had to explain why this writing had not appeared before, while the apostle was still alive. Finally, in this new 'spirit of truth' and authenticity, John has no need to employ spurious literary devices to generate confidence in his writing, but just to remind the reader that "these words are faithful and true" (Rev 21,5; 22,6; cf.19,9).

Paradoxically, the author's humble and elusive self-presentation not only removes any suspicion that he may have been writing under a pseudonym, but does so in a way that resonates with the great authority of an apostle. In so far as he wished his identity to be

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Collins, *Imagination*, 269-73.

<sup>20</sup> The argument that it was written pseudonymously "is not compelling because there was a revival of prophecy among the followers of Jesus, which led, for a short time at least, to the willingness to prophesy and to write books of prophecy in one's own name", Adela Yarbro Collins, "The Book of Revelation", ch. 11 in *The Encyclopedia of Apocalypticism*, Vol 1, 385. The only other known non-pseudonymous apocalypse is the 2<sup>nd</sup> cent *Shepherd of Hermas*.

<sup>21</sup> The author describes himself only as a fellow-servant of God and, by implication, a prophet, but not as an apostle or disciple. Some scholars interpret this to mean he should not therefore be identified with John the apostle or disciple of Jesus. However, if this had been stated openly in the text, it would immediately have raised suspicions of pseudonymity.



recognized, he clearly relied on the local communities to make it known, thus raising the importance and value of the early Christian tradition.

There was only one historically important attempt to attribute the Book of Revelation to an author using the name of John as a pseudonym. Around the year 200 CE, a Roman presbyter called Gaius, followed by an Asian group called the *Alogi*,<sup>22</sup> claimed that this book was written in John's name by the heretic Cerinthus, in order to deceive people it was apostolic.<sup>23</sup> There is no evidence that this was the result of a genuine discovery, but rather it was a crude attempt to undermine the authority and credibility of the Book of Revelation, for its visions had inspired the prophetic Montanist movement, which was attracting many people away from the Church at that time.<sup>24</sup> This was the only early attempt, from within the Western Church, to discredit the Book of Revelation. Of significance is the fact that rejecting the book's apostolic authorship was deemed an effective way of discrediting it.

b. The second challenge comes from those who claim that the author was not the apostle, but another John, portrayed as a younger man, otherwise unknown, who may have belonged to a group of early Christian prophets (cf. Rev 22,9).<sup>25</sup> The current scholarly consensus

<sup>22</sup> Identified by Epiphanius of Salamis who coined the name, which means at the same time 'illogical' and 'against the Logos'. According to Epiphanius, the *Alogi* also opposed the Gospel of John because of its *Logos* theology (Epiphanius, *Panarion* 51.1,3-6; 51.32,2-33,3). About whether they ever existed as a group, what they actually claimed and whether there was any connection between the *Alogi* and Gaius, there is much debate, see Charles E. Hill, *The Johannine Corpus in the Early Church*, Oxford: OUP, 2004; 172-204.

<sup>23</sup> Reported by Eusebius, Gaius wrote "Then there is Cerinthus, who by revelations purporting to have been written by a great apostle presents us with tales of wonder falsely alleged to have been shown to him by angels", *The History of the Church* III,28.2; Penguin Classics, 1989; 91. For the heresies of Cerinthus, see Charles E. Hill, *Regnum Caelorum: Patterns of Millennial Thought in Early Christianity*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Grand Rapids MI/Cambridge UK: Eerdmans, 2001; 69-73.

<sup>24</sup> According to Charles Hill (*Regnum Caelorum*, 143-59), the Montanists, or New Prophecy movement, were falsely accused of being 'millennialists' in the classical materialist sense, but rather represented the inauguration of a new age of 'Paraclete now', i.e. a kind of inaugurated millennialism, or what would be termed post-millennialism nowadays.

<sup>25</sup> For the biblical argument for this view, see David Aune, The Prophetic Circle of John of Patmos, *Journal of the Study of the New Testament* (1989), 103-16.

supports this solution to the identity of the author.<sup>26</sup> Similarly, in times past, the author was distinguished from John the apostle and identified as an otherwise unknown church leader called “John the elder”.<sup>27</sup> The simplest denunciation of this view is that there is no contemporary external evidence for the existence of another author of this name, apart from John the apostle—a fact that is surprising in view of the divine significance of his message and his close relationship with the seven communities in Asia Minor. The proposal therefore raises many more questions than it solves. Is it possible for the author of such an extraordinary work to simply disappear from the collective memory of these communities without leaving any trace? Is it possible that the Church would later canonize the prophetic revelation of a completely unknown author, when the moral character and life experience of the author is an essential index of its trustworthiness and authenticity? Is it possible that the local faithful invented the widespread and enduring tradition of apostolic authorship?

What is most extraordinary, then, is that this proposal requires the rejection of a wealth of reliable, contemporary evidence identifying the author with John the apostle, along the lines presented

<sup>26</sup> E.g., Adela Yarbro Collins, *The Encyclopedia of Apocalypticism*, Vol 1, 385-6; Craig Koester, *Revelation*, 68-69; Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, xlvi-lvi; Elaine Pagels, *Revelations: Visions, Prophecy, & Politics in the Book of Revelation*, New York/London: Penguin Books, 2013; 7-9. See Isbon Beckwith for a scholarly appraisal (*The Apocalypse of John*; 343-379) and for the dismissal of reports that John the apostle was martyred before the year 70 CE (ibid. 379-393).

<sup>27</sup> The figure of John the elder (or presbyter) as distinguished from John the apostle was first proposed in the fourth century (324 CE) by Eusebius, in *The History of the Church* (III, 39.4-6), with his own novel interpretation of a passage from a lost book by Papias, Bishop of Hieropolis, dated to the early 2<sup>nd</sup> century (c. 120 CE). As it stands, this passage is ambiguous: it could either be telling us that John the apostle was still alive when Papias was collecting his material, at which time he was called the ‘elder John’, or that John the apostle and John the elder were two different disciples of Jesus. As Eusebius, writing 200 years after Papias, is the first to propose the second option, it is quite likely that the first option was widely accepted until then, as readers were familiar with the person concerned and did not doubt John the apostle and the elder John were the same. Eusebius was evidently persuaded by Dionysius of Alexandria (cf. *The History of the Church* VII, 25) that John the apostle did not write the Book of Revelation and seized on this ambiguous passage in Papias to propose a separate, non-apostolic ‘elder John’ as the author. However, the existence of a non-apostolic ‘elder John’ has never been independently confirmed up to this day.

above,<sup>28</sup> and then replacing this evidence with an unprovable hypothesis about an imaginary author, whose name also happens to be John, but for whom no contemporary record remains.<sup>29</sup> This counter-intuitive proposal appears to rely upon an overly rigid distinction between the early Christian use of appellations like ‘apostle’, ‘elder’, ‘evangelist’, ‘prophet’, ‘disciple’, as if they were already, in the first century, a type of ‘job description’ for highly specialized and suitably qualified individuals. In the New Testament, the use of these terms seems more fluid, so that an apostle can also be described as a disciple, an evangelist, an elder or a prophet, depending on his role in any particular context.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>28</sup> For an example of the perfunctory arguments adduced for this purpose, see Koester, *Revelation*, 66-67.

<sup>29</sup> Neatly summed up by one scholar: “Questa ipotesi è molto intelligente. Ma non ci sono prove per poterla confermare” (“This hypothesis is very intelligent, but there is no evidence to confirm it”), N. Casalini, *Iniziazione al Nuovo Testamento*, Jersusalem: Franciscan Printing Press, 2001; 83. After his survey of research, R. Alan Culpepper writes: “Most Johannine scholars would probably agree with the sentence of Robert Eisler that nowhere in the whole realm of history is there a more elusive ghost than “John the Elder.” In fact, even the existence of John the Elder has been contested. D.A. Carson recently concluded: “it is far from certain that there was an ‘elder John’ independent of the apostle, and if there was, it is still less certain that he wrote anything. The ambiguity of the evidence, which makes disparate interpretations virtually inevitable, lends the whole issue of John the Elder a phantom quality”, *John, the Son of Zebedee: The Life of a Legend*, Columbia, SC: Univ. of South Carolina Press, 1994; 298.

<sup>30</sup> This is a weakness of arguments, based on Eusebius’ novel interpretation of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century fragment of the work by Papias (cf. note 27 above), against the traditional view that the apostle John was the author of the Book of Revelation and the Fourth Gospel. They continue to distinguish two disciples of the Lord, both called John, one listed among the apostles and the other called ‘elder John’, as though there is a rigid distinction between these two roles. Apart from a late, imprecise reference to an uncorroborated statement of Papias, traceable to Philip of Side, mid-5<sup>th</sup> century, that ‘John the evangelist’ was “killed by the Jews”, there is certainly no reason why the two mentions of John, in the fragment of Papias, could not refer to the same person, regarded as an apostle in his younger days and an elder later in life, all the time remaining a disciple of the Lord. In fact, there are good reasons to explain why ‘the elder’ was a particularly appropriate title for John the apostle, above all to distinguish him from Paul, the founder of the church in Ephesus, who was known locally as “the apostle” and who lived there for 2 years less than a decade before John arrived. It is also quite possible that the title “apostle” had fallen into disrepute because of the multiplication of ‘false apostles’ at the end of the first century (cf. Rev 2,2; 2Cor 11,5.13; *Didache* 11;). In fact, the

However, this observation cannot explain how a proposal representing such a radical revision of first century Church history could have prevailed and persisted in various forms from ancient times up to the present day. Looking back, the origin of this unconventional proposal appears to have been fueled by opposition to the Book of Revelation itself, or certain aspects of it, since denial of apostolic authorship was an effective way of undercutting its credibility and challenging its inclusion in the New Testament canon.<sup>31</sup> This is the likely explanation for its exclusion from the canon of the Eastern Churches for many centuries, and it is instructive to examine how it all began around 250 CE, with the writings of Dionysius, Bishop of Alexandria, that were preserved for posterity by Eusebius in *The History of the Church*.<sup>32</sup>

### The Criticism of Bishop Dionysius

Recalling the harsh criticism of the Book of Revelation by the Roman presbyter Gaius and the *Alogoi* 50 years before (see above), Dionysius rejects the claim that it was written pseudonymously by the heretic Cerinthus and suggests instead that the author was an unknown John. After examining the book closely, he negates apostolic authorship on the grounds of literary, linguistic and stylistic differences from the Gospel and first Letter of John, which he takes to be the authentic work of the apostle. He complains that the author of Revelation is promoting himself by often mentioning his first name, whereas the evangelist never writes his name in the Gospel or the Letters, but uses other epithets, such as 'the beloved disciple' or 'the elder'. He adds that John's self-presentation could apply to anyone called by that name, which was quite common at that time.

Next, Dionysius is troubled by the fact that in Revelation, 'the ideas, words and the way they are put together' are totally dissimilar from, and foreign to, those in the Gospel and first Letter. Furthermore,

word 'apostle' is completely replaced by 'disciple' in the Gospel and letters of John, and in the works of most 2<sup>nd</sup> century writers from Asia Minor.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. the relevant comments in the section 'Character of the Speaker', by Koester, starting with "People are more likely to be persuaded by someone they trust than by someone they do not trust. When readers have confidence in the character (...) of an author, they are more receptive to the message", *Revelation*, 106.

<sup>32</sup> *The History of the Church* VII, 25.

compared with these works, the linguistic style of Revelation is unpolished and incorrect: "The first two are written not only without any blunders in the use of Greek, but with remarkable skill as regards diction, logical thought, and orderly expression. It is impossible to find in them one barbarous word or solecism, or any kind of vulgarism. For by the grace of the Lord, it seems their author possessed both things, the gift of knowledge and the gift of speech. That the other saw revelations and received knowledge and prophecy I will not deny; but I observe that his language and style are not really Greek: he uses barbarous idioms, and is sometimes guilty of solecisms".<sup>33</sup> Even though Dionysius is at pains to stress that he is not mocking and does not 'dare to reject the book', and apologizes for not being able to understand it, one wonders how anyone reading this criticism could ever be persuaded to open it and 'keep its words' (Rev 1,3; 22,7). His portrayal is extremely repellent: he argues that the book is not written by an apostle, is not well composed, and is written in ugly, vulgar, and incorrect Greek by an unknown, self-promoting mystic from who-knows-where.

Of course, neither the criticism of Dionysius (c. 250 CE), nor the amplification of this criticism through its publication in *The History of the Church* by Eusebius (c. 325 CE), were gratuitous. Like Gaius against the Montanists in 200 CE, Dionysius was trying to combat a materialistic form of millennialism in the Church, for which the Book of Revelation was again held responsible.<sup>34</sup> It was not until Augustine of Hippo in the next century that the nuisance of millennialism was finally overcome by a careful exegesis of the text (Rev 20). Meantime, the easiest option was to denounce and degrade the Book of Revelation itself, and its author, with the inevitable result that the book was ignored by the Eastern Churches for several centuries and, in some places, many more.

#### Relation to the other writings of John

Before responding to Dionysius' complaints about the grammar and style of the Book of Revelation, it is necessary to tackle the first

<sup>33</sup> *The History of the Church* VII, 25.25-27; Penguin Classics, 1989, 243.

<sup>34</sup> Dionysius' comments on Revelation immediately follow his account of the schism led by Nepos, Bishop of Arsinoë, based upon a materialist interpretation of Rev 20; *The History of the Church* VII, 24.

part of his argument against apostolic authorship: the lack of any resemblance with the Gospel and First Letter, which he assumes to have been written by John the apostle. Dionysius' assertion that there is an obvious resemblance of style, vocabulary and ideas between the Gospel and the First Letter<sup>35</sup> meets with general agreement to this day, so it is not controversial to affirm that the Gospel and this Letter are the work of the same person. However, although Dionysius was convinced that the author of these works was the apostle John, son of Zebedee, according to Church tradition from the early second century,<sup>36</sup> many scholars have since found it necessary to propose an alternative, hypothetical author.<sup>37</sup>

In spite of all the scholarly debate and revisions, the reasons for accepting the early tradition on apostolic authorship are particularly persuasive in the case of the Gospel. However, although the title unambiguously attributes the Gospel to John, the text itself does not identify the author (Jn 21,24) by name, but only impersonally as 'the disciple whom Jesus loved' (13,23;19,26; 21,7.20),<sup>38</sup> 'another disciple' (18,15), 'the other disciple' (18,15; 20,8), 'the other disciple, whom

<sup>35</sup> "Gospel and the Epistle have one and the same colour" Dionysius *apud* Eusebius, *The History of the Church*, VII, 25.21; Penguin Classics, 1989, 243.

<sup>36</sup> A particularly solid line of documentation on the apostle John's authorship of the Gospel and Book of Revelation, comes directly from a personal disciple of John: Polycarp, the bishop of Smyrna, (born *circa* 70 CE and martyred in 155 CE). Polycarp's witness to John was then heard by the young Irenaeus (*circa* 135-145 CE), who recorded Polycarp's sayings in his opus *Against Heresies* (cf. III,1,2; II, 33,3), cited later by Eusebius (*The History of the Church* V, 8.4; III, 23.3; V,20.4-8).

<sup>37</sup> It appears that the Gospel author's evident knowledge of Jerusalem, the Temple, and Jewish Feasts has persuaded some scholars that he must have been an "educated", or even a "priestly", Jerusalemite and therefore could not have been a Galilean—one that had appeared "uneducated and unrefined" to the chief priests, elders and scribes (Acts 4,13). This overlooks the fact that even Jews living in Galilee were well educated in their scriptures and traditions and used to travel to Jerusalem regularly for the pilgrim feasts. Furthermore, we suggest that John only spent the first 20 years of his life in Galilee, before moving to Jerusalem and living there for the next 30 years. In that time John would have got to know Jerusalem, its inhabitants and institutions very well. His acquaintance with the high priest can be explained either through his father's business as a provider of fish, or by having an official position (an elder) in his community.

<sup>38</sup> It should be noted, however, that John, or Yochanan in Hebrew, means 'the one whom God favours'. This is so close in meaning to the 'the one whom Jesus loves' that one wonders if this appellation might not have been intended as a code for his name, Yochanan.

Jesus loved' (20,2), or is just an unnamed disciple (1,35-40). Nevertheless, it is clear from the text that this disciple was indeed an eyewitness to the events he reports, that he knew the local topography well and that he was very close to Jesus and to Peter. All this matches what is known of John the apostle from the other Gospels and from tradition. Although this disciple did not write the final chapter (Jn 21,1-25), he was well known to the redactor who did (21,25), and to those who are called 'the brothers' (21,23), with whom the redactor included himself (21,24).<sup>39</sup> The author was clearly so well known that there was no need to do more than add John's name to the title. The certainty that it was written by John would have passed into Church tradition, where it remains to this day. The text confirms the apostolic identity of the author in other ways too.

The redactor's personal contribution to the last part of the final chapter seems to have been written after the beloved disciple's death, for it deals with questions arising from this, in particular with the belief that this disciple would not die (Jn 21,23; cf.11,25-26). This belief arose because the risen Christ had said of him: "What if I want him to remain until I come?" (21,22), which in turn chimes with Jesus' saying that "there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see that the kingdom of God has come in power" (Mk 9,1; cf.13,30). By alluding to a well-known prophecy associating the author with those who had personally accompanied Jesus, the author's death raised serious questions about the delay of Christ's second coming.<sup>40</sup> The issue became acute with the death of this author, precisely because he was the last of those who 'were standing around Jesus'. All this points to the author as an original apostle of Jesus, one of his inner circle, who had lived to an old age and died near the end of the first century, just before the Gospel was published. And this again agrees with the tradition identifying the author as John the apostle and son of Zebedee.

However, for the doubters of this tradition there is another piece of evidence to consider. We have seen that the Gospel identifies its author as a disciple from the inner circle of Jesus, who survived to the

<sup>39</sup> We know that the author was well known by the redactor, the brothers and many others, because he had a reputation among them: 'they thought he would not die' and 'they know that his testimony is true' (Jn 21,23-24).

<sup>40</sup> This must have been of considerable concern, as it also occupies the author of 2Peter 3,1-10 and underlies the Millennial Reign of Christ described in Rev 20.

end of the first century and, although he had died, he was expected in some sense 'to remain' until the second coming (Jn 21,23). The usual explanation is that John 'remains' through his witness to Christ in the Gospel. That may be true, but would apply equally to all the evangelists. There is another explanation that applies specifically to the apostle John and better fits the context of comparing Peter's future (Jn 21,15-19) with that of the beloved disciple (Jn 21,20-23).

Just as Peter is commissioned to fulfil a pastoral role by the metaphorical act of 'feeding Christ's sheep' (cf. Jn 21,15-17; Mt 16,17-19), so in the Book of Revelation John is commissioned to perform a prophetic role by metaphorically 'measuring the temple' (Rev 10,1-11; 11,1-2), which means 'helping to build up the Church' by strengthening the inner part with this prophetic word and rejecting the outer part.<sup>41</sup> This role ends only with the fulfilment of the prophecy he was given, which includes the completion of the temple (15,8; cf. Exod 40,34-35; 1Kgs 8,10-13 ) and the second coming of Christ (Rev 19,11-21). To perform this role the author must, in some sense, 'remain' until the second coming at the end of history. The author's commissioning in the Book of Revelation therefore answers and resolves the enigmatic remark of the Risen Christ to Peter "What if I want him to remain until I come?" (Jn 21,22), and identifies the author of the Gospel, the beloved disciple, with John, the author of the Book of Revelation.

This link between the Gospel and the Book of Revelation provides the best internal and textual evidence for the common authorship of both writings by John the apostle: the Gospel tells us that the author was an original apostle of Jesus, one of his inner circle, who would 'remain' until the second coming, while the Revelation tells us that the one who 'remains' is its author, John, whose prophecy performs an important role in the Church right up until the second coming. John's spiritual presence would 'remain' until his prophecy is brought to completion.

<sup>41</sup> Of note here is the resolution of an alleged attempt, by the redactor of the Gospel, to portray Peter and 'the beloved disciple' as rivals in a Church leadership contest, discussed in some commentaries. The final chapter resolves this tendentious assertion by indicating the complementarity of the roles assigned to Peter and to the beloved disciple: Peter's role is pastoral while the beloved disciple's role is prophetic. Although the two are different, they are both essential and mutually sustaining.



In view of this complementarity between John's Gospel and his Revelation, it is not necessary to dissect the differences in vocabulary, style and ideas between these works and then try to explain them by assigning imaginary authors to its different parts.<sup>42</sup> These differences can be explained not only by the evident dissimilarity in literary genre, but, above all, by the literary mediation of an amanuensis and/or redactor. Coming from the totally different cultural background of Galilee, the author of Revelation clearly needed the redactor's help to adapt, that is, 'enculturate' his Gospel message for the prevailing Greco-Roman culture of Asia Minor.<sup>43</sup> This leads directly into the second part of Dionysius' argument against apostolic authorship of the Book of Revelation: his observation that the book is not written in correct and polished Greek. Although this complaint of Dionysius may be undeniably true, it is not an effective argument against apostolic authorship.

### Literary Quality of the Text

In fact, from a different perspective, Dionysius' literary criticism can be reversed and added to the evidence endorsing apostolic authorship. When he observes that the author's "language and style are not really Greek: he uses barbarous idioms, and is sometimes guilty of solecisms", Dionysius is actually confirming that Greek is not the author's mother tongue, which is exactly what one would expect if he was a Jew from first-century Galilee.

The unique style, grammar and vocabulary of the Book of Revelation can be summarized by describing its style as that of the Hebrew

<sup>42</sup> If one does dissect these differences, one finds many important theological, thematic and literary similarities between the Fourth Gospel and the Book of Revelation, which would be hard to explain without identity of authorship, as documented by Henry Swete, *Apocalypse of St. John*, cxx-cxxx, and by Isbon Beckwith, *The Apocalypse of John*, 353-62. It is also clear that, from the earliest times, many 2<sup>nd</sup> century literary sources treated the Fourth Gospel, Book of Revelation and First Letter of John as one 'corpus' of sacred scripture ascribed to John the apostle, cf. Charles Hill, *The Johannine Corpus*, 470-75.

<sup>43</sup> A good example of the redactor's work of enculturation can be mentioned here: in the Book of Revelation, it is the divine angel that reveals what will happen in the future (Rev 1,1; 22,6; cf. 2,7.11.17.29; 3,6.13.22.), whereas in the Gospel the same task will be fulfilled by the 'Spirit of Truth' (Jn 16,13-14). As their prophetic function is exactly the same, the divine angel in Revelation can be identified with the promised Spirit of Truth.

Bible, its grammar as that of the Aramaic language and its vocabulary as that of Koine Greek. At the end of an extensive grammatical study, Steven Thompson pictures the situation as follows: "Thus one might venture to suggest that, at least in the Apc., the Greek language was little more than a membrane, stretched tightly over a Semitic framework, showing many essential contours from beneath."<sup>44</sup> It appears that the author described his revelation in Aramaic, embracing the style of the ancient Hebrew Scriptures, and then transmitted it as literally as possible in Greek. Although the underlying Semitic structure was well preserved, the result was offensive to the ears of Greek literati like Dionysius. Far from disproving the author was an apostle from Galilee, however, the underlying Semitic structure is entirely consistent with this tradition.

Nevertheless, Dionysius was right to draw attention to the crude Greek of the Book of Revelation, as a feature that distinguishes it from other works of the New Testament. Examining the language more closely, the 20th century English scholar, Henry Swete, identifies the author's main literary transgression as a kind of grammatical 'insouciance': "from whatever cause or concurrence of causes, it cannot be denied that the Apocalypse of John *stands alone among Greek literary writings in its disregard of the ordinary rules of syntax*, and the success with which syntax is set aside without loss of perspicuity or even literary power. The book *seems openly and deliberately to defy the grammarian*, and yet, even as literature, it is in its own field unsurpassed".<sup>45</sup> This may seem irrelevant to the issue of apostolic authorship until we discover that disregard for the rules of grammar was one of the reasons the Galileans were often misunderstood and mocked by their better educated Judaeans compatriots.

#### New Evidence for the Traditional View

Galilee and its people were different from those of Judaea, historically, socially, culturally and even religiously. Derisively called 'country people' (*Am haAretz*), they were held in contempt by the rabbis in Jerusalem for their simple piety and less than rigorous

<sup>44</sup> Steven Thompson, *The Apocalypse and Semitic Syntax*, Cambridge: CUP, 1985; 108.

<sup>45</sup> H.B. Swete, *The Apocalypse of St. John*, cxix-cxx (my italics).

application of the religious laws, an attitude echoed not infrequently in the New Testament (e.g., Jn 1,46; Jn 7,41; 7,45-52). The Talmudic rabbis (*Amoraim*) went so far as to blame the Galilean imprecision in religious matters on their linguistic carelessness: "Rav said that Rav Yehuda said: the Judaeans took care over their language and the Torah in their possession was preserved, but the Galileans did not take care over their language and the Torah in their possession was not preserved" (BT *Eruvin* 53a). Although the passage is probably 3<sup>rd</sup> century or later, consistent patterns of Galilean mispronunciation are widely attested from as early as the first century.

The New Testament itself is one of the most ancient witnesses to the existence of a distinctive Galilean Aramaic dialect (cf. Mt 26,73; Mk 14,70; Lk 22,59; Acts 2,7) and to the kind of misunderstanding it could cause (Mk 15,34-36; Mt 27,46-49), for when Jesus, dying on the cross, called out "my God" (*Eloi*), the bystanders thought he was invoking Elijah (*Eli*).<sup>46</sup> Other names too were simplified by Galileans: for example, the name Lazar was the Galilean version of Eleazar<sup>47</sup> and Yeshu was most probably the way Galileans pronounced Yeshua and Yehoshua.<sup>48</sup>

Geza Vermes describes one of the main dialectical differences as the loss of distinction between the various guttural sounds (*alef*, *hey*, *chet* and *ayin*) and adds "One of the commonest jibes directed against Galileans is that they did not speak correct Aramaic".<sup>49</sup> In the Talmud, the rabbis relate several examples of how speakers of the Galilean dialect were misunderstood, including the Galilean who went to the market in Jerusalem and was ridiculed by the merchants, because he could not properly pronounce what he wanted to buy (BT *Eruvin* 53b). Western scholars have long been aware of these dialectal differences:

<sup>46</sup> Geza Vermes counsels against citing this as an example of the Galilean dialect, because "Clarity cannot be expected of the cry of a crucified man at the point of death" *Jesus the Jew*, London: Collins, 1973; 54. This advice seems over cautious, as the entire exclamation seems to have been perfectly clear to the one reporting it, who most likely understood it because he was also a Galilean.

<sup>47</sup> Vermes, *Jesus the Jew*, 53.

<sup>48</sup> David Flusser, *Jesus*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1998; 24.

<sup>49</sup> Cf. Vermes, *Jesus the Jew*, 52.

Gustav Dalman wrote a grammar of the Galilean dialect (1905)<sup>50</sup> and Alfred Edersheim (1897) recalled the rabbinic comment about neglect of study: “Although the Judaeian or Jerusalem dialect was far from pure, the people of Galilee were especially blamed for neglecting the study of their language, charged with errors in grammar, and especially with absurd malpronunciation, sometimes leading to ridiculous mistakes”.<sup>51</sup>

None of this is surprising in view of the literacy gap between the rural Galilee villages and Judaea, with its large population of literate religious and administrative officials. Being far from the urban centre of Jerusalem and wholly dependent on agriculture, rural Galilee was an oral and largely illiterate society in late second temple times. Recent excavations have finally confirmed that schoolrooms existed in the first century, since it has long been supposed that children received Torah-based instruction from the more literate members of the local community, involving reading and memorizing;<sup>52</sup> the rest of their education was left to their families at home, amongst whom there may have been relatives with a variety of basic literacy skills to teach to the younger generation.

Grammatical accuracy should certainly not have been expected from members of such a society. Its people, however were neither uneducated nor ignorant, as education for most was achieved by regular and life-long listening to the readings of the Scriptures in the synagogue on Sabbaths and feast days. The frequent repetition of prayers, songs and religious rituals in the home contributed towards a rich, memory-based education, as Richard Horsley explains: “In such societies, people who are illiterate nevertheless have a rich knowledge of their own cultural heritage... people are still able to recite prayers, portions of religious liturgies, and popular and patriotic songs in

<sup>50</sup> *“Grammatik des jüdisch-palästinischen Aramäisch nach den Idiomen des palästinischen Talmud, des Onkelostargum und Prophetentargum, und der jerusalemischen Targume”*.

<sup>51</sup> Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990; 225 and notes.

<sup>52</sup> Cf. Alan Millard, *Reading and Writing in the Time of Jesus*, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000; 225. Millard’s imaginary description of schooling at the time of Jesus is upheld by the excavation of a schoolroom adjacent to the first-century synagogue at Magdala in Galilee (2009), which is similar to findings in Gamla.

particular”.<sup>53</sup> However, even for such a society, reading and writing literacy was necessary for internal growth and for contact with the outside world. At a very minimum, someone had to read the Scripture in the synagogues and someone had to be able to write legal and administrative documents. That is to say, even in the most basic agricultural societies in first century Galilee, reading and writing skills would have been encouraged and highly valued, as in the rest of the Greco-Roman empire at the time.

Although the smallest villages may have had no one who could read or write at more than an elementary level (literacy level 0%), there would have been access to literate individuals in a nearby town. Towns like Magdala, Capernaum or Bethsaida, with populations of 1,000 or more, are estimated to have had literacy rates of 1-5% of the population, although levels of performance in reading and writing probably varied considerably.<sup>54</sup> It should be said, moreover, that individuals moving to large cities with higher levels of literacy (2-15%) would have had the opportunity to become literate in the languages they normally spoke, which were Aramaic and to a lesser degree Greek.<sup>55</sup>

<sup>53</sup> Richard Horsley *Galilee: History, Politics, People*, Pennsylvania: Trinity Press, 1995; 245.

<sup>54</sup> As noted by John Poirier, “A scribe was probably within reach (relatively speaking) of just about anyone who needed one, but that is no reason to include grapho-literacy as an expectation of a run-of-the-mill education at any point during our period”, in ‘Education/Literacy in Jewish Galilee: Was There Any and at What Level?’, *Galilee in the Late Second Temple and Mishnaic Periods, Vol 1: Life, Culture, and Society*, eds. D. A. Fiensy and J. R. Strange, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014; 258. Concerning general literacy rates in first-century Israel, see Meir Bar-Ilan, ‘Illiteracy in the Land of Israel in the First Centuries C.E.’, S. Fishbane, S. Schoenfeld and A. Goldschlaeger (eds.), *Essays in the Social Scientific Study of Judaism and Jewish Society, II*, New York: Ktav, 1992; 46-61. In conclusion, Bar-Ilan writes: “With the assumption that the rural population was around 70% (with 0% literacy), 20% of urban population (with 1-5% literacy), and 10% of highly urban population (with 2-15% literacy), the total population literacy is still very low. Thus, it is no exaggeration to say that the total literacy rate in the Land of Israel at that time (of Jews only, of course), was probably less than 3%”. This position is largely endorsed by Catherine Hezser, in her *Jewish Literacy in Roman Palestine*, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck: 2001, cf. especially ‘Degrees and Distribution of Literacy’, pp. 496-504.

<sup>55</sup> From fragmentary inscriptional evidence, Richard Horsley summarizes the use of language in Galilee, in the early to late Roman periods, as follows “Hebrew may frequently have functioned as a formal and/or sacred language, while Aramaic

So, we propose, it is in this context that we should understand the grammatical ‘insouciance’ of the author of the Book of Revelation. The improper Greek of Revelation is best explained as the work of an Aramaic-speaking author who was not formally educated in Greek and, although he may have lived several decades among Greek-speakers, he still spoke and wrote Greek like a foreigner and made many grammatical mistakes.<sup>56</sup> Furthermore, judging by the unpolished text that has come down to us, the author seems to have refused to allow scribes to revise the text of the Revelation and convert it into correct, literary Greek. Although his specific reasons for this refusal are still much debated, it is quite likely that he was helped by an inbred Galilean indifference to grammatical correctness, which he would have imbibed as a youth growing up in Galilee.<sup>57</sup> The author was much more concerned about preserving the original Semitic quality of the text than about improving its literary quality or correctness in Greek. Incidentally, as the literary quality of a text reflected the scribal skill of the author, the poor literary quality of the Book of Revelation is strong evidence against the accepted view that it was written by a scribe. Thompson calls the language of Revelation “Jewish Greek, to

was primarily a vernacular. Greek would have been familiar to a certain percentage of people in Lower Galilee, but the inscriptional evidence available is not sufficient to indicate that it had become the primary or only language in Galilean towns and villages”, *Galilee*, 250; these findings are broadly confirmed by Stephen Fassberg in ‘Which Semitic Language Did Jesus and Other Contemporary Jews Speak?’ *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, Vol 74, No. 2, April 2012; 263-280. This author differs only in emphasizing that Hebrew was still a living language in first century CE Palestine, although Aramaic was more commonly spoken in daily life.

<sup>56</sup> This corresponds to proposition 4 in Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, cxcix: “The author was secondarily bilingual (i.e., he had no formal instruction in Greek... and he was probably able to speak as well as write in Greek; the Semitisms that undoubtedly exist in Revelation are the results of bilingual interference.” According to the grammarians, his main mistakes are in the area of ‘concordance’, which is exactly what you would expect in somebody who has not been formally taught the language. In adjusting from Aramaic/Hebrew to Greek, the correct use of cases and case-endings would present a formidable challenge.

<sup>57</sup> It is highly unlikely to have been solely because “the services of the usual amanuensis, or some other kind of reviser, were not available, especially if he really were on the remote island of Patmos”, as proposed by Nigel Turner (*Grammar of New Testament Greek*, Vol IV, Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1980; 149), for back in Ephesus there was a team of copyists, all skilled in writing Greek, and no doubt recruited to copy and distribute John’s final text.

the fullest extent of that term”,<sup>58</sup> but perhaps ‘Galilean Jewish Greek’ would be more apt.

The specifically Galilean origin is supported by the research of G. Mussies who, in a summary by Adela Yarbro Collins, “noted that John avoided typically Greek syntactical constructions that had no counterpart in Hebrew or Aramaic. Not only that, but in one type of case he avoided a construction that had a counterpart in biblical Hebrew, but none in Mishnaic Hebrew and Galilean Aramaic. Although there are many Semitisms in Revelation, the ones typical of the Septuagint are avoided”.<sup>59</sup> As a result, Yarbro Collins calls the author’s language “peculiar, contemporarily Semitizing Greek”, although a better description would be a literal Greek version of the Aramaic spoken in Galilee during the first century. If, as seems likely, the Greek of the Book of Revelation is a barely edited form of the author’s ‘Galilean Jewish Greek’, then far from disproving apostolic authorship it actually goes a long way to confirming it. But there are other indications too.

After a lifetime of research on the Aramaic translations, or targums, of the Hebrew Scriptures and their relation to the New Testament, Martin McNamara writes: “In fact, after a consideration of the evidence for the relation of the Targums—and of the Palestinian Targum on the Pentateuch in particular—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”. A study of the overall relation of the Johannine literature with the Targums would be very

<sup>58</sup> *The Apocalypse and Semitic Syntax*, 108. On translating the text into correct Greek, it would certainly have lost much of its original Semitic structure, many of its allusions to sacred scripture and something of its significance and authenticity too. Perhaps the author wished to preserve “the Word of God and the Witness of Jesus”, which was given to him in Aramaic (Rev 1,1-3), as accurately as possible in the form it was given to him, knowing that its message was primarily for fellow Jews, and that one day, it would be necessary to translate it back into the parent language.

<sup>59</sup> G. Mussies, ‘The Greek of the Book of Revelation’ in *L’Apocalypse johannique et l’apocalyptique dans le Nouveau Testament*, ed Jan Lambrecht, Leuven: 1980; 167-177, summarized by A. Yarbro Collins in *Crisis and Catharsis: The Power of the Apocalypse*, Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984; 47.

rewarding”.<sup>60</sup> This is significant because, although Hebrew was the language of the Bible and of public prayer, the people of the provinces, especially Galilee, spoke a form of Aramaic that was sufficiently different from Hebrew as to make comprehension difficult. McNamara writes: “We can presume that in Jesus’ day, in Galilee at least, and most probably in Judaea as well, the Hebrew text was rendered into Aramaic”.<sup>61</sup> The frequency of ‘targumisms’ (terms and paraphrases from the targums) in the Book of Revelation is therefore a sensitive indication of the author’s familiarity with contemporary Aramaic targums.

It is conjectured that the written tradition of the targums originated in the schools attached to local synagogues, not only for the Torah instruction of the pupils, but more specifically so that they could learn the appointed reading before reciting it, from memory, at the Sabbath synagogue service: “If the targum rendering was to be developed orally in the synagogue it might well be that the person delivering it, even minors, would have learnt the section by heart already from the advanced school, the *Bet ha-Midrash*”.<sup>62</sup>

<sup>60</sup> Martin McNamara, *Targum and Testament Revisited*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2010, 213. See also: Paul Trudinger, The Apocalypse and the Palestinian Targum, *Biblical Theological Bulletin*, 1986, vol 16, 78-79; Some Observations Concerning the Text of the Old Testament in the Book of Revelation, *Journal of Theological Studies*, vol 17 (1966), 82-88. The commentary by Pierre Prigent is perhaps the most sensitive to the author’s targumisms (*Commentary on the Apocalypse of St. John*, Trans. Wendy Pradels, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001).

<sup>61</sup> McNamara, *Targum and Testament Revisited*, 78. The dating of the first written targums for use in the synagogue liturgy is still hotly debated. Even though none of the existing manuscripts contain Aramaic dialects that are older than about 100 CE (Targum Onkelos) or 150 CE (the Palestinian Targums), it is hypothesized that both of these derive from an earlier first-century script (proto PT), which can be reconstructed by scholars, if not actually discovered on a manuscript (see Stephen A. Kaufman, ‘Dating the Language of the Palestinian Targums and their use in the Study of First Century CE Texts’, *The Aramaic Bible: Targums in their Historical Context*, Eds. D.R.G. Beattie and M.J. McNamara, JSOT Series 166, Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994; 118-130; and Paul Flesher in *The Targums: A Critical Introduction*, Paul V. Flesher and Bruce Chilton, Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2011; 91-107).

<sup>62</sup> Martin McNamara, *Targum and Testament Revisited*, 84. It is not known when the written text of the Targum first appeared, but the latest researches (see note 61 above) suggest it was probably during the first century. Echoes of the Targums in the New Testament, especially in the Book of Revelation, suggest that this must have happened around the beginning of the first century CE, or at the end of the



In contrast to rural Galilee in the first century CE, where Aramaic was the vernacular language and Hebrew was less widely used, it is now understood that Hebrew was the main spoken language in Judaeian villages, so there would have been little or no need for an Aramaic targum of the Hebrew Scriptures in rural Judaea.<sup>63</sup> The author's familiarity with the Aramaic targums is therefore a strong indication that Galilee was the place of his formative years, for here it is certain that both the Hebrew Bible and the Aramaic targum were read together in the synagogue liturgy, and probably formed the basis of every young Jew's education.<sup>64</sup> It is therefore quite possible that the author of the Book of Revelation learnt his Bible, in Hebrew and in Aramaic, by being selected to recite the targum in parallel with the Hebrew reading at the local synagogue services. If, according to the tradition, the author was indeed John the apostle, this suggestion gains more credibility on recalling the ambition of his mother Salome (Mt 20,20-21) and the above-average status of his father Zebedee (Mk 1,19-20), who for this reason may have been an official on the council of the local synagogue.<sup>65</sup>

It is now well established that, in the early 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE, northern Galilee became the home of Enochic mysticism, the seed-bed

first century BCE. The existence of 'advanced schools', or even elementary schools, at this time is disputed, but the school/study room adjacent to the first-century synagogue excavated recently at Magdala seems to settle the question (see note 52 above).

<sup>63</sup> Cf. Fassberg quoting Bernard Spolsky in 'Which Semitic Language Did Jesus and Other Contemporary Jews Speak?', 276. In Jerusalem the situation was more complex, with both Aramaic and Hebrew being commonly spoken, and also Greek, especially among the ruling classes, government officials and diaspora communities.

<sup>64</sup> Even more so if Oscar Skarsaune is correct in saying that "there were no ordinary synagogues in Jerusalem or Judea: the temple itself was close and available and made synagogues superfluous." Furthermore, he continues "In Galilee the synagogue seems to have become the order of the day in the first century, but was possibly quite young as an institution", *In the Shadow of the Temple: Jewish Influences on Early Christianity*, Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2002; 123. Although several first-century synagogues have now been excavated in Galilee, the lack of evidence for synagogues in Judaea may be due to the total destruction of 985 Jewish settlements there, following the suppression of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Jewish Revolt in 135 CE.

<sup>65</sup> See note 7 above, for an indication that the sons of Zebedee had a good command of Hebrew, as well as Aramaic.

of Jewish apocalyptic literature, whose prophetic visions later inspired the Essenes, the eschatological preaching of John the Baptist and the cosmic worldview of the early Christian movement.<sup>66</sup> An early pioneer in the study of these writings, R.H. Charles, wrote "This literature was written probably for the most part in Galilee, the home of the religious seer and mystic. Not only was the development of a religious but also of an ethical character. In both these respects the way was prepared by this literature for the advent of Christianity, while a study of the New Testament makes it clear that its writers had been brought up in the atmosphere created by these books and were themselves directly acquainted with many of them".<sup>67</sup>

This introduces another feature of the Book of Revelation that points to a Galilean author: it is one of a small group of ascent apocalypses, which recount the author's ascent to the divine throne in heaven as a preface to his commissioning for a prophetic task.<sup>68</sup> This

<sup>66</sup> For a brief and dense presentation of the apocalyptic worldview in *1Enoch*, see George W.E. Nickelsburg, *The Apocalyptic Construction of Reality in 1Enoch, Mysteries and Revelations: Apocalyptic Studies since the Uppsala Colloquium*, ed. John J. Collins and J.H. Charlesworth, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991; 51-64. The esoteric nature of these apocalypses probably diminished with the approach of the anticipated judgment, and so Joseph Klausner (after M. Friedlaender, 1905) could refer to the apocalyptists as "popular prophets" of the common people (*The Messianic Idea in Israel*, New York: Macmillan, 1955; 273, 393). To this day, Galilee, and the town of Safed (Sfat) in particular, remains a centre for the Jewish mystical tradition (Kabbalah).

<sup>67</sup> R.H. Charles, *Religious Development Between the Old and the New Testaments*, New York: Henry Holt, 1914; 9. At a very early stage in pseudepigraphal research, Charles was convinced of the Galilean origin of the Enochic literature and of its connection (doctrinally, geographically and historically) to the early Christian movement (op. cit. 33, 156-7). Perhaps it is no coincidence that papyrus grew abundantly in Lake Huleh in those days, one of the very few places outside Egypt, and this would have provided a plentiful supply for local scribal activity.

<sup>68</sup> The pre-Christian ascent apocalypses are very few: *The Book of Watchers* (*1Enoch* 1-36), the *Testament of Levi*, and the *Book of Parables* (*1Enoch* 37-71). The sequence of ascent, revelation and commissioning is undoubtedly modelled on a very ancient prophetic commissioning sequence, described especially in Isaiah 6 and Ezekiel. During the exile, Ezekiel had a vision of the throne-chariot of God leaving the temple and, later, a vision of its return. Despite the restoration of Jerusalem and its temple after the exile, God's presence did not return to dwell in the temple, and remained in heaven. Among the Jews of Judaea, prophecy was re-defined at this point as a function of the priest and the scribe (cf. Martin Hengel, 'The Scriptures and Their Interpretation in Second Temple Judaism', *The Aramaic Bible: Targums in their Historical Context*, Eds. D.R.G. Beattie and M.J. McNamara,

is not a novel invention of the author, but the culmination of the above-mentioned prophetic tradition that emerged 300 years before, with some of the oldest writings in the book of *1 Enoch* (The Book of Watchers). These form the groundwork for the other books in the first Enochic corpus, reaching completion around the turn of the Common Era, the time of Christ's birth. What is unique about the earliest visions of *1 Enoch* is that the terrestrial setting for the heavenly 'ascent' is identified as 'the waters of Dan'—the site of a restored Israelite temple near the south-western foothills of Mt. Hermon. Also named in Enoch's vision are Mt. Hermon and Abel-Ma'in, only a few kilometers from Dan in northern Galilee (*1 Enoch* 6:6, 13:7,9).<sup>69</sup>

Indicating the establishment of a prophetic tradition associated with this region, the writer of the later *Testament of Levi* (ch. 2) is taken from the same Abel-Ma'in to the top of Mt. Hermon, where the heavens open and the same pattern of ascent to the divine throne followed by a divine commissioning is described.<sup>70</sup> It would appear that the water-rich areas around the south-western foothills of Mt. Hermon were regarded as a gate to heaven and Mt. Hermon itself as the stairs leading up and down.

JSOT Series 166, Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994; 161-64; Joseph Blenkinsopp, *A History of Prophecy in Israel*, Louisville/London: Westminster/ John Knox Press, 1996; 222-26), but the ascent apocalypses describe a continuation of prophetic activity centred in the North, in Galilee. In these writings, the commissioning of prophets now involved ascent to the throne in heaven, a theme developed above all in the writings of *1 Enoch*, which form the closest prophetic background for the Book of Revelation. Cf. Martha Himmelfarb, *Ascent to Heaven in Jewish and Christian Apocalypses*, New York/Oxford: OUP, 1993.

<sup>69</sup> About 50 kms north of the Sea of Galilee, the Israelite temple at Dan was briefly restored by Ptolemy II around 260 BCE. In late second temple times, the borders of Galilee (administered by Antipas) stop a few kilometres south of this area, which was then part of north-western Gaulanitis (administered by Philip). For the geographical sites and their significance, see George Nickelsburg, 'Enoch, Levi, and Peter: Recipients of Revelation in Upper Galilee', *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 100/4 (1981), 575-600; also David Suter, 'Why Galilee? Galilean Regionalism in the Interpretation of *1 Enoch* 6-16', *Henocho*, Vol XXV, 2003; 167-212. Suter also examines the connections of the text with local mythology and spiritual practices in the early 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE, and suggests it could have been a foundational text for the newly restored Israelite temple at Dan, established by priests who did not qualify for service in the Jerusalem temple.

<sup>70</sup> Nickelsburg, 'Enoch, Levi, and Peter', 588-89.

Scholars have recently reached a consensus that the latest book in the Enochic Corpus (the Book of Parables, *1Enoch* 37–71) was also composed in Galilee, around the turn of the millennium. Geographical identification is made possible by the frequent condemnation of those who ‘possess the land’, which aptly describes the Roman and Herodian colonists who had acquired most of the drained and fertile land in the Huleh and Ginnosar Valleys to the north and west of the Sea of Galilee. The indigenous farmers had been made tenants or day labourers after losing their land through debt from heavy taxation during the reign of Herod the Great (37–4 BCE) and from the famine in 25 BCE. This dating for the Book of Parables not only accords well with a textual reference to the Parthian invasion of the Holy Land in 40 BCE (*1Enoch* 56:5-8), but also locates its origin specifically to the same parts of Galilee that witnessed the birth of the Christian movement soon after.<sup>71</sup>

New Testament echoes of the Enoch-Levi tradition can be detected in the account of Peter’s commissioning near the sacred pagan site of Paneion (today Banyas), renamed Caesarea Philippi (Mt 16,13-19 *et par*), and in the Transfiguration of Jesus on a high mountain nearby, surely Mt. Hermon or one of its foothills (Mt 17,1-13 *et par*).<sup>72</sup> Peter’s commission to lead the Church proceeds from his confession that Jesus, the Son of Man, is indeed the Messiah (Mt 16,13-16), a

<sup>71</sup> Cf. James H. Charlesworth, ‘Can we discern the Composition Date of the Parables of Enoch?’ In *Enoch and the Messiah Son of Man: Revisiting the Book of Parables*, ed G. Boccaccini, Grand Rapids MI /Cambridge UK: Eerdmans, 2007; 450-68, esp 467: “The Book of Parables (1 En 37–71) appears to be a Jewish work that antedates Jesus, and the author seems to imagine a connection among the Messiah, the Righteous One, and the Son of Man. The work most likely took shape in Galilee, not far from where Jesus centered his ministry. He, thus, could have been influenced by this writing or the traditions preserved in the *Parables of Enoch*. In this case, his own self-understanding may have been shaped by the relationship between the Son of Man and the Messiah that is found only in the *Parables of Enoch*. If those in the Enoch group were known as the great scholars who had special and secret knowledge, and if they lived in Galilee, then Jesus would most likely have had an opportunity to learn firsthand about their teachings through discussions and debates.” More recently the contributions of J.H. Charlesworth and Mordechai Aviam in *Parables of Enoch: A Paradigm Shift*, eds. James H. Charlesworth and Darrell L. Bock, London: Bloomsbury, 2013.

<sup>72</sup> A personal review of the area suggested that Mt. Dov, now a closed military zone, could have been the mountain of the Transfiguration.

confession that Jesus then exposes as a gift of divine revelation.<sup>73</sup> If this divine revelation can be identified with the Transfiguration of Jesus, then it would seem the narrative order has been reversed (perhaps for rhetorical reasons) and the ascent of Jesus, with Peter, James and John, up the mountain should have preceded Peter's commissioning in a way that would better fit the traditional pattern of ascent and revelation followed by the commissioning. Either way, the northern Galilean location for the Transfiguration of Jesus and the commissioning of Peter seems to be modelled on that of the more ancient Enoch-Levi tradition.<sup>74</sup> Extending the distance around Mt. Hermon, but still within a day's walk, we could include the post-Resurrection appearance of Jesus on the shores of the Sea of Galilee (Jn 21,1-14) and the conversion of Paul on the road to Damascus (Acts 9,1-19).

It is in the context of this Galilean tradition of divine revelation and then commissioning that we return to the Book of Revelation, where the same pattern is easily discernible, although the terrestrial setting has shifted to the Aegean Island of Patmos. The author John ascends to the divine throne (Rev 4,1) where he narrates a sequence of liturgical actions leading up to, and including, the eschatological judgments of God (11,15-19), at which point he receives a divine commission to 'prophesy again' (10,11) and metaphorically 'measure the temple' (11,1-2), in a way that mirrors Peter's commission to lead the Church (Mt 16,13-16; Jn 21,15-19).

Evoking, and even fulfilling, the Enoch-Levi tradition of ascent and divine commissioning, the author of the Book of Revelation shows

<sup>73</sup> The identification of Jesus, the Son of Man, with the Messiah was indeed a daring claim, and one that would not have been evident to many Jews at the time, although the ground had been prepared in the Book of Parables (*1 Enoch* 48,10; 52,4; 62,5; 69,29), cf. John J. Collins, *The Scepter and the Star: Messianism in Light of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed, Grand Rapids MI/Cambridge UK: Eerdmans, 2010; 203.

<sup>74</sup> Cf. Nickelsburg, 'Enoch, Levi, and Peter', 575-600. See also Sean Freyne, *Galilee and the Gospel: Collected Essays*, WUNT 125, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000; 230-70; "Jesus of Nazareth had a Galilean rural background and, as we have seen, Mt. Hermon and its region had in the past provided an alternative location for God's heavenly sanctuary, by way of criticism of the Jerusalem temple and its priesthood. There was, therefore, some precedent upon which a Galilean prophet such as Jesus could have drawn, even if his critique of the temple, in line with his own passion for justice, seems to have had more to do with its economic exploitation than with its clergy's failures to observe the purity regulations as this is expressed in *1 Enoch* and *Testament of Levi*", op. cit. 269.

himself to be intimately acquainted with this esoteric Galilean tradition,<sup>75</sup> which was also strongly opposed to the Jerusalem temple and critical of its impurity.<sup>76</sup> Familiarity with this tradition would also explain how young men from Galilee like Andrew, John, Simon Peter and Philip, would have been attracted by the apocalyptic preaching of John the Baptist and might readily have become his disciples (cf. Jn 1,35-51).

Without laboring the point further, these three features of the Book of Revelation (Galilean Jewish Greek, Galilean targumisms, Galilean prophetic tradition) combine to confirm that the author was a son of Galilee, born and bred in the region where most of the first apostles came from and where Jesus first preached. He was intimate with the Bible in Hebrew and Aramaic, used Greek effectively, though somewhat ungrammatically, as a vehicle for carrying his message, and was familiar with the Enochic prophetic tradition associated with north-eastern Galilee. Although this finding does not identify the

<sup>75</sup> Nickelsburg notes "In its form as an apocalypse in which the seer is taken to heaven to see the events relating to the coming judgment, this work offers the closest first century Christian analog to the Parables of Enoch. A number of other Enochic elements are present as well", *Things Revealed: Studies in Early Jewish and Christian Literature in Honour of Michael E. Stone*, eds. E. Chazon, D. Satran and R. Clements, Leiden: Brill, 2004; 70. For these elements, see the study by Loren Stuckenbruck and Mark Mathews, 'The Apocalypse of John, *1 Enoch*, and the Question of Influence', *Die Johannesapokalypse*, Tübingen, Mohr Siebeck, 2012; 191-234. The authors conclude that apart from Exodus, Daniel, Isaiah and Ezekiel, whose importance for the Book of Revelation is the greatest, the influence of *1 Enoch* is comparable to that of the other canonical books of the Bible. How, when and where the author of Revelation became familiar with the Books of *1 Enoch*, and other sectarian works like the *Book of Jubilees*, is difficult to ascertain. Although already known to the author during his youth, more profound contact could have occurred after the Resurrection, when there was an ardent desire to understand the Scriptures in the light of Jesus. The sectarian literature, including *1 Enoch*, would have been available to read in the Essene Quarter, in the 'upper city' of Jerusalem (now called Mt. Zion), which was adjacent to the 'upper room', the first place of worship, and the homes of the first Jewish believers; cf. Oskar Skarsaune, *In the Shadow of the Temple*, 185-91. See also the next section: 'The Author and His Text'.

<sup>76</sup> Nickelsburg, 'Enoch, Levi, and Peter', 587; David Suter, 'Fallen Angel, Fallen Priest: The Problem of Family Purity in *1 Enoch* 6-16', *Hebrew Union College Annual*, Vol 50 (1979) 115-135; 'Revisiting "Fallen Angel, Fallen Priest"', *Henoah*, Vol XXIV, 2002; 137-142.

author precisely as the apostle John, son of Zebedee,<sup>77</sup> it does lend support to the traditional view of apostolic authorship by locating the author's origin in Galilee and thereby excluding a hypothetical author from Asia, Syria, Egypt, Judaea or even Jerusalem.

### The Author and His Text

Skeptics may still not be convinced by the new evidence presented above. Nowadays, one of the main objections to the apostolic authorship of the Book of Revelation takes a view radically opposite to that of Dionysius. Whereas Dionysius assumed the apostolic author would be well educated, especially in the Greek language, the modern view presumes he would be too poorly educated to write such a sophisticated composition as the Book of Revelation. The modern view arises from a rather static conception of the social and educational differences between the oppressed illiterate peasant class in Galilee, who became the first apostles of Jesus, and the writers of apocalypses, identified with learned scribes from Judaea and Jerusalem. Richard Horsley states it as follows: "Apocalyptic literature was written by the literate, cultural (although not political-economic) elite. Jesus and his followers, among whom the Synoptic Gospel traditions originated, were illiterate peasants who cultivated their own Israelite traditions in village communities".<sup>78</sup> It is therefore assumed that between the

<sup>77</sup> Beckwith mentions another feature, with qualifications: "In the contents, spirit, and impassioned language of the book, there is much that is akin to the vehement 'son of thunder', who would call down visible judgment from heaven to consume the enemies of the Lord, Lk 9,54; and herein may be found some confirmation of this conclusion. But this and similar features in the character of the Apocalypticist are too common to justify any sure inference", *The Apocalypse of John*, 353 (cf. note 7 above).

<sup>78</sup> "The Kingdom of God and the Renewal of Israel: Synoptic Gospels, Jesus Movements, and Apocalypticism", *The Encyclopedia of Apocalypticism*, Vol 1, 307. In order to explain how the work of the educated scribe from Jerusalem (the hypothetical author of the Book of Revelation) ended up in the New Testament, alongside the testimonies of the illiterate peasant apostles, Horsley argues that "Particularly in times of crisis, as they engaged in common struggles, there would have been much more interaction between the Judean scribes and the peasantry than is usual in traditional agrarian societies. Thus, we may presume a considerable degree of common culture across the social divide between scribal circles and peasant villages around the time of Jesus" (*The Encyclopedia of Apocalypticism*, Vol 1, 308).

apostle preacher (an illiterate peasant) and the apocalypse writer (a learned scribe), there was such a huge educational gap that the apostle preacher could never have become the writer of an apocalypse. In brief, it is widely contested that the apostle John could ever have learnt to write proficiently and, even if he could have learnt this skill, he would never have been able to master the literary techniques of apocalyptic literature and produce the masterpiece that is the Book of Revelation. This challenge must therefore be met on two levels: the first concerning the apostle John's ability to write, his 'grapho-literacy', and the second dealing with his ability to write an apocalypse.

In the Book of Revelation, the author gives testimony to having both these skills, for he reports that he wrote it in obedience to a divine command to write what he saw and heard and send it to the seven churches (Rev 1,2.11.19). Given to John in person, this command implies that he could not only write, but that he could write well, without the help of a secretary. Is it possible that John the apostle, son of Zebedee and fisherman from Galilee, could have acquired the necessary skills to write, copy and then distribute a book such as the Book of Revelation? In the rest of this essay we will attempt to show how, without great difficulty, John the apostle could indeed have acquired the skills to accomplish the tasks given to him, namely the tasks of writing, copying and distributing the Book of Revelation. In fact, in the light of the three Galilean characteristics elucidated above, the text as it stands is quite consistent with what one would expect an elderly, divinely-inspired, Aramaic-speaking, Scripture-saturated, immigrant Church leader from rural Galilee to write, but in order to demonstrate how he could have realized this achievement we must move into the realm of informed speculation and reconstruct the following literacy and literary trajectory for our author from Galilee.

The issue of whether a fisherman from Galilee, like John, could plausibly have written such an elaborate and sophisticated work as the Book of Revelation hinges first of all on the author's ability to write, his 'grapho-literacy'. The evidence presented in the last section confirms that, through regular attendance at the synagogue and its school, young Jews in first-century Galilee were well educated in reading and memorizing their sacred texts, ritual prayers and prophetic traditions. Indeed, if he was a bright and intelligent child, John may have been one of the pupils selected to recite the Aramaic version of Scripture at the synagogue services on Sabbaths and at feasts, in



which case he would have achieved a high standard of reading in Hebrew and Aramaic.

However, childhood education at that time did not include instruction in writing. At most, individual children could have learnt rudimentary writing skills in their own language from literate or partially literate individuals in the town or at home, as this would have been useful for work in a practical occupation like agriculture or fishing.<sup>79</sup> Furthermore, if John was living in a mixed Jewish and pagan town like Bethsaida, he would also have learnt to speak some colloquial Greek. However, when he was about 21 years of age, John left Galilee and settled in Jerusalem for the next thirty years of his life. It is only after migration to a city like Jerusalem, in early adult life, that John could have acquired full grapho-literacy in Aramaic, Hebrew and even Greek, providing he had time for extra study and instruction from professionally trained individuals, or scribes, of whom there were many in Jerusalem.

The mention of professional scribes leads into the question of how John, once he had learnt to write proficiently in his own language, could have learnt the literary technique of writing an apocalypse. It is widely accepted that apocalypses were written by trained scribes, and so it is clear that for John to learn about this form of writing he would have needed to receive instruction from a scribe, or scribes, familiar with this literature.

At this point, it is necessary to distinguish between the scribes who wrote and copied apocalypses and the scribes as commonly understood in the second temple period. Joseph Klausner was among the first to insist that the scribes educated in first-century-CE Judaea and Jerusalem were mainly concerned with the everyday application of religious law and had little or no interest in the messianic prophecies that pervade the apocalypses. To emphasize the point, he used the term 'popular prophets', not 'scribes', to describe the writers of those days who wrote the apocalypses that revealed the messianic

<sup>79</sup> It is instructive to compare John's level of education with that of Jesus of Nazareth, the son of a carpenter, who despite his rural education, is known to have achieved a high level of familiarity with the Scriptures by the age of 12 (Lk 2,46-47), as well as good public reading skills (Lk 4,16-22) and some writing ability (Jn 8,6.8).

prophecies and expectations of the nation.<sup>80</sup> The socio-historical background of the apocalypses and other pseudipigrapha is still a topic of research and discussion, but from what is known Klausner is substantially correct: the Jerusalem temple scribes, drawn mainly from the parties of the Pharisees and the Sadducees, were not the authors or guardians of these prophetic and apocalyptic works. Instead, the authors were scribes of a devout but rival party of Judaism called the Essenes, from whom the Qumran sect had previously separated themselves (75-100 BCE).<sup>81</sup> Members of the Essene party had sectarian views on the temple and its offerings, on the legitimacy of the priesthood and on the ritual calendar, and were well known for their ascetic life of hard work, prayer, purifications and sexual abstinence,

<sup>80</sup> In explaining why the earliest *Tannaim* did not see the need to 'elaborate further the Messianic ideas of the prophets', Klausner carefully distinguishes the activity of the popular prophets from that of the Scribes: "In the circles of the nation from which came the "popular prophets", the creators of the Book of Enoch, the Psalms of Solomon, the Assumption of Moses, IV Ezra, the Syriac Baruch, and the like, Messianic expectations were very much alive. But the "Scribes", the precursors of the *Tannaim*, immersed themselves in the exposition of the Law, adapting it to everyday life and to the understanding of the people; they indulged very little in Messianic expectations, which sought "to hasten the end," and so could have destroyed such semblance of Jewish political power and autonomy as still remained in the days of the Herods and the Roman procurators" (Joseph Klausner, *The Messianic Idea*, 393).

<sup>81</sup> A split, or schism, between the non-Qumran Essenes and the Qumran or 'Dead Sea' sect is argued convincingly by Gabriele Boccaccini in *Beyond the Essene Hypothesis: the Parting of the Ways between Qumran and Enochic Judaism*, Grand Rapids MI/Cambridge UK: Eerdmans, 1998; also "Enochians, Urban Essenes, Qumranites: Three Social Groups, One Intellectual Movement", *The Early Enoch Literature*, Eds. G. Boccaccini and J.J. Collins, Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2007; 301-27; challenged and debated by John J. Collins, in "'Enochic Judaism" and the Sect of the Dead Sea Scrolls', in *The Early Enoch Literature*, 283-99; and in 'Enochic Judaism: An Assessment', in his *Apocalypse, Prophecy, and Pseudepigraphy: On Jewish Apocalyptic Literature*, Grand Rapids MI/Cambridge UK: Eerdmans, 2015; 73-88. Reversing the view that the Qumran community was the headquarters of a unified movement, Boccaccini proposes that the non-Qumran Essenes were the mainstream and Qumran a radical and isolated extreme. This clarifies the relation between Essenism and Christianity by postulating the mainstream Essene party as the precursor of Christianity, not the Qumran sect, which was a 'sideshow'. Evidence of the influence of mainstream Essenism on the NT and the early Church can be found in many places, but especially in the preaching of John the Baptist and in the writings of John the Evangelist (cf. David Flusser *Judaism and the Origins of Christianity*, Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1988; 24).

as well as their medical skills, prophetic gifts, esoteric literature and angelic (mystical) knowledge. They were widely respected for their holy way of life, and in this sense Klausner was also right to describe them as 'popular'.

In view of the outstanding social, cultural and theological affinity between the Essenes and the popular, first-century-CE movements of John the Baptist and Jesus of Nazareth, it is quite conceivable that both these movements, in their early stages, maintained close contacts with the Essenes in Galilee, in Jerusalem and even in Damascus. Not all, but a large number of mainstream Essenes, with their adherents and admirers among the general public, would have recognized Jesus as the Messiah Son of Man prophesied in their sacred book '*Parables of Enoch*' (1*Enoch* 37-71), and so became his first disciples and followers. It is likely to have been in this context that John the apostle, who had first been a disciple of John the Baptist, encountered Jesus of Nazareth and became his disciple (Jn 1,35-42). If recent research on the provenance of the *Parables of Enoch* from the Magdala area is correct then it was precisely due to his work as a fisherman, bringing fish frequently to Magdala for processing, that the young John first became aware of this prophetic book and its messianic significance.<sup>82</sup>

The apostle John's familiarity with the rest of the Essene library, and the books of Enoch in particular, would have continued in

<sup>82</sup> In 'The Book of Enoch and the Galilean Archaeology and Landscape' (*Parables of Enoch: A Paradigm Shift*, Eds. James H. Charlesworth and Darrell L. Bock, London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2013; 159-169), Mordechai Aviam presents the case for Magdala as the birthplace of the *Parables of Enoch*. More likely, as we proposed in chapter 1 of this book, there was a large Essene scribal community dwelling in the 'cave-village' high up in the cliffs of nearby Mount Arbel, with its spectacular views of Mount Hermon in the distance. If further archaeological work confirms this was the home of a large scribal community belonging to the mainstream (non-Qumran) Essenes, it is probable that not only *Parables of Enoch* was composed here, but also *Epistle of Enoch*, the *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*, the Aramaic *Targumim* of the Hebrew Scriptures and many other works. If so, this lakeside area of Galilee was one of the main centres of Torah learning and study in the whole country. It raises the possibility that John, son of Zebedee, may have studied here for a year or two as a child or young man, but this discussion must await archaeological confirmation of a first-century Essene presence at this site. In any case, formal acceptance into the Essene community was not the only way John might have acquired his scribal skills and knowledge of sectarian writings. Informal instruction by a former Essene scribe, over several years, while he was living in Jerusalem, would have been more than sufficient, as we go on to suggest.

Jerusalem, when the early Christian community, led by Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, established itself in the 'upper city' adjacent to the Essene Quarter, on the hill now called Mt. Zion. Undoubtedly many of the Essenes living there had joined the early Christian community and so it is not unreasonable to suggest that it was an Essene scribe from this community that completed the education of the apostle John, by instructing him not only in the art of writing Aramaic and Hebrew, but also in basic scribal skills, such as the use of ink and papyrus, and finally, when proficient at the rest, in the techniques of writing apocalypse. It was here, when he could find time from his other duties, that the apostle John received a comprehensive scribal education.

During his thirty-year residence in Jerusalem (from about 33-63 CE), the apostle John not only managed to acquire the language and literary skills to eventually write his Apocalypse, but also became familiar with the Essene library, the temple ritual and feasts, and the topography of Jerusalem that are all so evident in his later writings. At the same time, some of John's local missions took him into the Greek-speaking communities of Jerusalem, Samaria and probably Galilee (cf. Acts 8,14-17; 9,31), where he would have had to speak Greek and read it from the widely-used Septuagint version of the Bible. So he would also have received some tutoring in Greek at this time, from a bilingual, Aramaic/Greek-speaking companion, who was not well versed in Greek grammar, but knew some of the rules and improvised the rest. This could easily have been the same scribe, the former Essene, who provided John with his elementary scribal education. Consequently, when John moved to Ephesus 30 years later (around 63 CE), his fluency in speaking and writing Greek had improved considerably, despite being incorrigibly imprinted with Semitisms and irregular syntax. After another 30 years of living in Ephesus and preaching to the newly-converted, Greek-speaking communities of Asia Minor, his Greek had become more or less what we see in the text of Revelation now.

Exiled on Patmos around 95 CE, John was in a literary wilderness, without secretarial help and, perhaps more significantly, without a library of sacred texts, dictionaries or grammar books.<sup>83</sup> It was

<sup>83</sup> Being exiled on the remote pagan island of Patmos is therefore good circumstantial evidence for regarding his text as it describes itself—the authentic account of a genuine supernatural revelation, and not just the product of a scribal

John, and no one else, whom the Risen Christ commanded to write what he saw. John obeyed and wrote, either by dictation (as for the seven messages in Rev 2–3) or from immediate recall of his visionary experience.<sup>84</sup> As revelations of this kind are usually communicated in the mother-tongue of the recipient, which was Aramaic in John's case,<sup>85</sup> it is most likely that his first accounts of the revelation were in Aramaic, or in a dialect that mixes Aramaic with Hebrew.<sup>86</sup> It is highly unlikely that he would have had the fluency to write his visions directly into Greek, which he had still not mastered to a sufficient degree. This account, most probably in an abbreviated or note form, would have been written on whatever writing medium was available on the Island, on scraps of leather, on papyrus or even on pieces of wood.

Even before returning to Ephesus from Patmos, John would have started writing the first draft of his text in his own uniquely ungrammatical 'Galilean Jewish Greek'—a process that involved revising, redacting and translating his original text and notes in Aramaic. There is evidence in the text that John himself translated from Aramaic into Greek.<sup>87</sup> Towards the end of 96 CE, he was released from the Island and allowed to return to Ephesus, where help with translation into correct literary Greek was available, but appears to have been declined for the reasons discussed above. John was certainly back in Ephesus by the time he composed the Prologue (Rev 1,1-9) and

exegetical exercise. The tradition that John had an assistant on the Island of Patmos called Prochorus (*The Acts of John by Prochorus*) is very late (5<sup>th</sup> century). Although John may have had a personal assistant, it is unlikely to have been the same person named in Acts 6,5.

<sup>84</sup> On this subject, see chapter 5 of this volume: "Composition and Structure of the Book of Revelation".

<sup>85</sup> Of no little significance is the fact that this was Jesus Christ's language too.

<sup>86</sup> Scholars who have argued for an original Semitic text have differed over whether the original was Hebrew or Aramaic. However, the presence of Aramaisms in Hebrew texts and Hebraisms in Aramaic texts found at Qumran and at other sites in the Judaean desert suggest the possibility that the original text of John's Revelation was in a mixed dialect, most probably Aramaic with many Hebraisms; cf. Stephen Fassberg in 'Which Semitic Language Did Jesus and Other Contemporary Jews Speak?', 274.

<sup>87</sup> E.g., at 9,11, the name of the angel of the abyss is given in the two languages, Aramaic/Hebrew and then Greek, confirming that the translation into Greek was made by the author himself, since no one except the author would take the risk of adding the name in Greek, in view of the warning at Rev 22,18-19.

Epilogue (22,6-21) and added them to the text he had just translated into Greek.<sup>88</sup> This first complete draft in Greek was then handed over for proof reading, superficial correction and final drafting by a secretarial assistant, who could have consulted the author's original Aramaic version during this work. The most glaring translation mistakes entered at this stage, due to incomprehension of John's Greek draft and misreading of his original Aramaic script.<sup>89</sup> It was surely to avoid errors of this kind, in addition to the reasons discussed above, that John had originally translated the text himself and then refused all but the most superficial changes to it. The only significant changes that were made involved the messages to the seven churches (Rev 2-3), which were purged of Semitisms and cast into a more polished Greek, no doubt so that they could be read and clearly understood in the churches. Finally a master copy was created and further changes could have occurred only in the process of copying.

### The Copying and Distribution of the Text

The Risen Christ's command "Write in a book what you see and send it to the seven churches" (Rev 1,11) raises the important question of how John would eventually convey his 'book' to all seven churches. Is Christ asking him to painstakingly copy it six times and send it personally to all seven churches? Is he asking him to send it to one church with instructions to copy it and send the copy to the next, until all seven had received a copy, in which case how could he be sure each church had the meticulous copying skills and motivation to fulfil

<sup>88</sup> The aorist past tense in Rev 1,9 "was on the Island of Patmos", suggests that John is writing this section after his release from exile, cf. David Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 77.

<sup>89</sup> Only the presence of mistranslations can distinguish a text that has been translated from one that was merely influenced by foreign idioms, Semitic in this case (cf. Nigel Turner, *The Language of the New Testament: Classic Essays*, ed. Stanley Porter, JSOT series 60, Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991; 175). As evidence of translation from a Hebrew/Aramaic original into Greek, there are signs of mistranslation in the text of the Book of Revelation, by someone other than the author: e.g., in 10,1, 'feet' is a mistranslation of the Hebrew word for leg (רגל), because legs can look like 'pillars of fire', but feet cannot; and in 19,16 'thigh' (ירך or רגל) is a misreading of the Hebrew/Aramaic word for 'standard' (דגל) in the original Aramaic. Other translation mistakes include: 'thrones' instead of 'throne' at 4,6; 'calf' instead of 'ox' at 4,7; 'scales' instead of 'yoke' at 6,5 (although ζυγόν can mean both); and 'number fulfilled' instead of 'consecrated' in 6,11 (from מלא יד).

the command which only he had been entrusted to do? Or does Christ's command not show awareness of an established manuscript copying centre, well known to John, and based in the city of Ephesus, the third most populous city of the Roman Empire? This last interpretation is the most satisfactory, for it gives John full authority and control over the copying and distribution of his book. He, or a trusted companion, simply had to dictate his final text to seven experienced scribal copyists writing simultaneously, then check the seven copies for accuracy, make the necessary corrections, and finally dispatch a copy to the head of each church. A centrally organized manuscript production process seems to have been very much in the mind of Christ when he issued this command to John (Rev 1,11) and proceeded to create a novel literary form by dictating seven messages to seven churches at the opening of a single document for the entire Church.

Many important observations flow from this reconstruction of John's task, but only a few can be mentioned here. Firstly, it underlines the author's leadership status in the Church of Ephesus<sup>90</sup> and the community's unquestioning belief in the divine revelation he was given for the Asian churches, although few could have grasped its full significance. Secondly, it confirms the existence of a "Johannine school" in the city of Ephesus, cooperating closely with its leader, John, to produce and distribute Church writings. It identifies this "school" as a scribal copying centre,<sup>91</sup> established to meet the needs of the expanding church in Asia for officially approved and accurate copies of Church documents, especially—but not only—of the Letters of Paul, the Gospels of Mark, Matthew and Luke, to be followed subsequently by copies of the Book of Revelation, the Fourth Gospel and the Letters

<sup>90</sup> A position entirely endorsed by early tradition recorded by Eusebius: "In Asia, moreover, there still remained alive the one whom Jesus loved, apostle and evangelist alike, John, who had directed the churches there since his return from exile on the island, following Domitian's death", *The History of the Church* III,23.1; Penguin Classics, 1989, 83.

<sup>91</sup> Interestingly, the similarity between the school master (*magister*) dictating to his young pupils (*pueri*) and the publisher (*librarius*) dictating to his copyists (*pueri*: originally these were slaves) was noted in classical times by the author of two comments (*scholia*) in the margin of a work by the Latin author Horace, cf. T.C. Skeat, in 'The Use of Dictation in Ancient Book-Production' in *The Collected writings of T.C. Skeat*, ed. J.K. Elliott, Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2004; 13-14.

of John.<sup>92</sup> Thirdly, the identification of this manuscript production centre, officially and centrally organized by the church in Ephesus, under the leadership of John, resonates strongly with the speculations of the eminent papyrologist, T.C. Skeat, on the invention and sudden appearance of the papyrus codex (Latin term for 'book') from a single source in the Eastern Mediterranean, before the year 100 CE.<sup>93</sup> Skeat suggests Antioch as the site of this centre, but the evidence he proposes actually conflicts with its probable Roman origin and Latin name "codex".<sup>94</sup> Furthermore, Skeat recognizes that the production of the papyrus codex, with its unified *nomen sacra* abbreviations and its adaptation for the public reading of the Gospels, required "a degree of organization, of conscious planning, and uniformity of practice among Christian communities which we have hitherto had little reason to suspect, and which throws a new light on the history of the early Church".<sup>95</sup> Such coordination presumes the involvement of the highest authorities in the Church, and these were based in Ephesus at the time.

At the epicentre of the expansion of the Church into Asia Minor, at the end of the first century, the church of Ephesus needed to produce and distribute its texts as covertly and discretely as possible, for Christianity was still regarded with suspicion, as an 'illegitimate association', by the Roman administration. Written in codex form, the new manuscripts could easily have been disguised to look like the common manuals used by engineers and medics.<sup>96</sup> The use of papyrus would

<sup>92</sup> The so-called "Johannine school", which has impressed so many scholars since the 1960's, is explained here as a team of literate professionals that had already been formed, in Ephesus, for the copying and distribution of manuscripts to the rapidly growing Christian communities in Asia Minor. It was not so much a 'conventicle' of prophets, apocalyptists or theologians, meditating on Scripture, as an early "scriptorium", or publishing house, engaged in practical Scripture propagation. For Ephesus as the birthplace of the Fourth Gospel, cf. C. Hill, *The Johannine Corpus*, 472-3.

<sup>93</sup> Colin H. Roberts and T.C. Skeat, *The Birth of the Codex*, London: British Academy/OUP, 1983; 54-61, and further developed by T.C. Skeat in 'The Origin of the Christian Codex', *The Collected writings of T.C. Skeat*, 79-87, then creatively imagined in *ibid.* 'Appendix A', 269-78.

<sup>94</sup> *The Birth of the Codex*, 58-61.

<sup>95</sup> *The Birth of the Codex*, 51; quoted from Skeat's contribution to *The Cambridge History of the Bible*, Cambridge: CUP, 1969; Vol 2, 72-3.

<sup>96</sup> I suggest this (easy concealment and camouflage) was the main reason for the Church's rapid adoption of the papyrus codex, instead of the more cumbersome



have been considerably less costly than parchment and in codex form it could be used on both sides, allowing more text per page.<sup>97</sup> It was a felicitous and timely invention that combined writing media from the East and the West by taking the handy rectangular form of the Roman parchment notebook (*membranae*), and using, instead of parchment, sheets of papyrus cut from rolls imported from Egypt. Several sheets were then gathered together, folded in two, sewn together in quires and bound with a hard cover for protection and disguise. All the evidence points to Ephesus and the “Johannine school” as the origin of this ‘game-changing’ invention.

If further confirmation is needed to support the existence of a manuscript production centre in Ephesus, under the leadership of John, it can be found in a short but revealing passage by the Church historian Eusebius on the origins of the Gospel written by John: “*After the three Gospels which had been previously written had already been distributed to all, and even to himself, they say that he welcomed them and testified to their truth, but that there was therefore only lacking to the Scripture the account concerning things which had been done by Christ at first and at the beginning of the proclamation. The record is certainly true... Now they say that on account of these things, the apostle John was exhorted to hand down in the Gospel according to himself*

parchment or papyrus roll. Skeat discusses several possibilities—more economical, more compact, more comprehensive, more convenient in use, more suited for ready reference—in his *The Birth of the Codex*, 45-53, but rejects these as a prime causes because they are only relative and cannot explain the immediate and absolute way in which this change came about. He then suggests that the main reason for the adoption of the codex was the need for a single four-Gospel collection, which would be too long for a roll, but admits that evidence of early four-Gospel collections is absent to date, cf. *The Collected writings of T.C. Skeat*, 79-87. The papyrus codex certainly allows for the publication of all four Gospels in one volume, but this was probably the result of its adoption, not the cause.

<sup>97</sup> In his 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> letters, we find John writing on papyrus, mentioning also the use of pens and ink (2John 12, 3John 13). Furthermore, the same length of the two letters has led to the suggestion that it was “determined by the practical consideration of the writing space on one piece of papyrus” (introduction to 2John, *New American Bible*, Iowa Falls, Iowa: World Bible publishers 1986, 1365). It is conceivable that these letters by John, the leader of the Church in Ephesus, are paving the way for the use of papyrus in codex form for the longer texts, and for collections of texts, marking the invention of the papyrus codex in the Church, c. 95-96 CE.

*the time passed over in silence by the first evangelists and the things which had been done by the Saviour at this time...*"<sup>98</sup>

John, in brief, is here given the supremely authoritative task of verifying the three existing Gospels and supplementing them with a fourth and final Gospel. As the other Gospels had already been written and distributed, the date must have been after 85-90 CE. Further precision is possible, however, due to the remark that John, whose position of authority implies that he should have seen and approved the text *before* it was distributed, had only recently been given the text for review. The most obvious explanation for this curious delay in seeking John's *imprimatur* is that he was away 'in exile' on Patmos at that time and had evidently just returned. The date, then, is in the autumn of 96 CE and the narrators are not only close to John, but are also actively involved in the production and distribution of the manuscripts. As members of John's 'school' of scribal copyists, they clearly wish to emphasize John's overwhelmingly positive reaction to the manuscript of the Gospels they had given him ("*he welcomed them*"), despite the fact that he was already familiar with the Gospels and had certainly read them individually on previous occasions. One dares to suggest that what John is 'welcoming' is a new presentation of these three Gospels, perhaps his first view of these writings in the papyrus codex form. If this passage does indeed refer to the first emergence of the papyrus codex, the year 96 CE would correspond well with Skeat's estimate of a date before 100 CE.

Finally this short passage of Eusebius indirectly affirms that John, who had just returned from Patmos and was about to write his Gospel, was acknowledged by those around him to be one of the original apostles and eyewitnesses of Christ's ministry, and for this reason

<sup>98</sup> Eusebius' *The History of the Church* III,24.7,11, from the translation by Charles Hill in 'What Papias Said About John (and Luke): A New Papian Fragment', *Journal of Theological Studies*, NS, Vol 49, Pt. 2, Oct 1998; 589. In this study, Hill argues convincingly that this passage (III,24.5-13) by Eusebius is based on a report from Papias' long lost, early 2<sup>nd</sup> century work, *Exposition of the Sayings of the Lord*, without acknowledgment of the source. Something very similar is recounted by Origen (*Hom. Lk.* 1, fr.9), who could have read it from the same source (i.e. Papias) as Eusebius. Although Richard Bauckham agrees that the verses quoted here are from a single source, he disputes that source is Papias, cf. *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 2017; 433-37.

he was asked to verify the three Gospels. On the same note, John himself confirmed he was present at the very start of that ministry by finding omissions in the accounts of its earliest stages, which he could supply in a fourth Gospel. In brief, this passage is further evidence for traditional view that this John was the original apostle, seer of the Book of Revelation, evangelist of the fourth Gospel, head of the church in Ephesus and Asia, and the highest ecclesiastical authority to approve the novel use of the papyrus codex for Church writings.<sup>99</sup>

Returning to the copying and distributing of John's manuscript of the Book of Revelation, in the way proposed above, further small corrections must have been made down the centuries by later copyists, without the help of the author or the original, but always mindful of the severe warning to those who add to or subtract from its words (Rev 22,18-19). More than anything, this warning has prevented major revisions to the text, allowing it to reach the present day more or less as it was when it left the hand of the author John. It is the New Testament book with the least number and variety of textual variants. The text remains essentially his own work.

On what happened after John's Revelation was received, with great anticipation, by the churches, one can only guess. Judging from the reaction of Dionysius of Alexandria, writing more than a century later, there may have been some disappointment. Like Dionysius, they would have been perplexed to receive his work in such an unattractive and obscure form. The language was unseemly and the apocalyptic style was not familiar. They would have found it difficult to read and their comprehension would only have been partial.<sup>100</sup> It was not appropriate for public readings. So, soon after, they may have sent representatives to Ephesus to ask the apostle to write a Gospel that could be read and understood in the assembly. The message would have reached John's scribal community after he had already acceded to their request "to record in his gospel the period which the earlier

<sup>99</sup> Thus infringing the ancient Jewish custom (and Halacha) of only using parchment rolls for Scriptural texts.

<sup>100</sup> Dionysius was no doubt reporting the truth when, around 250 CE, he wrote "Some of our predecessors rejected the book and pulled it entirely to pieces, criticizing it chapter by chapter, pronouncing it unintelligible and illogical and the title false. They say that it is not John's, and is not a revelation at all, since it is heavily veiled by a thick curtain of incomprehensibility", *apud* Eusebius, *The History of the Church* VII, 25.1; Penguin Classics, 1989; 240.

evangelists has passed over in silence and the things done during that period by the Saviour".<sup>101</sup> The original scope of his project was expanded and John was assigned the person with the best literary skills to help compose his memories and reflections into a culturally acceptable form, including his oral preaching and written vignettes. The result was the Fourth Gospel and then the First Letter.<sup>102</sup> The apostle John was still formally the author, but the literary fluency, vocabulary and syntax of the text are those of the redactor, who appears in the first person at the end of the Gospel (Jn 21,25). The final version of John's Gospel was not completed until after his death at the end of the first century.<sup>103</sup> Explained in this way, the differences between John's Gospel and his Revelation do not, by any means, contradict the traditional view of apostolic authorship.

### Summary and Conclusions

The early Church tradition was almost unanimous in identifying the apostle John, son of Zebedee, as the author of the Book of Revelation, as well as the Fourth Gospel, and the three Letters attributed to John. These five separate works appear to have been copied and distributed together from a very early date, early in the second century, and are therefore justly referred to as the 'Johannine corpus'. Apart from a few solitary opposing voices, this unanimity was maintained for at least 200 years after the book was written. In this period, the opposition focused mainly on the Book of Revelation and two opponents were documented with particular care by later historians: both criticized John's Book of Revelation because it had inspired

<sup>101</sup> Eusebius, *The History of the Church* III, 24.11; Penguin Classics, 1989, 87.

<sup>102</sup> This is not the place to consider the origin of the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> letters of John, which tradition rightly includes in the 'Johannine corpus'. Differences in style from other members of the corpus can also be explained as the work of a different amanuensis, at a different time. The use of an amanuensis for letter writing was very common in the first century, even by highly literate authors like Paul, cf. Chris Keith, "In My Own Hand": Grapho-Literacy and the Apostle Paul', *Biblica*, Vol 89 (2008); 39-58.

<sup>103</sup> There is indeed evidence, in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century writings of Clement and Irenaeus (some of which are recorded in the 4<sup>th</sup> century by Eusebius), that John the apostle wrote his three principal works in this order: Revelation, Gospel and then First Epistle, cf. Charles E. Hill, *The Johannine Corpus in the Early Church*, Oxford: OUP, 2004; 124.

unorthodox millennial movements (Gaius c.200 CE vs. Montanism; and Dionysius c.250 CE vs. the millennialism of Bishop Nepos of Arsinoë, Egypt) and both tried to attack it by refuting its apostolic authorship. However, the means of attack was different. The first tried to discredit the book by attributing it pseudonymously to a famous heretic called Cerinthus, an absurd claim that was promptly dismissed, and the second launched a critique on its unattractive Greek style, syntax and language that persuaded the Church historian Eusebius (c.325 CE), and many biblical scholars up to this day, that it could not have been written by an apostle, least of all by the same apostle John who wrote the Fourth Gospel and his first Letter in correct and elegant Greek.

After repeating the traditional evidence for apostolic authorship, derived from the New Testament and other early Christian sources, we examined closely the criticism of Dionysius. Far from serving as evidence against apostolic authorship, we found that his observations are entirely consistent with a text that was written by a leader of the Church, who was familiar with the churches of Asia Minor, but whose origins were in Galilee. His mother-tongue was Aramaic/Hebrew and he had later learnt Greek somewhat imperfectly. This conclusion not only fits very well with the life history of the apostle John, according to the tradition, but it also reverses the original criticism of Dionysius. The very same characteristics that he invoked to deny apostolic authorship are the same that help to confirm it. In contrast with the final version of his Gospel and letters, John seems to have refused to allow scribal corrections to the style and grammar of his Book of Revelation and so we can be sure that it was not written by a professional scribe. The linguistic errors serve as a mark of authenticity.

While Dionysius was appalled by the low level of Greek literacy in the text, modern objections tend to overlook its style and language as the mark of a first-century Galilean education. Instead, they move in the opposite direction and claim that it must have been written by an educated scribe, most probably from Jerusalem, because such a sophisticated literary work could never have been written by a person who was brought up, in those days, on the shores of the Sea of Galilee and employed as a fisherman. The rest of this essay is therefore aimed at showing how Galileans were well educated in their Scriptures and traditions, although this was orally acquired and did not, in the first

century, include formal instruction in writing. However, for an intelligent and motivated young disciple like the apostle John, there would have been plenty of opportunity in the next 60 years of his long life, first in Jerusalem and then in Ephesus, to acquire the writing skills displayed in the text of his Book of Revelation. So between the Scylla of ancient literary criticism (claiming the apostle was too well educated to have written it) and the Charybdis of modern socio-cultural analysis (claiming the apostle was not educated enough), we conclude that the traditional view of apostolic authorship is not only plausible, but also highly probable.

To those who would dismiss this reconstruction of John's life as 'pure fantasy', the best defence is to recall the way it not only fits, but also illuminates the facts that are known: the transformation of John's life in early adulthood, his long residence in Jerusalem, the Essene influence on all his writings (the Fourth Gospel, First Letter and above all in the Book of Revelation) and, according to reliable tradition, the final and most productive phase of his life as head of the Church in Ephesus. The portrait offered above hangs harmoniously in the frame of recorded facts about the apostle John. Can we say the same about the alternative—the legacy of Dionysius and Eusebius—, which disregards these facts and postulates another author, an incognito, for whom no unambiguous literary or historical record exists? William of Ockham's saying comes to mind when faced with a choice like this: "Entities are not to be multiplied without necessity" (*Non sunt multiplicanda entia sine necessitate*). With the outline of John's life presented above, there is no need to introduce hypothetical authors or make assumptions that are not consistent with known facts.

In the words of Isbon Beckwith "It cannot be too strongly emphasized that the question of the personality of the author is altogether subordinate to that of the canonicity of the book and its religious value".<sup>104</sup> Such thoughts seem to have been in the mind of Dionysius when he wrote that he "would never dare to reject the book, of which many good Christians have a very high opinion".<sup>105</sup> But if, like Dionysius himself, these many good Christians understood it only partially and esteemed it mainly because it was deemed apostolic, his criticism of the apostolic authority of the book was bound to have a

<sup>104</sup> Beckwith, *The Apocalypse of John*, 347.

<sup>105</sup> Eusebius, *The History of the Church* VII, 25.4; Penguin Classics, 1989; 240-41.

negative impact on its reception. For the discernment of a work presenting itself as a supernatural revelation of the prophetic Word of God, the moral character and fidelity of the author are of much greater importance than if it was any other kind of writing. The authority and importance of the Book of Revelation continue to be underestimated because of the overly-critical pen of Dionysius and its endorsement by Eusebius.<sup>106</sup> It is time to reject their superficial criticism and remove the negative impact persisting everywhere up to this day, but especially in the Church.

<sup>106</sup> The remarks of Charles Hill summarize well the combined detrimental effects of Dionysius and Eusebius on the acceptance of the Apocalypse: "Though Dionysius continued to treat the work as inspired and refused to lower its esteem in the eyes of the brethren (7.25.4), he effectively helped to loosen it from its place in a conceptual Johannine corpus and opened the door for its rejection by some. For Eusebius' strange equivocation on the book—it is either 'confessed' or it is spurious—is no doubt based upon the report and the researches of Dionysius. Eusebius gave no more credit to the Cerinthus hypothesis than did Dionysius. But now faced with Dionysius' display of stylistic differences between the Apocalypse and the other works attributed to the apostle, and with the same writer's proposal that another John lay buried in Ephesus, and beset by lingering doubts about the book's relation to chiliasm, Eusebius was unable to adjudicate in a definitive way the matters of authorship and canonicity. For Eusebius, if the Apocalypse was apostolic, it was canonical; if not apostolic, its place among the homologoumena was in jeopardy... and if it was not genuine it was a forgery.... Eusebius' *History of the Church* was very well read in antiquity", *The Johannine Corpus*, 462f.

## CHAPTER 3

### The Johannine Question Answered

#### Introduction

The “Johannine Question” is about the identity of the author, or authors, of the five New Testament writings comprising what has come to be called ‘the Johannine corpus’: the Book of Revelation, the Fourth Gospel, and the First, Second and Third Letters of John. Church tradition, from the earliest days, has maintained that the author of these five works was the apostle John, son of Zebedee, who migrated to Ephesus just before the first Jewish revolt (66-70 CE), directed the Church in Asia Minor and died there at an advanced age, around 98 CE. Although there is nothing improbable about this, and it has been accepted by most of the faithful for the last two millennia, questions have arisen at various periods and for different reasons. In the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries, the questions were mostly focused on the author of the Book of Revelation. The apostolic authorship of this book was rejected by some, but it nevertheless remained in the New Testament canon. Doubts lingered in the literature, however, and fueled a resurgence of questioning in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The same evidence that was initially used against the Book of Revelation was enhanced by new findings from old manuscripts, and now undermines the apostolic authorship of the entire Johannine corpus. Over the last century the debate has inspired many scholarly works, with several of them propounding authors other than the apostle John. The latest frontrunner in the quest for a non-apostolic author is the ‘elder John’,<sup>1</sup> a purely hypothetical figure, for whom there is no unambiguous

<sup>1</sup> Please note that the terminology varies in this article, but the ‘elder John’, ‘John the elder’, or ‘the elder’, with or without capitalized initial letter, all refer to the same figure. Elder and presbyter are translations of the same word in Greek and are therefore synonymous in this context.



evidence separating him from the apostle John. Nevertheless, he continues to be hailed by many scholars as the author of most, if not all, of the books previously attributed to the apostle John.

This is an extraordinary situation: some of the most highly esteemed, even venerated, books of the New Testament are now said to have been authored by 'John the elder', a person whose existence, apart from John the apostle, has never been confirmed or corroborated.<sup>2</sup> The present essay is an attempt to trace how we have arrived at this truly bizarre solution to the "Johannine Question", and to offer a resolution.

### The Early Questioners

In the previous chapter,<sup>3</sup> the two earliest attempts to discredit the apostolic authorship of the Book of Revelation were presented: firstly that of Gaius the Roman presbyter, who around 200 CE attributed the text to a despised heretic called Cerinthus, with support from a group of like-minded objectors, later named mockingly 'the Alogi' by Epiphanius, and secondly Bishop Dionysius of Alexandria, who examined the text around 250 CE and found it to be lacking the literary qualities he would expect of a work by an apostle. He therefore attributed it to another John, whose identity he did not know, but whose presence in Ephesus could be inferred from the existence of two tombs for John in that city.

Neither of these questioners of apostolic authorship would have reached a wider readership, up to the present day, had it not been for the Church historian Eusebius, who wrote about both Gaius and Dionysius in his *History of the Church* (324 CE), reproducing

<sup>2</sup> After his survey of the research, R. Alan Culpepper writes: "Most Johannine scholars would probably agree with the sentence of Robert Eisler that nowhere in the whole realm of history is there a more elusive ghost than "John the Elder." In fact, even the existence of John the Elder has been contested. D.A. Carson recently concluded: "it is far from certain that there was an 'elder John' independent of the apostle, and if there was, it is still less certain that he wrote anything. The ambiguity of the evidence, which makes disparate interpretations virtually inevitable, lends the whole issue of John the Elder a phantom quality", *John, the Son of Zebedee: The Life of a Legend*, Columbia, SC: Univ. of South Carolina Press, 1994; 298.

<sup>3</sup> Chapter 2: 'The Author of the Book of Revelation'.

Dionysius' literary criticism in full.<sup>4</sup> It appears that Gaius' opinions were rebuffed within a few years by another Roman presbyter called Hippolytus in a lost work called "*Heads (Chapters) against Gaius*".<sup>5</sup> In contrast, the criticism of Dionysius has endured down the centuries, thanks to its publication by Eusebius, whose *History of the Church* has been, and still is, very widely read and studied. Because of its persisting influence up to this day, there is still a need for the rebuttal of Dionysius' criticism in the form it has been given to us by Eusebius.<sup>6</sup>

In *The History of the Church*, Eusebius' own position is profoundly ambiguous. On the one hand he faithfully reports the tradition that John the apostle was the author of the Book of Revelation and the Fourth Gospel,<sup>7</sup> but on the other hand he gives wide publicity to Dionysius' criticism.<sup>8</sup> His ambiguity is clearly visible when he classifies the Book of Revelation both among the "recognized" apostolic works and among the "spurious",<sup>9</sup> remarking that opinions as to where it belonged were evenly divided. He appears to invite the readers to judge for themselves.<sup>10</sup> By giving the writings of Bishop Dionysius so much exposure in his *History*, Eusebius indirectly showed that he agreed with this criticism of the Book of Revelation. In fact, Eusebius takes it one step further by suggesting the tomb of the other John in Ephesus belonged to a person called 'the elder John', who was not an apostle, but supposedly lived in the same area as the apostle John, at around the same time. To this day, the existence of a non-apostolic 'elder John' has never been confirmed and the other tomb has been identified as the place where John the

<sup>4</sup> Eusebius, *History of the Church* III,28,1-2; VII,25; Eng trans G.A.Williamson, London: Penguin Classics, 1989.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Charles Hill, *The Johannine Corpus in the Early Church*, Oxford: OUP, 2004; 99.

<sup>6</sup> This was one of the main aims of chapter 2: 'The Author of the Book of Revelation'. It is evident that Dionysius was unaware that the apostles spoke Aramaic and that Greek was not their mother tongue, for he judges the Book of Revelation to be 'not the work of an apostle' precisely because of the incorrect Greek (cf. *History of the Church*, VII,25). What is astonishing is that his criticism has impacted scholarship for so long, because the literary characteristics that Dionysius rejects as 'non-apostolic' are actually good evidence for the author's Galilean origin and for the authenticity of his book.

<sup>7</sup> *History of the Church* III,18.1; III,20.11; III,23.1-6; IV,18.8; V,8.4-7; VI,25.9-10.

<sup>8</sup> *History of the Church* III,39.4-7; VII,25.

<sup>9</sup> *History of the Church* III,24.18; III, 25.2-4.

<sup>10</sup> *History of the Church* III,25.2,4.

apostle's body lay until a church could be built to house a more permanent tomb. Both tombs continued to be frequented by the faithful until the Christians were expelled from Turkey in the 1920's.<sup>11</sup>

Eusebius' proposal is based upon a novel interpretation of a passage from the prologue of a work in five volumes, long lost, written by Papias, Bishop of Hieropolis in Asia Minor, and dated to around 110-120 CE. In this passage, cited by Eusebius, Papias describes the sources and methods of his work, which he called *Exposition of the Sayings of the Lord*. The crucial part of this statement by Papias reads: "And whenever anyone came who had been a follower of the elders, I inquired about the words of the elders—what Andrew or Peter *said* (ἔειπεν), or Philip, or Thomas, or James, or John, or Matthew, or any other of the Lord's disciples, and whatever Aristion and the elder John, the Lord's disciples, *are saying*" (λέγουσιν).<sup>12</sup> If it is apt to call this passage 'the birthplace of the elder John',<sup>13</sup> understood as a non-apostolic individual separate from the apostle John, then it would be fair to say that Eusebius was the midwife who assisted at the birth.

In order to illustrate the double meaning of this famous passage from Papias' book, it helps to consider an analogous statement concerning the Beatles, who were musically active as a pop group around 50 years ago, more or less the same period of time separating Papias from the first group of apostles he names: "And whenever anyone came who was a fan of the Beatles, I listened to their recordings of what John and George, Paul and Ringo *played* and of what Pete Best and Sir Paul *are playing*." The four Beatles correspond to the twelve apostles, the recordings are the sayings of their immediate followers, and the fans are those who listen to, and share, the recordings. The main point here is that those who are familiar with the Beatles know that John and George have died and that Paul is still alive and making music (as of 2018). They also know that Paul was knighted and is now called Sir Paul.<sup>14</sup> They may not know or remember Pete Best, who played the drums before Ringo joined and is therefore regarded as a Beatle, but is not one of the famous four.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Culpepper, *John*, 147-50.

<sup>12</sup> *History of the Church*, III,39.4; our translation from the Greek text of Loeb Classical Library Series.

<sup>13</sup> A metaphor coined by B.W. Bacon, and quoted in Culpepper, *John*, 298.

<sup>14</sup> John Lennon was assassinated in December 1980 and George Harrison died of lung cancer in November 2001. Paul was knighted in 1997.

The analogy is particularly useful in showing how the meaning changes for those who do not know anything about the Beatles, or the present condition of their members. For these, it may appear that all the original four have died and that Sir Paul in the second group must therefore be different from the Paul in the first group. Returning to the original statement of Papias,<sup>15</sup> all we need to ask is:

a) whether Papias was assuming that his readers knew about the original disciples, and especially about the apostle John, who had since become an elderly Church leader with the dignified title of 'John the elder',

b) or whether Papias was really writing to inform readers centuries later, distant in time and place, who knew none of these things?

It is fairly certain that Papias was writing for his contemporaries, or near contemporaries, to whom he felt no need to explain that the first John was the same person as John the elder, and that this great figure was still alive at the time he first started to collect his material. To interpret Papias' statement otherwise is to take it out of its original context, lose sight of the author's intention and misinterpret the meaning, which is exactly what Eusebius did, driven by the desire to find a non-apostolic author with the name of John, to whom he could attribute the Book of Revelation.

In brief, the passage of Papias cited by Eusebius<sup>16</sup> is profoundly ambiguous: depending on one's connection with the local Church, it could either be telling us that John the apostle was still alive when Papias was collecting his material, at which time he was called the 'elder John', or that John the apostle and John the elder were two different disciples of Jesus. As Eusebius, writing 200 years after Papias, was the first to propose the second option, it is quite likely that the first option was widely accepted until then, since readers of Papias knew about the apostle John and had no doubt that he was indeed the same person as the 'elder John'. This would explain how Irenaeus could unwaveringly affirm that Papias was 'a hearer of John the

<sup>15</sup> *History of the Church* III,39.4.

<sup>16</sup> *History of the Church* III,39.4.

apostle', for he knew that the apostle and 'the elder John' were the same person, a point later denied by Eusebius.<sup>17</sup>

Eusebius had evidently been persuaded by Dionysius of Alexandria that John the apostle did not write the Book of Revelation and seized on this ambiguous passage in Papias to propose a separate, non-apostolic 'elder John' as the author. Eusebius' *History of the Church* was widely read in the East and so would have directly influenced the leaders of the Oriental Churches to reject the Book of Revelation for not being the work of the apostle John. It was subsequently excluded from the New Testament canon of the Eastern Church for many centuries, and it was not until Andrew, Bishop of Caesarea in Cappadocia, wrote his Commentary on the Apocalypse, in 611 CE, that a slow process of reacceptance began.

It is of particular significance, therefore, that in the Prologue of his commentary Andrew included Papias in a chain of Church Fathers (Gregory of Nazianzus, Cyril of Alexandria, Irenaeus, Methodius of Olympus and Hippolytus) who not only 'bear witness to the trustworthiness' of the Book of Revelation, but also affirm, in their own writings, that it was written by the apostle John. As Andrew shows familiarity with the work of Papias by quoting him in his commentary, it is fair to suppose he knew that Papias also attributed the Book of Revelation to the apostle John. The author of a comprehensive study of Andrew's work, Eugenia Constantinou, puts it like this: "Andrew would not have cited Papias as part of a string of witnesses to apostolic authorship of the Apocalypse if Papias had not ascribed it to the apostle John". And again "...because Andrew cites Papias as supporting Johannine authorship, through Andrew we have the earliest attestation of apostolic authorship of Revelation".<sup>18</sup>

By reasserting the apostolic authorship of the Book of Revelation in this way, and by reiterating it himself numerous times, Andrew helped to restore the book's apostolic reputation, reverse the damage caused by Eusebius and pave the way for its eventual return

<sup>17</sup> *History of the Church* III,39.1-7.

<sup>18</sup> *Andrew of Caesarea and the Apocalypse in the Ancient Church of the East: Studies and Translation* by Eugenia Constantinou, PhD thesis, Quebec: Université Laval, 2008 (available at [www.theses.ulaval.ca](http://www.theses.ulaval.ca)), which includes a complete English translation by the author. The first quotation is from p. 54 and the second from p. 243, both in Part 1. For the passages in the Commentary referred to above, see Part 2: Prologue, text 10, p.11 and ch 33, text 129, p.134.

into the canon of the Eastern Churches.<sup>19</sup> Although Eusebius' invention of a non-apostolic 'elder John' should have disappeared from history at this point, it nevertheless persisted due to its publication in his *History of the Church*, only to be picked up again, in the modern period, by those who, like Eusebius, were looking for a weapon to discredit the Book of Revelation.

In the Western Church, Eusebius' book was not so widely read, perhaps because of his support of the heretical Arian position prior to the Ecumenical Council of Nicaea, and so the apostolic authorship of the Book of Revelation was undisputed in the West until the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, when the scholars in the universities started asking 'critical' questions.

### Alleged Martyrdom of Apostle John

However, long before modern scholars started critically investigating the authorship of the collection of books attributed by Church tradition to the apostle John, there were some minor developments in the Eastern Church which came to light in manuscripts discovered in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and had an immediate effect on questions of authorship. It should be said that, at the time they were written, these developments do not seem to be related, in any way, to claims or counterclaims concerning the authorship of the Book of Revelation or of the other writings of the Johannine corpus.

The first of these developments was the establishment of a date in the liturgical calendar, December 27<sup>th</sup>, to celebrate the "martyrdom of the apostles John and James at Jerusalem", appearing first in the Syrian martyrology of Edessa in 411 CE, but ultimately deriving from a Greek martyrology composed at the Byzantine city of Nicomedia in about 360 CE, more than 300 years after the supposed event.<sup>20</sup> The factors leading to the adoption of this commemoration are not known, but it is likely to be a conjecture arising out of Jesus' response to the Zebedee brothers' request to sit beside him in his Kingdom: "The cup that I drink, you will drink, and with the baptism with which I am

<sup>19</sup> See chapter 7 ('Posterity and Contribution of Andrew of Caesarea') in Part 1 of Constantinou's thesis on *Andrew of Caesarea* (pp. 234-246) in order to grasp the extreme slowness of this process and the huge part played by Andrew's inspired Commentary on Revelation.

<sup>20</sup> Culpepper, *John*, 172.

baptized, you will be baptized; but to sit at my right or at my left is not mine to give, but is for those for whom it is prepared" (Mk 10,39; cf. Mt 20,23). Interpreted as a prophecy regarding the fate of the two brothers, James and John, there would have been a strong presumption of fulfilment (despite Jn 21,22-23), although tradition has recorded only the martyrdom of James, by King Agrippa, in Jerusalem in the year 42 CE (Acts 12,2). Regarding the apostle John, the tradition represented by Eusebius is unanimous in affirming that he died in old age, at Ephesus, soon after the start of Trajan's reign in 98 CE.<sup>21</sup> From the Syrian martyrology, the commemoration eventually spread to a few other areas, but not to all, and certainly not to Jerusalem, where the absence of such a memorial for the apostle John, up to this day, is strong evidence against its veracity.

The other 'development' was a reference to the 2<sup>nd</sup> book of the 5 volume work by Papias, *Exposition of the Sayings of the Lord*, in a 36 volume work called *Christian History* dated to 434-39 CE and written by Philip of Side, a deacon ordained by John Chrysostom. The reference survives in an excerpt of a 7<sup>th</sup> century collection preserved in a single 14<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> century manuscript called *Codex Baroccianus* 142 (also known as the 'De Boor fragment'). After mentioning Papias' list of sources including 'another John' called the elder, and the view erroneously 'held by some' that this John was the author of the Book of Revelation, the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> letters of John, the excerpt goes on to assert that "Papias says in his second book that John the Evangelist and his brother were slain by the Jews".<sup>22</sup>

It is echoed in the 9<sup>th</sup> century *Chronicle* by George the Sinner, but only in one out of 26 surviving manuscripts dated to the 11<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> century (*Codex Coislinianus* III.134; all the rest record the peaceful death of John). There it is written that "John has been deemed worthy of martyrdom. For Papias, the Bishop of Hieropolis, having been an eyewitness of him (or of it?), says in the second book of his 'Dominical Oracles,' that he was killed by Jews, having evidently fulfilled with his brother the prediction of Christ concerning them".<sup>23</sup> The author goes on to falsely claim that this report was corroborated by Origen in his

<sup>21</sup> *History of the Church* III,1.1; III,23.1-4.

<sup>22</sup> Quoted from Culpepper, *John*, 171.

<sup>23</sup> Again quoted from Culpepper, *John*, 171.

*Commentary on Matthew*,<sup>24</sup> raising justified doubts about the accuracy of his reference to Papias, which, in its emphasis on the role of Jews, appears to depend entirely on the earlier work by Philip of Side.

Philip of Side's reputation for accuracy must also be doubted by the fact that the apostle James, who was indeed martyred in 42 CE, was not martyred by the Jews, but by King Agrippa, to 'please the Jews' (Acts 12,2). As the reference of Philip of Side is completely lacking in historical detail (date, place, manner of martyrdom) and its main emphasis is upon the agency of the Jews, it looks like an attempt to incriminate and possibly incite against the Jews. As a close associate of John Chrysostom, Philip of Side may also have cultivated a strong anti-Jewish animus.<sup>25</sup> Finally, if Papias had indeed written about the martyrdom of the apostle John in his second book, it would certainly have been picked up by other writers, such as Origen, who knows nothing of it,<sup>26</sup> or Eusebius, who writes nothing about it.<sup>27</sup> The suggestion that Eusebius would have deliberately suppressed Papias' reference to John's martyrdom, "in order to support the apostolic

<sup>24</sup> Culpepper explains: "concerning Matthew 20:23, Origen says only that Herod killed James and that John was sent into exile by the emperor" *John*, 171.

<sup>25</sup> James Parkes gives a vivid summary of a series of sermons preached by John Chrysostom, in Antioch, in response to the close Jewish-Christian relations prevailing there. The intention seems to be to implant an anti-Semitic attitude among Christians and sow hatred between the two communities: "In eight sermons which he delivered in 387 he speaks with a bitterness and lack of restraint unusual even in that place and century... In these discourses there is no sneer too mean, no gibe too bitter for him to fling at the Jewish people. No text is too remote to be able to be twisted to their confusion, no argument is too casuistical, no blasphemy too startling for him to employ; and most astonishing of all, at the end he turns to the Christians, and in words full of sympathy and toleration he urges them not to be too hard on those who have erred in following Jewish practices or in visiting Jewish synagogues. Dealing with the Christians, no text which urges forgiveness is forgotten: dealing with the Jews only one verse of the New Testament is omitted: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." The only explanation of his bitterness contained in the sermons themselves is the too close fellowship between Jews and Christians in Antioch.... When it is clear that God hates them, it is the duty of Christians to hate them too..." *The Conflict of the Church and the Synagogue: A Study in the Origins of Antisemitism*, New York: Atheneum, 1969; 163-66. As a deacon and disciple of Chrysostom, Philip of Side may easily have been recruited into his campaign of inciting Christians against Jews.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. note 24 above.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. note 21 above.



authorship of the Johannine corpus",<sup>28</sup> is groundless, firstly because it would have been unnecessary, as Eusebius could have claimed John wrote his corpus prior to his alleged martyrdom, and secondly because Papias' work was still circulating at that time, so Eusebius could not have hidden the report.<sup>29</sup> It seems fair to conclude that the reference to Papias in the excerpt by Philip of Side is either fabricated or garbled beyond recognition. It could have been based on a misunderstanding of 'witness' as a legal term, whose meaning evolved after the first century to denote someone who died witnessing, 'a martyr'. Perhaps, in his 2<sup>nd</sup> book, Papias spoke of John 'giving witness' to the Jews in a general way, but not specifically through the violent death of martyrdom ('red martyrdom'). The later legend about the apostle surviving immersion in boiling oil, in Rome, certainly supports the tradition that he was spared a violent death and died in old age.<sup>30</sup>

### The Later Questioners

Apart from the lasting doubts sown by Dionysius and Eusebius in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, there were no other memorable challenges to the apostolic authority of the Book of Revelation, until the awakening of critical scholarship in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Then, not only the Book of Revelation, but the entire Johannine corpus and indeed all the Bible, came under critical scrutiny by university scholars. The Tübingen school in Germany led this field of research from the mid-18<sup>th</sup> to the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, when it was joined by scholars in the USA and Britain.

This was a time when manuscripts, writings and historical documents from past ages were being reopened, examined and translated from foreign languages, archaeological expeditions were yielding new finds and soon traditional understandings were inadequate to explain the new discoveries. All the old questions, and a host of new ones, were arising from the more complex and detailed picture of antiquity that was emerging. The Fourth Gospel, in particular, now became the focus of inquiry: its differences from the

<sup>28</sup> Culpepper, *John*, 305; Martin Hengel, *The Johannine Question*, London, UK: SCM Press, 1989; 21.

<sup>29</sup> Culpepper, *John*, 155.

<sup>30</sup> From an extract of Tertullian's *On Prescription Against Heretics*, 36, in Culpepper, *John*, 140.

Synoptic Gospels, its unhistorical depiction of Christ, its purpose, dating and authorship all came up for reconsideration. To a number of renowned scholars, the Fourth Gospel's reception history suggested a delay in acceptance by the mainstream churches because of its early embrace by gnostic thinkers of the Valentinian school—an academic *idee fixe* which Charles Hill named the 'Orthodox Johannophobia Paradigm' before uprooting it completely in his comprehensive work *The Johannine Corpus in the Early Church*.<sup>31</sup> While there has been a constant flow of devotional books upholding and updating the traditional position affirming apostolic authorship, the progress of historical critical research has never been impressed by their relatively narrow and subjective reconstructions. The academic search for the historical John has pressed on, in parallel with the search for the historical Jesus and the great expansion of knowledge from contemporary archaeological, historical and literary sources.

### Martin Hengel and the Johannine Question

By the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it seemed that no one could bring all the diverging strands of research together into a coherent synthesis. In order to explain the enigmatic character of the writings in the Johannine corpus, leading scholars had proposed theories with a multiplicity of sources, authors, redactors, disciples and a school, raising even more questions than they could answer. But then, in 1989, Martin Hengel reversed the trend in a landmark study that greatly reduced the number of variables and focused on a single question he called *The Johannine Question*, about which he remarks: "Of course this remains hypothetical (like all attempts to solve the Johannine question in the last 150 years): the attempt to assign to the Johannine corpus one particular historical location—already well attested in the early church—and one towering theologian and founder of a school as its author. However, I think that after a century of critical attempts at deconstruction such a hypothesis (which is not new at all) has more to be said for it than against it".<sup>32</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Charles Hill, *The Johannine Corpus in the Early Church*, 465-75.

<sup>32</sup> Martin Hengel, *The Johannine Question*, Eng. Trans John Bowden, London/Philadelphia: SCM Press/Trinity Press International, 1989; 108. This study was justly hailed as "a treasury of scholarship on the early references to John and the

The single most important question identified by Hengel is indeed the question of authorship, which arises directly from the 'crucial question' of why John's identity was hidden in the first place.<sup>33</sup> Culpepper summarizes his conclusions concisely: "Hengel's thesis in short is that the Gospel and the Epistles of John (and probably an early version of the Apocalypse) were composed by one 'towering theologian, and founder and head of the Johannine school.' This influential teacher of Asia Minor, however, was not the apostle but a disciple called John the Elder."<sup>34</sup>

1. This prompts the first criticism of Hengel's thesis. Apart from his description of John the Elder as a priestly aristocrat born, bred and firmly rooted in Jerusalem, who fraternized with the upper class and ignored the poor, everything he says about this figure could very well describe the later life of John the apostle, who was based in Jerusalem from around 33-63 CE and then in Ephesus until his death in 98 CE.<sup>35</sup> Even Hengel's estimate of the elder's dates of birth (15 CE) and death (100 CE) would match those proposed for John the apostle.<sup>36</sup> This close resemblance could explain Hengel's frequent interjections deterring readers from identifying his John the elder with John the apostle: "We know virtually nothing specific about his personal prehistory";<sup>37</sup> "this Gospel cannot come from a Galilean fisherman";<sup>38</sup> "This special and deliberate stress on the southern province and the capital is one of the reasons which make it extremely improbable that

Johannine writings. It calls us back to the substantial scholarship of the Harnack, Lightfoot, Schlatter, Zahn and others who had a high respect of the historical value of the second-century patristic writers. Hengel forged a challenging thesis as a reasonable explanation of the riddles posed by the five Johannine writings, their relationships with synoptic Gospels, their setting in the Johannine school, and the references in the second century to John the Elder, the apostle John, and the Johannine corpus. The scope and coherence of the thesis add to its strength", Culpepper, *John*, 307.

<sup>33</sup> *Johannine Question*, 3.

<sup>34</sup> Culpepper, *John*, 305.

<sup>35</sup> See especially *Johannine Question*, 109-135.

<sup>36</sup> *Johannine Question*, 133. In the previous chapter, 'The Author of the Book of Revelation' (note 8), my own estimate of the apostle John's dates was 12-98 CE.

<sup>37</sup> *Johannine Question*, 123.

<sup>38</sup> *Johannine Question*, 130.

the Gospel was written or even prompted by a Galilean disciple”;<sup>39</sup> “We may recall the old tradition that the second son of Zebedee, John, was also ‘killed by the Jews’”;<sup>40</sup> not to mention all the references to Hengel’s anti-apostolic arguments elsewhere in his book.<sup>41</sup>

Hengel’s anti-apostolic zeal is indeed necessary in order to impose his non-apostolic John the elder in exactly the same place, and at exactly the same time, as tradition had determined for the apostle John. His zeal far exceeds the combined efforts of Eusebius and Dionysius against the apostolic authorship of the Book of Revelation, for here the target has grown to the entire Johannine corpus and claims support from the 5<sup>th</sup> century Syrian martyrology (411 CE) and Philip of Side’s vague reference to a passage claiming to be by Papias (439 CE), about the killing of John by the Jews (see above). In his need to “kill off” the apostle and avoid having the two near-identical Johns residing in Asia Minor at the same time, Hengel assumes the apostle John was slain after his brother James,<sup>42</sup> but before the appearance of John the elder in Asia Minor,<sup>43</sup> which is to say between 42 and 62 CE. This is indeed a period in which the apostle John is mentioned only once in the New Testament: on a visit to Jerusalem in 47 CE, Paul met the three leaders of the mother Church, including John, and calls them the ‘ones seeming to be pillars’ (Gal 2,9). It is hugely improbable for John, in this prominent leadership position, to be martyred between 47-62 CE without any news of the event reaching the rest of the world before the year 439 CE, and then only in the form of a vague reference by a single church historian citing an uncorroborated 2<sup>nd</sup> century source.<sup>44</sup> The silence in the historical records at this time does not mean that John was dead, or that the historian Eusebius was

<sup>39</sup> *Johannine Question*, 124; “the southern province and the capital” refer to Judaea and Jerusalem.

<sup>40</sup> *Johannine Question*, 115.

<sup>41</sup> *Johannine Question*, 21-23 and 158 note 121.

<sup>42</sup> *Johannine Question*, 159, note 121h.

<sup>43</sup> *Johannine Question*, 134.

<sup>44</sup> Culpepper concurs: “On the other hand, the thesis, while a plausible and reasonable construction of the evidence, is unconvincing at key points. The linchpin of the argument—the identification of the Elder John (from the single reference in Papias) with the elder of 2 John 1 and 3 John 1—will not bear the weight of the argument that is built on it. For many, the evidence for the early martyrdom of John the son of Zebedee remains problematic”, *John*, 307.

deliberately suppressing the record of his martyrdom,<sup>45</sup> but that he was quietly preparing for the next phase of his life as leader of the Church in Asia Minor, where he would be known as John the elder.

2. This takes us to the next general criticism of Hengel's thesis. As it is dependent upon the same interpretation of the ambiguous Papias fragment that Eusebius first proposed—the interpretation which 'gave birth' to the figure of a non-apostolic 'elder John'<sup>46</sup>—Hengel's thesis lends itself to the same criticism. This is not the only interpretation possible, as explained above, and seems to have been ignored by most churchmen both before and after Eusebius. To this day the existence of a non-apostolic 'elder John', separate from the apostle John, has never been corroborated. It is a spurious interpretation of the Papias' fragment, invented by Eusebius with the tendentious aim of removing the apostle John as author of the Book of Revelation. Furthermore, the interpretation relies heavily on the distinction between John *without* a title, but listed among other known apostles, and John *with* the title 'elder'. However, it is well known that the apostle John received the title 'elder' when he was one of the Church leaders in Jerusalem, whom Paul calls "pillars" (Gal 2,9), but in Acts are called "apostles and elders" (Acts 15,2.4.6.22.23; 16,4) or just "the elders" (Acts 11,30; 21,18). So it would appear that John was called an apostle in his younger days and an elder in later life, all the time remaining a disciple of the Lord. Nevertheless, Hengel is 'title sensitive' and often makes deductions based on whether John is, or is not, called an apostle.<sup>47</sup> He seems to be influenced by an anachronistic tendency to interpret first-century usage of the terms 'apostle' and 'elder' from a later perspective, when 'elder' had become the title of a particular office and rank within the Church hierarchy.

In the first century, however, there was no such distinction between 'elders' and 'apostles', as shown by Alastair Campbell in his study on 'The Elders of the Jerusalem Church': "The elders' did refer

<sup>45</sup> As suggested by Hengel, *Johannine Question*, 21; it was debunked above in 'Alleged Martyrdom of Apostle John'. Also detected and challenged by Culpepper, *John*, 305 and 307: "Why is it more credible that Eusebius suppressed the evidence of the early martyrdom of John the son of Zebedee than that Irenaeus shortened the chain of tradition leading back to John?"

<sup>46</sup> *History of the Church* III.39.3-4.

<sup>47</sup> *Johannine Question*, 4, 7, 8, 9, 12, 15, 126.

to those who succeeded members of the original Twelve in the leadership of the Jerusalem church as they died or departed to other places, but the title did not exclude members of the Twelve, since it was never the title of an office separate from that of an apostle. *Some of the elders belonged to the original Twelve, others were replacements.* The term 'elder' connoted dignity and authority; it did not denote someone who had not been an original member. Quite the reverse! There were no more worthy bearers of the title 'elder' than those who had been there from the beginning".<sup>48</sup>

So according to first-century usage, 'the elder' was an optimal title for the aging apostle John, son of Zebedee. In fact, it is conceivable that he strongly rejected the title 'apostle', as his writings, and the writings of his followers in Asia Minor, mostly avoid that term and use 'disciple' instead.<sup>49</sup> The reasons for this are not wholly clear, but there were many 'false apostles' in Asia at the end of the first century, who must have brought this designation into disrepute (cf. Rev 2,2; 2Cor 11,5.13; *Didache* 11). A more compelling reason for the disappearance of the term 'apostle' may have been the inescapable connection between the twelve apostles of Christ, who were said to symbolize the rulers of a restored Israel, and the resurgence of hopes for Jewish national restoration at the end of the first century, leading up to the catastrophic Bar Kochba revolt (132-135 CE). This would have caused a serious clash of loyalties among the many Jewish Christians, confusing their faith in Christ and his apostles with Jewish aspirations

<sup>48</sup> R. Alastair Campbell, 'The Elders of the Jerusalem Church', *Journal of Theological Studies*, NS, Vol 44 (1993), 519; the italics are mine. The study continues: "Support for this can be found in the way a connection between apostles and elders surfaces persistently in Christian writings both in and beyond the New Testament. Thus the writer of 1 Peter has the apostle in whose name he writes style himself 'fellow elder' (1 Peter 5:1). The author of 2 and 3 John, while doubtless claiming apostolic authority, styles himself 'The Elder' (2 John 1). Papias uses the term 'elder' either of the apostles themselves (as many think) or of their immediate disciples, but in any case not of a church office (Eus HE 3,39.4). Ignatius, who finds the bishop and deacons to be types of the Father and of Christ, consistently sees the elders as types of the apostles (Ign. Magn. 6.1, Trall. 3.1, etc). Only in the perspective of a later generation did the terms 'elder' and 'apostle' become mutually exclusive terms of rank within a hierarchy."

<sup>49</sup> "It seems that the Fourth Gospel, without offering reasons, studiously avoids using the title apostle, while presuming the concept and terminology of sending", Betz, Hans Dieter, 'Apostle', *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Ed. D.N. Freedman, 6 vols., New York: Doubleday, 1992; vol 1, 311.

for national restoration. It may indeed have caused many to return to the Synagogue, in the false hope that the Lord was going to return soon, with his twelve apostles, to rule over a restored nation of Israel.<sup>50</sup> So for these reasons, and possibly others, the apostle John forbade the use of the title 'apostle', starting with himself, and replaced it with 'disciple' and 'elder'.

3. The third and final criticism of Hengel's thesis concerns his identification of the 'beloved disciple', who is also the author of the Gospel (Jn 21,20-24), with a priestly aristocratic, but non-apostolic, disciple called 'elder John' from Jerusalem. Hengel claims that the apostle John's past life as Galilean fisherman and Jerusalem Church leader disqualifies him from being the beloved disciple and author, but the reasoning is carelessly outsourced in the first part and is a *non sequitur* in the second: "There are too many historical reasons against supposing that the Gospel was composed by John the son of Zebedee, which was the predominant view from the middle of the second century on. They have already been given: this Gospel cannot come from a Galilean fisherman and is also hard to reconcile with the significance that John had for a long time in the Jerusalem community as one of the three pillars (Gal 2,9)".<sup>51</sup> For the 'many historical reasons', Hengel refers the reader to an article by a scholar writing in 1962 as if he were the spokesmen for the pioneer critical scholars of the 20's, 30's and 40's, for whom "John, the Son of Zebedee, had nothing at all to do with the writing of this gospel".<sup>52</sup> It is an

<sup>50</sup> This is precisely the dilemma addressed by the prophecy in the Book of Revelation, which essentially repeats and expands Paul's warning that the 'Son of Perdition' (the Beast from the Sea, Rev 13) must come first (2Thess 2,1-12), while emphasizing that the rule of Christ with his saints is a spiritual reign (Rev 20,4-6).

<sup>51</sup> *Johannine Question*, 130.

<sup>52</sup> Pierson Parker, 'John the Son of Zebedee and the Fourth Gospel', *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 81, 1962; 35-43. Until the last paragraph of his tract, Parker takes no account of the fact that John 1) writes in old age and about 65 years after the events, 2) writes to supplement, not to replace, the other 3 gospels which he has read and verified (cf. Eusebius, *History of the Church* III.24,7), 3) has lost his brother James in circumstances he does not wish to recall, 4) admits that he could write much more (Jn 20,30-31; 21,25). Only in the last paragraph does Parker seem to understand that there are diachronic developments and nuances to consider, but not for long, for he quickly returns to his synchronic black and white version: "For John the son of Zebedee to have written this book, the personality

uncompromising and polemical tract, which no doubt explains Hengel's own dogmatic stance, but does little else.<sup>53</sup> For the rest, one wonders why the Gospel cannot come from a Galilean fisherman, if, at the end of this Gospel, it is described how the author/beloved disciple willingly joins an all-night fishing expedition on Lake Tiberias with Peter and five other disciples (Jn 21,1-14). This is certainly not what a priestly aristocrat from Jerusalem would do, but it is entirely consistent with the identification of the author/beloved disciple with the apostle John, former Galilean fisherman and fishing partner of Peter and Andrew.<sup>54</sup>

Hengel's identification of the 'two other disciples' at the end of the list of seven (Jn 21,2) in the same narrative, as Aristion and 'the elder John',<sup>55</sup> is artificial and gratuitous. The connection between the two anonymous disciples in this episode from 33 CE and the two longest surviving disciples known to Papias 65 years later, is very tenuous to say the least. Of course, it allows Hengel to identify his non-apostolic 'elder John' with the beloved disciple, but only at the cost of

which he brought before Jesus would have had to be not transformed, but blotted out". This is polemics, not scholarship. It should have had no part in Hengel's reasoning.

<sup>53</sup> On page 158, note 121, of *Johannine Question*, Hengel provides a list of 8 references to ancient documents that allude to a martyrdom suffered by the apostle John. These either include or relate to the three documents discussed above, in the section: Alleged Martyrdom of Apostle John. From this evidence, Hengel concludes that the report by Papias ("that John the evangelist and his brother James were slain by the Jews") has "a certain plausibility" and that later church tradition suppressed this report in order to assert the apostolicity of John of Ephesus. In response: firstly the report refers to 'John the evangelist', implying that he had already written the Gospel before being slain, and secondly there is no reason why the Church should suppress this report in order to assert that John was an apostle: he could easily be both an apostle and a martyr. However, for the Church, there was no suppression and no martyrdom, as the prophecy of Jn 21,22-23 superseded that of Mk 10,39/Mt 20,23 (especially in connection with Hengel's note 121e, page 158).

<sup>54</sup> In response to Hengel's "this Gospel cannot come from a Galilean fisherman" (*Johannine Question*, 130), it must be said that the fishing expedition in Jn 21,1-14 confirms that the author/beloved disciple was indeed a Galilean fisherman, and that it is therefore far more plausible for a Galilean fisherman to write a Gospel than it is for a priestly aristocratic Jerusalemite to embark on an all-night fishing expedition in Galilee.

<sup>55</sup> Taken from the now famous list of sources recorded by Papias and cited by Eusebius in his *History of the Church*, III.39,3-4.



setting up the improbable, and somewhat comical, scene of a priestly aristocrat disciple from Jerusalem embarking for an all-night fishing expedition on Lake Tiberias. Comparison of the list of disciples in John 21,2, with the lists in the seven other sources tabulated by Hengel to prove his point, actually show that Philip and Andrew are the most likely candidates for the 'two other disciples' in John 21,2, since they are mentioned in all the lists except the list in John 21, although in one of them only Philip is mentioned, but not Andrew.<sup>56</sup>

However, identifying the 'two other disciples' (Jn 21,2) tenuously with the non-apostolic disciples Aristion and 'elder John' allows Hengel to construct his answer to the 'crucial question' of why the identity of the beloved disciple is veiled. In brief, that is the way the editors wanted it: "This vagueness is deliberate".<sup>57</sup> "In the Fourth Gospel the identity of the mysterious beloved disciple is certainly veiled, and the editor(s) uncover(s) the author's incognito only by hints. Did they want to hide his identity because the author did not come from the acknowledged group of twelve, and because about 100 his relationship to Jesus as 'beloved disciple' was anything but acknowledged everywhere? This crucial question will accompany us till the end of the investigation".<sup>58</sup> At the end of the investigation Hengel does indeed present his answer to the 'crucial question'.<sup>59</sup>

The answer he gives is that it is a "guessing game" designed to make it appear that the beloved disciple is John the apostle, although he is really the non-apostolic 'elder John'.<sup>60</sup> It is a cunning way for the editors of the Fourth Gospel "to establish their Gospel as an 'apostolic one'". In the list of John 21,2, continues Hengel, the beloved disciple "could be one of the sons of Zebedee, and indeed because of the title of the Gospel could be John the apostle of the Synoptic Gospels—but need not be, for there are some features which tell against this; he could just as well be one of the two anonymous disciples, indeed it might be more likely. As we have a guessing game at the beginning of

<sup>56</sup> *Johannine Question*, 18: the lists of the apostles are from Papias, John 1, John 21, Philip of Side, Mark 3, Acts 1, *Epistula Apostolorum*, and *Apostolic Constitutions*. Philip and Andrew are mentioned in all the lists except the list in John 21, although in the list of Philip of Side, only Philip is mentioned, not Andrew.

<sup>57</sup> *Johannine Question*, 128.

<sup>58</sup> *Johannine Question*, 3.

<sup>59</sup> *Johannine Question*, 128-132.

<sup>60</sup> A new category: "Homonymous Pseudonymity"?

the Gospel with the unknown disciple of John the Baptist and colleague of Andrew, so at the end we have another in 21.1,7,20ff with the beloved disciple and his identification. The editors—like the author—want the riddle to remain unsolved, the issue to be left open. So they take the reader some way towards the sons of Zebedee but refuse, indeed prevent, a truly unequivocal identification. This feature too, is one of the deliberate contradictions in the Gospels. The redactors could truly have made things easier for themselves”.<sup>61</sup>

Instead of stopping at this point and asking why the editors may have wanted the identity of the beloved disciple and author to remain veiled and enigmatic, in view of the situation prevailing in Ephesus at the time, Hengel continues on the guessing game theme: “the editors did not want simply to identify one specific individual—a certain John—as the true disciple. He was meant to be and remain ‘ambivalent’.”<sup>62</sup> According to Hengel, the editors deliberately wanted to superimpose the personalities of John the apostle and the non-apostolic ‘elder John’ into the one beloved disciple, presented as the ‘ideal disciple’ of Jesus. In this way they wanted to ‘immortalize’ the two persons in the one beloved disciple, and more practically, they wanted to pass off the work of the non-apostolic ‘elder John’ as ‘apostolic’. In his proposal for an ‘editorial merging’ of the two Johns, Hengel actually comes within a hairsbreadth of identifying them as the same person. The only thing preventing this union is Hengel’s rigid, one could say Pharisaic, refusal to accept that a Galilean fisherman could become an evangelist: “this Gospel cannot come from a Galilean fisherman”.<sup>63</sup> Nevertheless, the differences dissolve and the union is restored when we reconsider the enigmatic “Johannine Question” against the contemporary situation of the Church, as it is represented in the first three chapters of the Book of Revelation.

<sup>61</sup> *Johannine Question*, 128.

<sup>62</sup> *Johannine Question*, 128-9.

<sup>63</sup> *Johannine Question*, 130. One is reminded of John Chrysostom’s *Homilies on the Gospel of John*, where he exalted the power of Christ by describing first John’s humble origins: “For when a barbarian and an untaught person utters things which no man on earth ever knew, and does not only utter (...) but besides this, affords another and a stronger proof that what he says is divinely inspired, namely the convincing all his hearers through all time; who will not wonder at the power that dwells in him?” Culpepper, *John*, 159-60.

## Resolution of the Johannine Question

According to early tradition, the Book of Revelation and the Fourth Gospel were written and edited around the same time, first the Revelation (95-97 CE) and then, after John's return from Patmos at the end of 96 CE, the Gospel (97-99 CE). At the start of this period, the Book of Revelation describes the situation in Ephesus and other cities of Asia Minor as openly hostile to followers of Christ. John introduces himself as a companion in the affliction, kingdom and endurance in Jesus (Rev 1,9) and reports that he had been banished as a punishment for his work of witnessing Jesus and the Word of God (Rev 1,9). Antipas had been martyred in Pergamon (2,13) and several Christian prisoners awaited execution in Smyrna (2,10). The hostility to Christianity was pervasive and came from all quarters, from the Roman administration who regarded it as "an illegal association", from the more pious pagans who saw it as an ungodly threat and from the Jews who despised it as a religious rival. *Under these conditions, the most obvious explanation for concealing the author's identity in the Fourth Gospel was to protect the apostle John from further persecution.* The editors did not want to risk having John brought before the Roman authorities again by allowing him to be identified, by one of the ubiquitous spies and informers, as the author of the literature of this new and not-yet-legal community. And so they decided to 'encode' the connection between the apostle and his Gospel, in order to keep his identity secret to those on the outside. The faithful, those on the inside, could easily have been informed, by word of mouth, that 'the one whom Jesus loves' was a code for John, in Hebrew Yochanan, whose meaning is very similar: 'the one whom God favours'.

In Chapter 21 the editors are more forthcoming, because this chapter makes most sense if it was written after John had died in 98 CE. For those on the inside, the narratives in this chapter tell us that the beloved disciple was the author (Jn 21,20-24), that he was a Galilean fisherman and companion of Peter (21,1-14) and that, although he had died, he will remain until the second coming (21,15-19) to accomplish the prophetic mission described in his Book of Revelation (Rev 10,11-11,2). With these three short passages the faithful would have grasped his identity fully and without ambiguity, but for those on the outside it remained an enigma.

So one might ask why, even after the disciple's death, the editors were still not completely transparent, but left the enigma of the author's identity tantalizingly uncertain for those who were not familiar with the apostle's life and mission. Following the same line of reasoning, the editors did not divulge more details about the author in order to prevent violence to his tomb, where his body had been laid to rest. The same need for precaution may have prompted the anonymity surrounding the identity of the 'two other disciples' (Jn 21,2), whom we identified above as the apostles Philip and Andrew. If Eusebius, Clement and Polycrates are correct, Philip the apostle was buried at Hieropolis, not far from Ephesus, although others maintain that this must have been tomb of Philip the evangelist.<sup>64</sup> Seen against the background of hostility and persecution, the enigma around the identity of the author is understandable, both in his life and after his death.

Having reframed the "Johannine Question" in this way, not as a guessing game or as a literary device to create the illusion of apostolicity, but rather as an expedient to protect the beloved disciple and his earthly remains from violence and damage, it is necessary to admit that there is actually no ambiguity about his identity.<sup>65</sup> There were just those on the inside who knew and those on the outside who did not know. To explain the mystery of this enigma, there is no need to invoke another author. To postulate another disciple is to miss the

<sup>64</sup> *History of the Church* III, 31.3-4; the argument holds whether it was the tomb of the apostle or the evangelist, or both. Either way, it was a tomb that was venerated by pilgrims. Interestingly, the reports on the excavation of Philip's tomb in Hieropolis, by Francesco D'Andria, also refers to this tomb as the tomb of the Philip the apostle; 'Philip's Tomb Discovered—But not where expected', *Biblical Archaeological Review*, Jan/Feb 2012. Is it possible that Philip, the Greek-speaking apostle from Bethsaida (Jn 12,20-22), joined Stephen and the other 5 'Hellenists' (Acts 6,5), preached to the Samaritans and coastal cities, before settling in Caesaria (Acts 8,4-40), where he was known as the evangelist (Acts 21,8-9)? If so, this would be another example of the title 'apostle' being superseded by another title, 'evangelist', and causing confusion, as in the case of John the apostle and John the elder; for a thorough investigation of the issues, see Christopher R. Matthews, *Philip: Apostle and Evangelist, Configurations of a Tradition*, Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2002.

<sup>65</sup> The question of authorial identity is very similar to that in the Book of Revelation, where recognition of his identity relies a great deal on the familiar relationship between the author and those communities in Asia that he is addressing. Hence local Church tradition provides the main source of evidence for his identity.

point, to be on the outside, to impose a meaning that was not intended—eisegesis of the most insensitive kind. There is only one beloved disciple and, as Hengel has so comprehensively documented, he is “one towering theologian and founder of a school”, as well as being author of all five books of the Johannine corpus and leader of the Church in Asia Minor. He is also, perhaps to Hengel’s disappointment, a Galilean fisherman, apostle, disciple, prophet, teacher and elder—‘the Elder’ of the elders.

The crucial part of the “Johannine Question” has been resolved, but other less urgent issues remain. Most pressing, perhaps, is the need to explain how one author, John, an Aramaic speaker who spoke and wrote Greek incorrectly, can be regarded as the author of such widely differing books as the Book of Revelation and the Fourth Gospel. With this question, we have made a full circle and returned to the problem confronted by Dionysius at the start of all the questioning. However, rather than propose a different author for whom no evidence exists, it may be fruitful to introduce into the discussion of authorship a concept we could call “degrees of literary mediation”.

For most of the first century and beyond, it was usual for the author of a book, document or letter to dictate his text to a trained scribe, or amanuensis, even if he could write competently himself.<sup>66</sup> The one who dictated remained the undisputed author and would often confirm his authorship of the new document by writing a short sentence in his own handwriting, signed with his name. This is evident in some of Paul’s letters, for example (1Cor 16,21; Gal 6,11; Col 4,18; 2Thess 3,17; Phil 19).<sup>67</sup> The scribes, whose educational level and professional skills would vary considerably from one to the next, would have been highly motivated to create a literary product of good quality, as this would affect their future employment and income. In order to ensure a good quality product, they would certainly have made any corrections they deemed necessary, which in turn would reflect their own level of education and skill. From this brief description of the normal writing process, it is clear that, although the form and content of

<sup>66</sup> Cf. Chris Keith, “‘In my own hand’: Grapho-literacy and the Apostle Paul”, *Biblica*, Vol 89, 2008; 39-58.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid* 40-42.

the text were still largely determined by the author, its literary quality was mainly the responsibility of the scribe.

Now, if the author was not a native Greek speaker, like John, but spoke and dictated Greek as a foreigner, the scribal input would have to have been even more intense, in order to produce a satisfactory literary product; in other words, the 'degree of literary mediation' had to be so much greater, and may have also included some radical corrections in style, vocabulary and grammar. Nevertheless, the one who dictated the text is still the author of that document, even though his literary expression may have been changed extensively by the scribe.

There is good evidence in the Fourth Gospel that the author was helped by at least one scribe and probably by more (Jn 21,24-25). It is therefore likely that the impressive literary quality of the Gospel is due chiefly to a high level of scribal input, but regardless of the level of scribal mediation the author is still rightly considered to be John the beloved disciple. Compare this situation with the Book of Revelation, at the other end of the scale. In this text, the author tells us that that Risen Christ asked him to write the book (Rev 1,11) and then include a serious warning to those who would change the text in any way (Rev 22,18-19). These divine instructions ensured that there was minimal scribal input in the production of this text, so it remained almost entirely the work of John himself, with some superficial corrections in vocabulary and grammar at most.<sup>68</sup> In between these two extremes are the Letters of John, for which scribal input would have varied in inverse proportion to their linguistic accuracy and coherence. Due to evident similarities in literary characteristics, it is likely that the same scribes cooperated with the author, John, to produce the Letters and the Gospel, lending support to the proposal

<sup>68</sup> Comparative studies of vocabulary such as those of Schüssler Fiorenza, cited by Culpepper (*John*, 99-101), showing a greater frequency of Pauline and Lucan vocabulary in Revelation than words from John's Gospel, should be interpreted in the light of these observations. Is it not possible that the author John himself had learnt or augmented his Greek vocabulary by reading the works of Luke and Paul, or that the scribes helping to translate John's text of the Book of Revelation had also been copying the Gospel of Luke and the letters of Paul, and that is why there are similarities in vocabulary with these works?

that the Johannine school was actually a scribal centre for the production of manuscripts.<sup>69</sup>

In summary, the huge literary variation between the Gospel and the Revelation is best explained by 'the degree of literary mediation' that has been invested in each work, by the scribe or scribes working with the author. In general, and especially in the case of John, whose native language was Aramaic and not Greek, one could say that the higher the literary quality of his text in Greek, the greater was the corresponding degree of scribal mediation.

### Conclusions

The 'Johannine Question' is basically about the identity of the author of the Johannine corpus, consisting of the five New Testament writings attributed to John, for it seemed inconceivable to many modern scholars that all these writings could have been written by the same author, and a Galilean fisherman at that, as was taught for centuries by Church tradition.

Long before modern scholars had questioned the authorship of these works, a series of spurious interpretations by ancient churchmen had set the stage. Firstly, the poor literary quality of the Book of Revelation prompted Dionysius to deny John the apostle was the author (c. 250 CE), although the poor quality Greek is entirely consistent with a text written by a Galilean Jewish apostle. Secondly Eusebius compounded this dubious judgment (324 CE) by distinguishing John the elder, mentioned as a source by Papias, from John the apostle and then identifying him as the author the Book of Revelation, even though John the apostle and John the elder were seen as the same person up until Eusebius and ever since. Thirdly a single historian writing in 439 CE, called Philip of Side, reports that Papias, in his lost work, had written that John the apostle and his brother James were killed "by the Jews", even though many churchmen had read his books and none had reported this before him. Upon a foundation created by these three equivocations, modern scholars have built a tall and complex structure of questions, proposals and arguments. To the upholders of church tradition, however, the foundations are shaky indeed and cannot support the weight of the

<sup>69</sup> See chapter 2: 'The Author of the Book of Revelation'.

scholars' reconstructions: the whole building is erected upon 'a mistake upon a mistake upon a mistake'.

Nevertheless, the scholarly edifice is still standing. A multitude of alternative solutions have been proposed by scholars over the last century, but none of these have answered the 'Johannine Question' in a satisfactory way. The best attempt is that of Martin Hengel in his 1989 study entitled *The Johannine Question*, in which he manages to unite the production of all five books under one principal author, working together with a school of fellow writers in Ephesus, at the end of the first century. His thesis almost works, but fails at key points, particularly in asserting the early martyrdom of John the apostle and in identifying, as principal author, a fellow disciple of the apostle John—not another Galilean fisherman, but an educated, priestly, aristocratic "*doppelgänger*" from Jerusalem, a hypothetical twin, called 'the elder John'. This figure was originally 'birthed' by Eusebius from an 'inadvertently pregnant' statement of Papias with the specific aim of removing the authorship of the Book of Revelation from its true author, John the apostle. Underlying this literary fiction of a non-apostolic 'John the elder', there is the genuine puzzlement of Dionysius concerning the authorship of the Book of Revelation, or what one might call the 'Original Johannine Question'. Tracing the origin of the 'Johannine Question' back in time, in this way, indicates that its answer might lie with the Book of Revelation. In other words, first we must determine the truth about the author of the Book of Revelation and then, perhaps only then, the answers to the authorship of the rest of the Johannine corpus will follow.

In the previous chapter we presented three specific aspects of the Book of Revelation that indicated a Galilean author and followed this by showing how it was quite plausible for a young man, like the apostle John, to acquire the language and literacy skills to enable him, in later life, to write a text like the Book of Revelation, despite having a primary education based on the hearing and reading of the Bible in the predominantly oral culture of Galilee. There is nothing inherently improbable about this trajectory, which included a long period of residence in Jerusalem (33-63 CE), during which John could easily have completed his education with instruction from a former Essene scribe. Furthermore, the author's ungrammatical Jewish Greek helps to explain the crude literary quality of the text, which, instead of arguing against apostolic authorship as Dionysius insisted, is good



evidence in favour. On a more general level, the Book of Revelation gives valuable information (especially in Rev 1–3) for the unravelling of the ‘Johannine question’ in the other books attributed to John.

Having re-established the apostle John as author of the Book of Revelation, the other works in the Johannine corpus can be more easily understood as the products of cooperation between John, whose mother tongue was Aramaic, and a well-trained, probably bilingual, scribe or scribes, who corrected what John dictated and wrote it down in acceptable literary Greek. We have referred to this as a high ‘level of literary mediation’, and it contrasts with a very low level of literary mediation in the writing of the Book of Revelation. Hence the difference in the literary characteristics of these two works. In view of the similarity of literary features between the Gospel and the three letters attributed to John, it is likely that the same scribe or scribes worked with the author to produce all these works.

As for the enigmatic presentation of the author in all these writings, but especially in the Fourth Gospel—the ‘crucial question’ posed by Martin Hengel—the best solution is the simplest: this was a deliberate ploy by the scribes, or editors, to protect the author and ensure that he was not hunted down again and punished for his “witness to Jesus Christ and the Word of God” (cf. Rev 1,9).

## CHAPTER 4

### The Historical Background to the Book of Revelation

#### Introduction

It is often said that the background to the visions of the Book of Revelation is the persecution of Christians by the Emperor Domitian at the end of the first century. Like other apocalypses, the Book of Revelation has been called 'a tract for hard times', whose principal purpose is to exhort the faithful to resistance, martyrdom and patient endurance. But of these persecutions little actual evidence has been found.<sup>1</sup> The messages to the churches in the first part of the Book of Revelation indicate the faithful were subjected to scattered trials, exile and occasional capital punishments, but nothing on the scale of the persecution envisioned later in the book (e.g., Rev chs. 7, 13). More recent study of apocalyptic writings has modified our understanding of the contexts that produced them: "We should not seek the origin of Jewish apocalypticism in the occurrence of dramatic international events, but in (less apparent) sociological conflicts within Jewish society. It was these internal conflicts that made some groups interpret historical events as "apocalyptic" (not the other way around, with apocalyptic events generating apocalyptic responses)".<sup>2</sup> So the

<sup>1</sup> This proposal was based on the false assumption that the entire book describes the situation that prevailed at the time of writing. The vision of countless numbers of martyrs in heaven after coming through a great tribulation (Rev 7,9-17, ch 13; 19-1-10) was therefore assumed to represent the result of persecutions at the end of the first century. This was misleading because there are clear indications in the text that these visions refer to a time that is future to the author (1,19; 4,1). Writing c. 180 CE, Irenaeus denies John's Apocalypse identifies the ultimate persecutor in those times, *Against Heresies*, V.30.3; *apud* Eusebius, *History of the Church III*, 18.2-3.

<sup>2</sup> Gabriele Boccaccini, 'Non-Apocalyptic Responses to Apocalyptic Events: Notes on the Sociology of Apocalypticism', *The Seleucid and Hasmonean Periods and the*

idea of the book as a response to empire-wide persecution of Christians or Jews was a scholastic invention of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and has largely been abandoned. However, in the absence of an alternative suggestion, a large question still remains over the immediate historical context of the visions of the Book of Revelation.

Though revealed from heaven, the Book of Revelation was not given in a social vacuum. It was given to a particular person at a time characterized by a certain social, political and religious 'background'. Knowledge about these circumstances not only clarifies the author's intention and purpose, but also helps to better understand certain parts of the text, by giving them 'context'. Furthermore, our knowledge of the background is constantly being illuminated by ongoing historical and archaeological research. Various contemporary, or near contemporary sources, can now be added to those parts of the text which refer to the situation at the time it was written, providing a clearer view of that period. So before going any further in the historical reconstruction of this situation, it is essential to decide, as accurately as possible, the date when the Book of Revelation was written.

#### The Date of the Book of Revelation

To start with, it is a mistake to assume, as in the classic use of the historical-critical method of interpretation, that the concerns of the Book of Revelation are limited to the period of history that is contemporary with its production. This assumption is clearly untenable in a prophetic work like the Book of Revelation, whose vast scope extends up to and beyond the end of history and the realization of the 'new heaven and the new earth'. In the divine instruction to the author to "write what you saw, and what is now, and what is to take place in the future (Rev 1,19), the text itself affirms that it refers not only to the time of the author, but also to the times that are future to him. Furthermore, each of the three parts of the text specified in this instruction is easily identifiable: "What you saw" refers to the

*Apocalyptic Worldview*, Eds. Lester Grabbe, Gabriele Boccaccini and Jason Zurawski, Library of Second Temple Studies 88, London: T&T Clark, 2016;33-42, quote on 41.

introductory vision of the 'one like a son of man' among the seven golden lampstands (Rev 1,12-20, cf. 1,11), "what is now" relates to the messages to the seven churches (Rev 2-3), and "what is to take place in the future" is everything that follows these messages, including the reign of Christ which lasts at least 'a thousand years' and probably more (i.e. 4,1-22,21, cf. 4,1). Therefore the only part of the text that can, with certainty, be identified with the author's own time is the "what is now" section, which records the letters to the churches (Rev 2-3). Everything else describes an undetermined time in the future, although the forms of expression used in the description of that future may be rooted in contemporary realities and therefore help indirectly to date the work as a whole.

After noting this temporal division in the text, between present and future, it must be admitted that the date of writing is never directly indicated by the author. In contrast to some other apocalypses (e.g., 4*Ezra* 3,1; 2*Baruch* 1,1), the date of production seems far from his mind. The temporal focus of his work is fixed constantly on the future, and in a special way on the second coming of Christ (Rev 1,3; 22,7.12.20). Even those parts of the text that refer to the author's contemporary situation (Rev 2-3) are abundantly sprinkled with references to the future consummation, described as imminent and glorious.

However, even though the author did not care to record the dates of his exile on Patmos, or precisely when he wrote the revelation given to him, some of his contemporaries did take note of it, for Church tradition gives it a very precise date "at the end of (Emperor) Domitian's reign",<sup>3</sup> which is to say 95-96 CE. There are few other works in the New Testament with such precise and widely accepted external evidence to authorship and date of writing. Nevertheless, since the beginnings of "critical scholarship" in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, this date has been challenged, often in the most perfunctory way.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, V.30.3; *apud* Eusebius, *History of the Church* III, 18.3; V, 8.6. Also Clement of Alexandria (died c. 215) in *Quis dives* 42.

<sup>4</sup> E.g., Craig R. Koester writes: "It is unlikely that Irenaeus preserves reliable historical information. His comment about the date is linked to his assumption that the author was John the apostle. If this assumption is incorrect, there is little reason to think that he was accurate about the date... Patristic evidence for the date of Revelation is not reliable" in *Revelation: A New Translation with Introduction*

Although dismissive of traditional dating, critical scholarship has made a valuable contribution by questioning the text more closely for internal evidence of its date of production, and thereby motivating further research into the historical background.

Extensive research into the social, religious, historical, literary, archaeological, epigraphic and numismatic background of the letters to the seven churches has confirmed the traditional date of 95 AD, reported by Irenaeus writing about 80 years later.<sup>5</sup> As one of the scholars who has studied these sources extensively, Colin Hemer wrote "I started with a provisional acceptance of the orthodox Domitianic dating, and have been confirmed in that view by further study".<sup>6</sup> He proceeds to list numerous features of the letters to the seven churches (Rev 2–3) that specifically point to a date in the mid-90's CE, and then concludes "We accordingly reaffirm the Domitianic date of the letters in the light of the kind of evidence here considered, while recognizing that many of these indications are uncertain. Cumulatively they align themselves with the case widely accepted on other grounds that the Revelation was written about AD 95".<sup>7</sup>

Other scholars concur, but only up to a point. Acknowledging Hemer's study, David Aune, for example, notes "it is clear that the proclamations to the seven churches in Rev 2–3 reveal a relatively close acquaintance with the specific circumstances of each of the Christian communities addressed",<sup>8</sup> but he later rejects Hemer's confirmation of the traditional 95 CE date, saying "The situation of the seven churches produces ambiguous evidence that could be dated

*and Commentary*, Anchor Yale Bible, New Haven/London: Yale Univ. Press, 2014; 74.

<sup>5</sup> It is important to note that Irenaeus (c. 130-202 CE) was born to a Christian family in Smyrna, listened to Polycarp in his youth, served the Church in Asia Minor until middle age, before being sent to Lyons (Gaul) where he was made Bishop in 177 CE. From birth until middle age, he was immersed in the society that had received the Book of Revelation only a generation before, well within living memory. It is highly unlikely that he transmitted the author and date of writing incorrectly.

<sup>6</sup> Colin Hemer, *The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia in Their Local Setting*, Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1986; 3.

<sup>7</sup> Hemer, *Letters to the Seven Churches*, 5.

<sup>8</sup> David Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, Word Biblical Commentary, Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1997; Vol 1, lx.

from the early 70's to the late 90's".<sup>9</sup> In spite of Hemer's conclusion that the internal evidence accords with external evidence in identifying a 95 CE date, scholars are loathe to accept this, for reasons that are hard to fathom. Most opt for a date sometime during the last 20-30 years of the first century.<sup>10</sup> Unless good evidence can be produced to the contrary, which 150 years of critical research has so far failed to produce, it is justifiable to accept the traditional date of 95 CE, especially since it has been corroborated by Hemer's work. It is therefore the date accepted in this study.

### The Letters to the Seven Churches in Asia Minor

The letters are messages dictated by the revealer, the Risen Christ, to the human author John and addressed to the 'angels' of the churches in Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea. They start with a self-presentation of the revealer and conclude with his promises to the one who overcomes the numerous challenges to his or her Christian faith. The main body of the message consists of a divine judgment, which may be positive, negative, or both. A divine instruction follows, either with an exhortation (Rev 2,10; 3,7) or with a warning (2,5.16. 22-23; 3.3. 8b-9. 18), depending on whether the judgment is predominantly positive or negative. After this, in most cases, there is a consolatory remark. It is in the judgment section that we hear about the prevailing internal or external challenges facing each church and from the nature of these challenges the local historical background can be identified and enriched with known historical data. Three major challenges can be identified:

#### 1. The First Challenge: The Teaching of Satan

In three of the messages, the most prominent challenge to the faithful community comes from false apostles (2,2) and false prophets (2,14-15; 20-21) all of whom appear to be associated with an otherwise unknown group called Nicolaitans, who were said to permit "fornication and the eating of idol-sacrifices". The stylized and coded

<sup>9</sup> Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, Vol 1, lxiii (5), and lxx (5).

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Koester "Revelation was probably written during the final decades of the first century.... the period 80-100 CE seems the most plausible", *Revelation*, 79.

way of describing this challenge is not as obscure as it may seem at first glance, because it was not a new problem. It had confronted the Church previously and had caused heated discussion on the degree to which Christian converts from paganism should be obliged to keep Jewish law. 'Fornication' had a double meaning in religious circles, either literally as 'sex outside marriage', or metaphorically as 'worshiping of images of pagan gods (idols)'; sometimes, as in this instance, it could have both meanings at once. Together with 'eating the meat of the animals sacrificed to these gods (idols)', all these activities were forbidden under Jewish law, and considered abominable, but nevertheless formed an important aspect of religious and social life of the Roman Empire at the time. To the Greco-Roman pagans, refusal to participate in these activities was considered 'impiety' (*asebeia*) or 'atheism' (*atheotes*) and belief in the imageless Judaeo-Christian God was considered 'superstition'.

Therefore great tension arose between the practices of the ancient pagan religion and those of the new Christian faith. For those pagans who had joined the newly established Christian communities, refusal to participate in traditional ceremonies and rituals would have led to social and economic ostracism, or other more severe forms of persecution. There was such a strong pressure for new converts to continue to participate in old pagan customs and practices that firm guidance was needed from the Church leadership. Accordingly, the leaders of the Church in Jerusalem convened a meeting with Paul and Barnabas in about 49 CE and issued the following declaration: "For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things: that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols and from blood, and from what is strangled and from fornication. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell" (Acts 15,28-29). It is quite probable that John, the author of the Book of Revelation, attended that meeting and interpreted it strictly.

By contrast, Paul gives the declaration a less rigid interpretation in his first letter to the Corinthians, written from Ephesus in 56 CE: though firmly against fornication, the worship of idols and other forms of immorality, Paul discusses the permissibility of eating the meat that had been sacrificed to idols and could then be purchased in the public markets. After a somewhat lengthy analysis, he discouraged this practice for the sake of those whose faith was weak, while also

admitting that it was actually of no consequence to those whose faith was strong (1Cor 8,1-13; 10,14-33). Although Paul had assented to the decision of the Apostolic Council, his advice to the Corinthians, which was later disseminated to the churches in Asia Minor (including those addressed in Rev 2–3), created a loophole, for those who claimed their faith was strong (i.e. the Nicolaitans), to argue that it was permissible to ‘eat meat sacrificed to idols’ and more. In these messages to the seven churches, the author clearly wishes to re-assert the original unambiguous decision of the Apostolic Council, formed under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. It seems to have been a much-needed clarification of the equivocal directions given by Paul.

But the Nicolaitan challenge is more serious than a simple dispute over orthodox teaching. The false teaching of the prophetess called Jezebel, to ‘fornicate and eat idol-sacrifices’, will end in illness and death for her and for her followers unless they repent from her practices (2,20-23). The severity of this punishment derives from the link between this teaching and ‘the deep things of Satan’ (2,24)—an expression that appears to be an ironic reversal of the Nicolaitan’s claim to know ‘the deep things of God’, or just the ‘deep things’, which ancient sources identify as the boast of early Gnostic groups. The association of this teaching with Satan, the eternal enemy of God and the Church, is the main reason that it must be opposed and its promoters punished severely.

Apart from causing doctrinal confusion, the false apostles and prophets openly challenged the leadership of the churches, recalling the time prior to the appointment of fixed bishops and priests, when itinerant ‘apostles’ and ‘prophets’ were the accepted leaders.<sup>11</sup> Many years before, the apostle Paul and others had warned about the problem of false teaching (Acts 20,28-30; 1Tim 1,3-11; 4,1-5; 2Pet 2,1-3, Jude 4), which inevitably accompanied the influx of large numbers of pagan converts who wanted the benefits of the new religion without having to renounce all their ties to the old religion. In the wake of the Christian expansion, this mixing of new and old would lead to the formation of various Gnostic sects, of which the Nicolaitans appear to be an early stage. The Church met this challenge by

<sup>11</sup> The transition from itinerant community leaders to fixed administrators can be seen in *Didache* 11-15, believed to have been written around the end of the first century or the beginning of the second.



establishing the episcopal hierarchy at the end of the first century and by the adoption of a body of orthodox teaching, based on the writings of the apostles and their personal assistants.<sup>12</sup> The mention of this problem in these messages helps to confirm the dating of the Book of Revelation to the end of the first century.<sup>13</sup>

## 2. The Second Challenge: The Throne of Satan

The second main challenge to the churches is presented in the message to Pergamum “where the throne of Satan is” (Rev 2,13). On account of this evil presence, the Christian community had been called to declare its faith in Christ and one of its members, Antipas, had been martyred for his faithful witness (2,13). A similar situation may explain why, in the previous message, the Smyrnians are enjoined to “be faithful unto death”, for “the devil is going to throw some of you into prison so that you may be tested, and you will have hardship for ten days” (2,10). In both situations, the devil or Satan (cf. 12,9) is the name for the Roman administration, which had shown itself ready to put Christ’s followers to death. It is therefore no coincidence that Pergamum was the official capital of the Province of Asia Minor and the seat of the Roman governor or pro-consul. With a long history of religious activity devoted to pagan deities such as Zeus, Athena, Demeter, Dionysius, and Aesculapius, Pergamum was one of the first cities in Asia to build a temple to Rome and her emperor (29 BCE). These temples, together with the presence of the Roman governor, established Pergamum as a regional centre for the imperial cult, which involved the idolatrous worship of the goddess Roma and of the ‘divinity’ of her most illustrious emperors.

This association between pagan religious devotion and the Roman administration had no impact on the Christian communities for as long as the administration considered them to be a branch of the Jewish community, which had special status as a “licit religion”

<sup>12</sup> The process of appointing fixed administrators (bishops and priests) in the churches was well underway by the time Ignatius wrote his letters to the churches in Asia, in 106/7. In these letters Ignatius actively promotes the office of bishop.

<sup>13</sup> It appears that John himself had already started appointing bishops in Asia (cf. Eusebius, *History of the Church* III,23.1,6), and in the 90’s he was present at the consecration of his disciple Polycarp as Bishop of Smyrna (Eusebius, *History of the Church* III, 36.1; IV, 14.3).

(*religio licita*).<sup>14</sup> So far as the Romans were concerned, Paul's mission to the Jews and the gentiles had been an internal affair and, at least until the start of the 90's, the new communities that grew up with mixed gentile and Jewish members were not distinguished from those of the Jews. The Romans saw that both communities were administered by Jews who worshipped in similar ways to an imageless God, and were not interested in judging disagreements in Jewish law.<sup>15</sup>

However, shortly before the Book of Revelation was written in the mid 90's CE, the Jewish and Christian communities had already started to pull apart, most probably at the instigation of the Jewish leadership,<sup>16</sup> and the two communities began to develop separate

<sup>14</sup> The first time the Romans seemed to have distinguished Christians from Jews was in 64-65 CE, when the Emperor Nero was suspected of deliberately organizing a destructive fire in Rome, so that he could rebuild his palace and the surrounding part of the city according to his own grandiose plans. To deflect the suspicion, he blamed and, sometime later, sadistically murdered a multitude of Christians, including the apostles Peter and Paul. The numbers are not known but two sources speak of a 'great crowd' (1 *Clement* 6,1; Tacitus *Ann.*, xv, 44,3). In the martyrology (*Acta Sanctorum*) compiled later, 977 martyrs are named and their feast is on 29th June (the Feast of St Peter and St Paul). There is evidence that Nero may have been put up to this by his second wife, Empress Poppaea, who was a 'God-fearing' member of the Jewish synagogue and clearly knew the difference between Christians and Jews and did not want Jews to be among the victims. The memory of the indiscriminate expulsion of Jews and Christians would still have been fresh (49 CE). There are other examples of her influence on the decisions taken by the emperor. The specific charge against the Christians was probably 'arson' at the outset, but was later changed to something like 'hatred of the human race'—a term that alludes to Christian criticism of pagan Roman society in general, and to their expectation of the fiery 'end of the world'. Although the elites, represented by the literati writing about 50 years later (Juvenal, Tacitus, Suetonius) continued to denigrate Christians at every opportunity, it is probable that Nero's massacre generated not a little sympathy for the victims and a great deal of antipathy against the emperor. In fact, from 65 CE, conspiracies against his life multiplied, leading up to his suicide in 68 CE, when the Roman armies were on their way to arrest him. The official execration of Nero's memory, enacted after his death, then became a deterrence preventing future Roman emperors from considering persecution of Christians as a group. Perhaps for this reason, there was no centrally organized persecution of Christians for nearly two centuries.

<sup>15</sup> Elegant examples of the disinterest of the Roman authorities in Jewish law are given in the accounts of Jesus' trial by Pilate (Jn 18,31-38; 19,6), and of Paul's trials by Gallio (Acts 18,12-17) and by Festus (Acts 25,18-20).

<sup>16</sup> To be discussed in the next section.

identities and go their own ways. When this separation became evident to the Roman authorities, the Christian churches could no longer be considered a 'licit religion' protected by Roman law, but became instead an 'illicit association', proscribed by the law. For the gentile converts from paganism, the legal infringement was compounded by what was seen as an impious abandonment of traditional religious customs. The new 'associations' were not only illegal but also irreligious, appearing as 'atheism', 'impiety' and 'superstition' to local religious sensibilities. To make matters worse for pious pagans, by the end of the century, large numbers of pagans in Asia Minor were becoming Christians.

Even though there was no coordinated campaign of persecution until the third century, the gentile Christian converts were subjected to scattered trials, exile and occasional capital punishments. After being reported to the authorities by informers, they were brought before the local magistrate. Penalties varied from place to place, and from magistrate to magistrate, but capital punishment was not uncommon, as the messages in the Book of Revelation indicate. There is evidence that the Roman magistrates gave the accused Christians an opportunity to go free if they would offer incense to an image of the emperor. This adaptation of the imperial cult as a loyalty test gave the accused the opportunity to refuse and witness to his faith in Christ, before being put to death for 'obstinacy' (*contumacia*).<sup>17</sup>

In this context, it is not surprising that the teaching of the Nicolaitan prophets and apostles had become so popular that it was a threat to the Church's leadership, since permission "to fornicate and eat-idol sacrifices" would have allowed their followers to offer incense to the image of the emperor and therefore escape the penalty for refusing the loyalty test of the imperial cult.<sup>18</sup> However, while

<sup>17</sup> A description of this 'loyalty test' in action a few years later is provided by the correspondence between Pliny the Younger, when he was pro-consul in Bithynia and Pontus around 111-12, and the Emperor Trajan (Pliny, *Epp.* X, 96, 97; quoted with an explanation in F.F. Bruce, *New Testament History*, New York: Doubleday-Galilee, 1980; 422-27). It is not known when this test was introduced but some historians date it to the last 3-4 years of Domitian's reign (cf. Ben Witherington III, *New Testament History: A Narrative Account*, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001; 394).

<sup>18</sup> In the letter to Pergamum (Rev 2,12-17), it is probably no coincidence that the seat of Roman authority (2,13), the martyrdom of Antipas (2,13) and the false

removing persecution and martyrdom at the hands of the Roman authorities, it would also have blurred the boundaries between pagan and Christian worship. If the Church had allowed it, Christ would have become just another god in the pagan pantheon.

Historically, the newly critical attitude of the Roman authorities towards the early Christian communities can be dated to the later years of emperor Domitian's reign, which is to say the last decade of the first century. It undoubtedly limited the freedom with which Christians could live and share their faith, driving their activities underground to a greater or lesser extent. Less than half a century before, both Paul and Peter had counselled Christians to pray for and obey the Roman authorities (Rm 13,1-7; 1Peter 2,13-17), but now the Christian leaders identify the same authorities with Satan, the spiritual adversary of God and his people. If the change of the Roman attitude towards Christians was such an important part of the background at the end of the first century, it is surely relevant to ask what lay behind it. Why did the Romans suddenly turn against this relatively benign and well-wishing Jewish sect?

The simple answer is its success: many people from every class of society, rich and poor, were abandoning their ancient pagan traditions and temples to become members of the newly formed Christian communities. Not only was the urban and rural economy affected by this,<sup>19</sup> but there was a fear that the ancient pagan gods would be angry at the lack of devotion and take revenge.

Before this drift from paganism and into the Christian churches, the pagan populace in the main population centres of the Roman Empire had shown a significant level of interest and participation in the Jewish religion. This was reflected in the large numbers of interested pagans attending the weekly synagogue services, and partially adopting Jewish customs and practices. For these 'God-fearers', as they came to be known, full membership of the Jewish community as 'proselytes' was impeded by the stringent dietary

teaching of the Nicolaitans (2,15) are all mentioned together, implying a connection between them: the teaching of the Nicolaitans was well received in those places where the Roman authorities were most active in putting Christians to the test.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. The anger of the silversmiths at Ephesus in 52 CE (Acts 19,23-40) and the plight of the farmers who provided food for the sacrificial animals in Pliny's province of Bithynia around 110 CE (Pliny, *Epp.* X, 96).

regulations (pork forbidden) and the obligation for male circumcision, a procedure held in contempt by pagan culture. Furthermore, interest in the Jewish faith waned after the destruction of the temple in 70 CE, and it was at this time that the young Christian communities presented themselves as an attractive alternative, boosted by an outpouring of public sympathy and interest following the cruel Neronian persecution of 66-68 CE.

Flavius Domitian, the future heir to the throne of the Roman Empire, grew up in this climate of rising public interest in the Jewish and Christian religions. By the time he came to power in 81 CE, the flow from paganism into the young Christian churches must have been of considerable concern to the imperial authorities.

Domitian's character and interests were quite different to those of his predecessors, his father Vespasian (69-79 CE) and his elder brother Titus (79-81 CE). He was autocratic, suspicious, controlling, ruthless, self-righteous and pious in his loyalty to the pagan gods, especially to those whom he claimed had protected him through the civil war in 68-69 CE (Jupiter) and thereafter (Minerva). As his predecessors were both successful military men, they kept control of the armies and more or less excluded Domitian from military life. During their reigns, Domitian was given a number of official religious duties to perform as Pontifex Maximus, and so it is natural that he considered himself to be a guide on morals and religious conduct. Around 85 CE, he made himself the guardian of public morals for life (public censor), going further than previous emperors to root out corruption, nepotism and punish adultery with exile. He presided over the reopening of the lavishly restored temple to Jupiter on the Capitol Hill. Domitian's devotion to traditional pagan religion may explain why he regarded Judaism and Christianity, along with other newly-imported cults, with suspicion and growing hostility, especially towards the end of his reign. His hostility was mainly directed against the Roman and Greek citizens who abandoned pagan traditions and adopted other religions, especially those of his own family and among the ruling elite. However, his pagan zeal and devotion did not stop there, but, in the later part of his reign, drove him to claim divine status for himself by insisting that everyone address him '*dominus et*

*deus*', including the patrician senators.<sup>20</sup> Whether this claim arose from an experience of the divine, or from pure self-glorification, it certainly suited Domitian's narcissistic personality, which in later years turned him into a cruel and paranoid tyrant.

The turning point came in 88 CE, when he faced an open revolt by Antonius Saturninus, the governor of the province of Germany who declared himself emperor and was supported by his army. Although the revolt was quickly suppressed by another governor, it seems to have exacerbated the Emperor Domitian's character flaws, and driven him, during the remaining eight years of his reign, to punish anyone, in Rome or in the Provinces, whom he suspected of opposing him, often relying only on the reports of unreliable informers. His victims included Roman citizens from all walks of life: philosophers, astrologers, rhetoricians, playwrights, governors, patricians and senators. At the instigation of the emperor, they were banished or executed for the slightest perception of insult. With the same heavy-handedness, the emperor meted out severe penalties for relatively trivial infractions.<sup>21</sup>

With this combination of zeal for pagan customs and hypersensitivity to insult, added to the routine triumphalist propaganda from the first Jewish revolt,<sup>22</sup> Domitian made life very difficult for the Jews and their Christian rivals, especially during the final few years of his reign, in the 90's of the first century. Before attempting to describe this crucial period, we must first return to the third major challenge facing the Christian churches, as revealed in the messages to the seven churches in Asia Minor.

### 3. The Third Challenge: The Synagogue of Satan

The first major challenge came from false apostles and false prophets, the second from the Roman authorities, and the third major

<sup>20</sup> 'Lord and god', cf. Suetonius *Domitian* 13.2; Dio Cassius *Hist.* 67,4.7; but also Jn 20,28 as a response.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Ben Witherington, *New Testament History*; 390-4.

<sup>22</sup> "The Jewish victory provided the equivalent of a foundation myth for the Flavian dynasty, which came to power in 69 through civil war: the routine suppression of a provincial insurrection was turned into a great and glorious triumph of Roman arms", T.D. Barnes, 'The Sack of the Temple in Josephus and Tacitus', in *Flavius Josephus and Flavian Rome*, eds. J. Edmonson, S. Mason and J. Rives, Oxford: OUP, 2005; 129.

challenge confronting the churches of Asia Minor came from the Jews, or rather “those who call themselves Jews and are not, but a synagogue of Satan” (2,9; cf. 3,9).<sup>23</sup> Not only do they slander those who believe in Christ, but they are lying when they call themselves Jews. There is little doubt that this hard language, so far used only for the Roman authorities, refers to non-Christian Jews.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, in a context in which the ‘throne of Satan’ refers to the official seat of Roman Provincial governor, ‘synagogue of Satan’ points to the people assembled around him, strongly implying willing cooperation between the Jews and the Roman authorities against the Christian churches. As with the other challenges, there is a wider context, with considerable historical depth.

On coming to power in 81 CE, Flavius Domitian did nothing to relax the Flavian administration’s humiliation of the Jews, but continued to exploit the Jewish defeat for its propaganda value for the Flavian dynasty. This made it clear that the Jews would not receive permission to rebuild the temple under his principate. Following the Roman suppression of the Jewish revolt in 70 CE, he had participated in the triumphal march in 71 CE. He kept the fine high-priestly robes in his palace and continued to display the precious Jerusalem temple vessels in the temple of Peace. He built and opened a second triumphal ‘Arch of Titus’ on the *Via Sacris* and continued to issue coins publicizing the defeat of Judaea (*Judaea Capta* and *Judaea Devicta*) until 85 CE.

Domitian also continued the diversion of the Jewish temple tax into the Roman treasury, where it was used for the repair of pagan temples and renamed *Fiscus Iudaicus*. In fact, he increased the humiliation of the Jews even further by exacting the two drachma tax “with the utmost rigour” (*acerbissime*). In effect, this meant that the people who had previously escaped paying the tax, were now compelled to do so, including ‘those who without publicly

<sup>23</sup> It should not be overlooked that all three challenges are now linked with Satan (cf. 1Pet 5,8-9).

<sup>24</sup> Neither gentile nor Jewish Christians would ‘slander’ other Christians, as these so-called Jews are accused of doing, and non-Jews would not try to call themselves Jews. For an informative discussion on the subject, see Adela Yarbro Collins, ‘Insiders and Outsiders in the Book of Revelation and its Social Context’, in *To See Ourselves as Others See Us: Christians, Jews, Others in Late Antiquity*, eds. J. Neusner and E. Frerichs, Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1985; 187-218; esp 206.

acknowledging that faith yet lived as Jews (i.e. pagan ‘God-fearers’ and proselytes, those of mixed Jewish-gentile descent), as well as those who concealed their Jewish origin and did not pay the tribute levied upon the people (i.e. non-observant Jews by birth).<sup>25</sup> Domitian also extended the pool of taxable subjects, by removing the age limits.<sup>26</sup> In order to ensure prompt compliance, Domitian relied on tax-collectors, tribunals and on a network of informants, thus introducing the potential for ‘calumny’, or false accusations. This measure was partly aimed at discouraging conversions from paganism to Judaism, and indeed to Christianity, for there was as yet no attempt by the authorities to distinguish the two communities. Basically, all those leaving the traditional imperial religion would now have to pay for their decision and would see their taxes used for the upkeep and restoration of the religion they had abandoned. Quite apart from the shrewd logic working to the advantage of the imperial religion, the emperor’s order to exact the tax “with utmost rigour” was also clearly a sign that increasing numbers of people were moving from paganism to Judaism or Christianity at this time, at the end of the first century.

These measures, however, had serious knock on effects for Christians. The leaders of the Jewish synagogues were now encouraged to register their members, which gave them a certain control in the determination of who was a Jew and who was not. The decisions of these Jewish leaders led to a situation in which the full members of the Synagogue paid their taxes and in return were allowed to practice their religion freely, while others (especially pagan converts to Christianity) were exposed and became liable to prosecution for ‘atheism’, ‘impiety’, or as members of an ‘illicit association’. So although the rigorous collection of this tax by Domitian may have been aimed at further vilifying the Jews, it rapidly

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Suetonius, *Domitian* 12, 1-2.

<sup>26</sup> The original Jewish temple tax was required of adult Jewish males only, from the ages of 20-50. According to Josephus, Vespasian imposed the *Fiscus Judaicus* immediately after the suppression of the Jewish Revolt in 70 CE, extending it ‘On all Jews, wheresoever they be’, i.e. including all ages (above 3 years and up to 62 at least), both sexes and slaves as well. From Suetonius’s account (in *Domitian* 12) of a 90 year old being examined in court for marks of circumcision, we can infer that Domitian removed all age limits (cf. Menachem Stern, ‘Fiscus Judaicus’, in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed, Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, 1971, vol 6, cols. 1325-6).



became a cause of insecurity and persecution for Christians, depending on the whim of Jewish informers and the attitudes of the local administrators. Suddenly, informers from the Synagogue were able to report members of the Christian churches to the Roman authorities for 'claiming to be Jews, but were not', ironically reversed in the two messages mentioned above (cf. Rev 2,9; 3,9). More importantly, the distinction between Jew and Christian became known officially and within a short time led to specific targeting of Christians and their communities (cf. 2,10.13; see above).

At the same time, at the beginning of the 90's, and perhaps arising from the need to distinguish non-Christian Jews from Christian Jews, the newly established Council of Jewish sages in Jamnia, Judaea, issued instructions to insert into the public prayer of the synagogues a modified version of one of the eighteen benedictions that was actually a curse on Christians and other sectarians (i.e., 'non-orthodox' Jews). It was ironically called the '*Birkat HaMinim*'.<sup>27</sup> No Christian or sectarian would pronounce such a malediction against himself and would either leave the synagogue or become conspicuous by his silence during the recital of the prayer. This 'malediction test' was most probably instituted by means of a circular letter, from Rabbi Gamaliel II to the synagogues in the diaspora, containing a "dignified but firm denunciation of the Christians, accompanied by an order to have no fellowship with them, as well as a copy of the new passage to be included in the service of the synagogue".<sup>28</sup>

<sup>27</sup> I.e. "the 'blessing' of the Sectarians". It reads: "And for the apostates let there be no hope; and may the insolent kingdom be quickly uprooted, in our days. And may the Nazarenes and the heretics perish quickly; and may they be erased from the Book of Life; and may they not be inscribed with the righteous. Blessed art thou, Lord, who humblest the insolent", Emil Schürer, *History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ*, rev and ed by G. Vermes, F. Millar, and M. Black, in 3 vols, Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1973; 461. This version of the prayer was found more than a century ago at the Geniza in Cairo and is thought to be the oldest in existence, dated to sometime in the second or third centuries CE. Interestingly, its curse against the Nazarenes (the Christians) is disarmed completely by the Risen Lord's assurance to the 'one who overcomes' in Rev 3,5, declaring he will never erase his name from the Book of Life. Christ is therefore the one who has the authority to erase names from that Book.

<sup>28</sup> James Parkes, *The Conflict of the Church and the Synagogue: A Study in the Origins of Antisemitism*, Cleveland and New York: World Publishing Company, 1961; 77-81, quote from 81.

It is now understood that, following the introduction of this prayer into diaspora synagogues, with the antichristian blasphemy that it expressed and generated, the process of separation known as 'the parting of the ways' proceeded rapidly. The timing of this 'parting of the ways' coincides squarely with the writing of the Book of Revelation, the other Johannine writings, other late New Testament writings (2Peter, Jude) and with a number of non-canonical Jewish and Christian texts (4*Ezra*, 2*Baruch*, Letters of Clement, Barnabas and Ignatius). As summarized by James Dunn, "The crisis of 70 CE did not settle the matter, then. There is other evidence, however, which strongly suggests that the following period, the period between the two Jewish revolts (66-70 and 132-135) was decisive for the parting of the ways. After the first revolt it could be said that all was still to play for. But after the second revolt the separation of the main bodies of Christianity and Judaism was clear-cut and final, whatever interaction there continued to be at the margins".<sup>29</sup>

### The End of Domitian's Reign

Towards the end of Domitian's reign, there is ample evidence of a further intensification of the emperor's hostility towards his perceived rivals and enemies. This hostility seems to have reached a climax in the years 95-96 CE with the conviction of many high-ranking Romans, including members of his own household:

a. "Towards the end of Domitian's reign the emperor became increasing tyrannical and, partly as a result, justifiably paranoid, executing at least twelve former consuls on charges of dissent or alleged conspiracy".<sup>30</sup> Among those he suspected of plotting against him was his cousin Flavius Clemens, grandson of Domitian's uncle Flavius Sabinus and husband of Domitian's niece Domitilla and their children. According to the 3<sup>rd</sup> century historian Dio Cassius, Clemens was sentenced to death at the end of his consulship in 95 CE, on the charge of "atheism, for which many others also were condemned who

<sup>29</sup> James D.G. Dunn, *The Parting of the Ways: Between Christianity and Judaism and their Significance for the Character of Christianity*, London/Philadelphia: SCM Press/Trinity Press International, 1991; 238.

<sup>30</sup> Martin Goodman, *Rome and Jerusalem: The Clash of Ancient Civilizations*, London: Allen Lane, 2007; 467

had drifted into Jewish ways”, mentioning also the execution of the former consul Acilius Glabrio partly on the same charges.<sup>31</sup> By indicating that many others had been condemned by Domitian in the same way, losing life or property, Dio Cassius is describing a new level to the Emperor’s hostility at this time.<sup>32</sup>

b. There is good evidence in rabbinical sources that four leading rabbis from the reconstituted Jewish authority in Jamnia (Judaea) travelled to Rome in the autumn of 95 CE.<sup>33</sup> The ostensible purpose was to intercede for their people with the Roman authorities, in the hope of being able to avert further persecution. It is possible that the abuse (*calumnia*) surrounding the collection of the *Fiscus Iudaicus* had reached intolerable levels, added to the humiliating search for descendants of King David. But both of these annoyances had been continuing for some time, and neither adequately explains why the four leading rabbis made the long journey to Rome at such a hazardous time of year. The reason for this visit must have been much more compelling. Two of the more enigmatic Jewish sources suggest that Domitian was planning to expel the Jews from Rome, or worse,

<sup>31</sup> Dio Cassius, *Hist.* 67, 14. Domitian did not spare his niece, the wife of Clemens, and their seven children, two of whom he had nominated heirs to the throne. Domitilla was exiled to the island of Pandateria on the same charge as her husband and no more was heard of her children (Dio Cassius, *Hist.* 67,14.2; Eusebius, *History of the Church*, III,18.5; Suetonius, *Domitian* 15:1). Roman tradition claims Clemens and Domitilla had become Christians, along with Glabrio, a fellow victim and former consul, although this is disputed.

<sup>32</sup> Dio Cassius, *Hist.* 67, 14. Some have reasonably suggested that these measures were aimed to prevent Romans, or at least high-ranking citizens, from abandoning their traditional religion and becoming Jews or Christians. Goodman disputes this was a problem calling for active measures, claiming Judaism was more unpopular than ever following the destruction of the temple of its only God (*Rome and Jerusalem*, 467; also ‘The *Fiscus Iudaicus* and Gentile Attitudes to Judaism in Flavian Rome’, *Flavius Josephus and Flavian Rome*, eds. Edmondson, Mason and Rives, Oxford: OUP, 2005; 172-7). Goodman’s view of widespread negative attitudes towards Judaism actually conflicts with the evidence, presented below, for a successful conspiracy against Domitian by Jewish sympathizers in the Senate. Goodman’s view is not unchallenged, however, and is rightly rejected by William Horbury, in his *The Jewish War Under Trajan and Hadrian*, Cambridge: CUP, 2014; 132-6.

<sup>33</sup> The evidence is dispersed in various rabbinical sources: a useful summary can be found in the recent book by Reuven Hammer, *Akiva: Life, Legend, Legacy*, Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2015; 35-39.

but was dissuaded by Ketiah Bar Shalom, identified by historians as Flavius Clemens, who paid with his life.<sup>34</sup>

c. At about this time (93-95 CE), Domitian seems to have been alert to the incubation of a messianic Jewish revolt, for he used informants to hunt down and execute anyone, in the Jewish or Christian communities, who was known to be a descendant of King David and the Judaeen royal family. There is even a Christian account of Domitian summoning Zoker and James, the two grandsons of Jude, Jesus Christ's brother, to an interrogation. They were released after giving their witness and demonstrating that they were simple farmers in Galilee.<sup>35</sup> For the same reason, a brutal investigation of the son of Christ's uncle, Simon son of Clopas, also took place around this time.<sup>36</sup>

d. In the same year (95-96 CE), the apostle John wrote his Book of Revelation after being exiled to the island of Patmos, even though he was about 83 years old.<sup>37</sup> As a circumcised Jew, he was obliged to pay the temple tax to the Romans, but could not be forced to observe pagan rituals or be charged with membership of an 'illicit association'. The only charge that could have been brought against him was 'causing a disturbance of the peace by his preaching' (cf. 1,9). Since only the nobility were offered exile instead of the death penalty, it is possible that the sentencing magistrate accepted that he was the 'high priest' of their branch of Judaism and so he was punished with exile on the Isle of Patmos.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>34</sup> B. *Avod. Zar.* 10b, and *Deut. R.* ii.24. For discussion of these sources and their historical interpretation, see 'Barnabas, Nerva, and the Yavnean Rabbis', by Peter Richardson and Martin B. Shukster, in *Journal of the Theological Society* (NS), vol 34, Pt 1, April 1983, 31-55. For more on this figure, see Moses Aberbach, 'Ketiah Bar Shalom', in *Enc. Jud.*, 1st ed, Vol 10, cols 925-6.

<sup>35</sup> Hegesippus *apud* Eusebius, *History of the Church* III,19-20.

<sup>36</sup> Hegesippus *apud* Eusebius, *History of the Church* III,32.3

<sup>37</sup> For confirmation that this was John the apostle, cf. Eusebius, *History of the Church* III,18.1-5, who mentions the exile of Domitilla at the same time. John returned to Ephesus at the start of Nerva's reign; *op.cit.* III,20.10-11.

<sup>38</sup> A century later, he was remembered as 'the one who wore the petalon (mitre)' according to Polycrates *apud* Eusebius, *History of the Church* III,31.3. See also note 11 in chapter 2 of this volume.

e. Several early Christian writers, including John (cf. Rev 1,9; 2,10.13), describe this period as one of particular hardship and suffering for Christians, in Rome and elsewhere. In 95 CE, Clement of Rome refers to this difficult time when he excuses his delay in writing to the Corinthians on “the sudden and repeated calamities that have befallen us”.<sup>39</sup> In Alexandria, Pseudo-Barnabas may have been referring to it when he writes “For these are evil days, with the worker of Evil himself in the ascendant”.<sup>40</sup> According to Melito of Sardis, Tertullian and Eusebius, the Emperor Domitian ranks with Nero as an organizer of persecution against Christians.<sup>41</sup> Eusebius wrote “Many were the victims of Domitian’s appalling cruelty. At Rome great numbers of men distinguished by birth and attainments were for no reason at all banished from the country and their property confiscated. Finally he showed himself the successor of Nero in enmity and hostility to God. He was, in fact, the second to organize persecution against us, though his father Vespasian had had no mischievous designs against us”.<sup>42</sup> By saying ‘finally’, Eusebius is indicating that Domitian’s turn against God, and against God’s people, took place at the end of his reign.<sup>43</sup>

All the evidence presented above shows that, as Domitian’s reign was coming to an end (95-96 CE), his cruelty was not merely aimed at those who crossed or annoyed him, but was strongly focused

<sup>39</sup> 1 *Clement* 1:1, as quoted in F.F. Bruce, *New Testament History*, 412.

<sup>40</sup> *Letter of Barnabas*, 2; dated convincingly to the reign of Nerva (96-98 CE) by Peter Richardson and Martin B. Shukster in ‘Barnabas, Nerva, and the Yavnean Rabbis’, *Journal of the Theological Society* (NS), vol 34, Pt.1, April 1983, 53-55; supported by James Carleton Paget, *The Epistle of Barnabas: Outlook and Background* (Reihe 2, 64) Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1994; 26-28; and Horbury, *Jewish War*, 298-303.

<sup>41</sup> Melito, *Petition*, apud Eusebius, *History of the Church* IV,26.9; Tertullian, *Apol.* 5:4; Eusebius, *History of the Church* III.17 (quoted below).

<sup>42</sup> Quoted from Eusebius, *The History of the Church*, 3.17, Eng trans G.A. Williamson, rev. ed. London: Penguin, 1988; 80.

<sup>43</sup> Modern historians are eager to revise the impression that Domitian’s hostility was aimed specifically against Christians, but was rather projected widely on to any and every perceived rival or opponent. Eusebius’ statement not only confirms Domitian’s persecution of people other than Christians (“great numbers of men distinguished by birth and attainment”), but also affirms that Domitian’s hostility against Christians was intensified at the end of his reign. This matches Dio Cassius’ report that towards the end of his reign, especially between 95-96 CE, Domitian focussed his anger specifically on those who had ‘drifted into Jewish ways’, which included Christians.

on Jews, Christians and those gentiles who were 'drifting into Jewish ways' or, to be more precise, on Jewish sympathizers among the ruling elites and on those pagans who were leaving their traditional customs to become Jews or Christians. Finally the intensity of hostility against these religious minorities actually increased in 95-96 CE, over and above previous levels, suggesting that Domitian was aware of a specific threat arising from their communities, similar perhaps to the revolt of Antonius Saturninus in 88 CE.

What happened next not only confirms that there was a serious threat, but also indicates the nature of the threat which Domitian was reacting against at the end of his reign: "He suspected, not without reason, that many members of the senate were plotting against him, and towards the end of his reign he took severe action against some of them, including certain members of the imperial family... It was Domitilla's steward, Stephanus by name, who a few months later offered his service to a group of senatorial conspirators against Domitian's life and assassinated him (18 September, A.D. 96). The same day, Domitian was replaced by Nerva, an elderly Senator (96-98), who reversed several of Domitian's tyrannical measures".<sup>44</sup> As with Nero, Domitian's memory was then 'condemned to oblivion' (*damnatio memoriae*) by the Roman Senate, and those who had been exiled were allowed to return to their homes, including Domitilla, the wife of the executed consul Flavius Clemens, and John the apostle.<sup>45</sup> Evidently the senatorial conspiracy which Domitian had tried to suppress finally succeeded in destroying him in 96 CE, at the age of 44. Of significance is the fact that the conspiracy was given a religious dimension by the historian Dio Cassius, when he refers to the charge against the many who were condemned as 'drifting into Jewish ways'.

<sup>44</sup> F.F. Bruce, *New Testament History*, 412-3. It is said that Domitian's wife and immediate household knew of the plot and helped to carry it through to completion, cf. M. Goodman, *Rome and Jerusalem*, 468. Goodman also notes "Nerva had probably connived in Domitian's murder and thus had a strong interest in winning popular support in Rome by countermanding his predecessor's unpopular actions", 'Diaspora Reactions to the Destruction of the Temple', *Jews and Christians: The Parting of the Ways AD 70 to 135*, ed James D.G. Dunn (WUNT 66), Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1992; 33.

<sup>45</sup> The release of the exiles by Emperor Nerva, including John, is reported in Eusebius, *History of the Church*, III,20.10-11 and again in III,23.1 (quoting Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, II. 33.2 and III. 3.4), also in Dio Cassius, *Hist.* 68, 2.

Within a short time of taking office Nerva gained Senate approval to reverse Domitian's policy on the collection of the former temple tax called *Fiscus Iudaicus*, further raising suspicion that Jewish interests were at stake in the conspiracy against the former Emperor, and that Jewish sympathizers formed a majority in the Roman Senate.<sup>46</sup> The reversal was announced on coins issued three times in Rome, between November 96 CE and Summer 97 CE, with the caption "FISCI IUDAICI CALUMNIA SUBLATA", translated "the abuse of the Jewish Fund has been lifted". Although the specifics of this change are debated, it is agreed that an alleviation in the collection of the tax followed with immediate effect, if not actually a temporary suspension.<sup>47</sup> According to Dio Cassius, Emperor Nerva also cancelled Domitian's policy of criminalizing 'atheism', 'impiety' and 'a Jewish mode of life', released all those on trial for these charges and executed the informers.<sup>48</sup>

There is also a substantial body of unofficial evidence indicating that Nerva gave permission for the Jews to return to Jerusalem, rebuild the temple and restore sacrifices. This could have been agreed while the four leading rabbis from Jamnia were still in Rome, for it appears that they were present at the enthronement of the new emperor in September 96 CE. Dated by textual clues to 97 or 98 CE, the Letter of Barnabas indicates, by combining two verbs in the future tense ('shall build', 'will build again') with a verb in the present ('it is happening'), that the Jews had received permission, and were already planning, to rebuild the temple with the help of the Romans: "Lo, they who destroyed this temple shall themselves build it. That is happening

<sup>46</sup> An extraordinarily detailed survey of the extent of Jewish involvement in this conspiracy can be found in the article by Shimon Applebaum, 'Domitian's Assassination: The Jewish Aspect', in *Scripta Classica Israelica*, vol 1, (1974); 116-32. In summary: "Judaism had penetrated deeply not only the ranks of the Roman aristocracy, but also among the Roman populace. It need not be assumed, of course, that everyone accused of judaization was really a proselyte, but evidently genuine conversions were sufficiently common to make the charge plausible. It seems, moreover, that a rapprochement with Judaism had begun to serve among the oppressed nobility as an expression of protest against the tyrant", *ibid* 121.

<sup>47</sup> Interestingly, archaeological surveys at Edfu (Apollonopolis Magna), in Upper Egypt, show an absence of evidence (inscribed potsherds or ostraca) for the collection of the Jewish tax until 98 CE, i.e. there was a pause of about 1-2 years during the reign of Nerva, until it was resumed in the first year of Trajan's reign.

<sup>48</sup> Dio Cassius, *Hist.* 68,1-2.

[now]. For owing to the war, it was destroyed by the enemy; at present even the servants of the enemy will build it up again".<sup>49</sup> The news of Nerva's change of policy towards the Jews, and particularly towards the rebuilding of the temple, seem to be the author's motive for writing the letter, which adopts a stance strongly opposed to these plans. He is thought to have been a Christian Jew from Alexandria.

In early 98 CE the elderly Nerva died after only 16 months on the throne and was succeeded by Trajan. Trajan initially adhered to his predecessor's policies regarding the Jews, who celebrated a feast day every year in his honour and called it 'Trajan Day'.<sup>50</sup> The friendship must have been mutual, for it incurred a reprimand from a Greek delegate from Alexandria, called Hermaiscus, when visiting the Emperor in Rome around 112 CE. After the Emperor had criticized the Greeks for treating the Jews harshly in Alexandria, Hermaiscus bravely accused the Emperor of being an advocate of the impious Jews, and remarked 'We are sorry to see your council filled with impious Jews'.<sup>51</sup> Commenting on this remark Horbury writes, "No doubt that is wild, but it will exaggerate a sympathy with Jews and Judaism genuinely found among some associated with senatorial circles. This would be consistent with the upper-class attraction to Judaism which was criticized by Persius under Nero and again by Juvenal under Trajan or Hadrian, and is suggested under Domitian by Dio Cassius on T. Flavius Clemens and by Epictetus".<sup>52</sup> As an indication of the prevailing mood at the end of the first century, Josephus issued his apology for Judaism, *Contra Apionem*, in which he presents Judaism as "the rational man's religion", and also reissued his own autobiography.<sup>53</sup>

<sup>49</sup> *Letter of Barnabas*, 16:3-4, citing Isa 49,17, quoted by Richardson and Shukster in 'Barnabas, Nerva, and the Yavnean Rabbis', 34; references supporting the dating of this letter are given in n. 40.

<sup>50</sup> *Megillat Ta'anit* on 12<sup>th</sup> Adar.

<sup>51</sup> It appears that Trajan's wife, the Empress Plotina, was a Jewish sympathizer and encouraged her husband to be the same. For the above interpretation of the original source (*Acts of Hermaiscus*, POxy. 1242 = *Acta Alexandrinorum VIII* = CPJ 157), see Horbury, *Jewish War under Trajan and Hadrian*, Cambridge: CUP, 2014; 213-5.

<sup>52</sup> Horbury, *Jewish War*, 304.

<sup>53</sup> One wonders how much Josephus may have been involved in the activities to depose Domitian and replace him with Nerva, being himself a member of the



In brief, Nerva's reign and the early part of Trajan's, were times of genuine détente and mutual respect between the Roman leadership and Judaism, in which the return of the Jews to Judaea and the restoration of Jerusalem and her temple looked certain. Jewish tradition does indeed allude to the time when the Romans gave the order to rebuild the temple, whereupon they resumed immigration to Jerusalem and Judaea, aided by two wealthy Jews by the names of Lulianus and Pappus: "In the days of Joshua b. Hananiah the [Roman] State ordered the Temple to be rebuilt, Pappus and Lulianus set tables from Acco as far as Antioch and provided those who came up from the Exile with all their needs..."<sup>54</sup> These two eminent Jews are reported to have set up banks along the Mediterranean coast, from Northern Israel to Syrian Laodicea, to finance pilgrims and immigrants coming from the diaspora, and especially from Cyprus. Archaeology has confirmed the success of their work, and of the Emperor Nerva's reform, by finding in Judaea and Samaria a large number of Domitian coins countermarked with the profile of Nerva or Trajan.<sup>55</sup>

From a benediction in the Mishnah, prescribed by R. Akiba at around this time, it appears that building activity was in progress and

Flavian household and therefore close to those who had suffered at Domitian's hands.

<sup>54</sup> *Gen. R.* lxiv 10 on Gn 26,29, as quoted by Richardson and Shukster in 'Barnabas, Nerva, and the Yavnean Rabbis', 47. R. Joshua Ben Hananiah was a disciple of R. Yochanan Ben Zakkai, and a leading member of the Rabbinic Council of Jamnia. Like Ben Zakkai, he was known for his conciliatory attitude to the Romans and was one of the four rabbis on the delegation to Rome in 95-96 CE. He took over leadership of the Council after the death of Gamaliel II (c. 114 CE) until his own death in 131 CE. The chronology of this account in *Gen. R.* lxiv 10 is so confused that many scholars follow Schürer in asserting that it has no historical value at all. But so long as we bear in mind that the episode refers, not to the *giving* of the order to rebuild, but to the announcement of its *cancellation* at the instigation of the Samaritans and, above all, to R. Joshua's role in deterring the crowd from rebellion, then the date can be inferred as follows: granting that the two eminent financiers Lulianus and Pappus were finally put to death by Trajan (according to several Talmudic sources), then this episode can be dated between 114, when R. Joshua Ben Hananiah took over leadership of the Council, and 117 when Trajan himself died. As it is highly likely that the outbreak of the diaspora revolt (War of Kitos/Quietus) from 115-118 was also due to the cancellation of the order to rebuild (for lack of a conciliatory intervention like that of R. Joshua in Judaea), then the cancellation can be dated fairly accurately to the years 114-115 CE.

<sup>55</sup> Cf. Richardson and Shukster, 'Barnabas, Nerva, and the Yavnean Rabbis', 44, n. 28.

sacrifices had resumed at an altar on the Temple Mount: "Therefore, O Lord our God and the God of our Fathers, bring us in peace to the other set feasts and festivals which are coming to meet us, while we rejoice in the building-up of thy city and are joyful in thy worship; and may we eat there of the sacrifices and of the Passover-offerings whose blood has reached with acceptance the wall of thy Altar, and let us praise thee for our redemption and for the ransoming of our soul. Blessed art thou, O Lord, who hast redeemed Israel!"<sup>56</sup>

Mention should also be made of the Talmudic report that R. Gamaliel II instructed his slave to "Go out and roast us the Passover offering on the perforated grill...", followed by a discussion of the correct procedure.<sup>57</sup> Given that the Passover sacrifice could only take place on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem and that R. Gamaliel II was the head of the Rabbinic Council in Jamnia from about 80-114 CE, then this report signals the restoration of sacrificial rites on the site of the temple, in the period under consideration. In fact, there are many other accounts in the literature that indicate some form of cultic activity on the Temple Mount between 70 and 135 CE,<sup>58</sup> although it is not likely to have been permitted under the Flavian Emperors (69-96 CE), since their policy was to humiliate the Jews and make political capital out of their defeat, even to the extent of shutting down the Oniad temple at Leontopolis in Egypt (73 CE). Under this policy, which became most severe under Domitian (81-96 CE), it is difficult to imagine the soldiers of the garrison in Jerusalem allowing access to the Temple Mount or permitting any significant building activity in the City. Not until Nerva was there any significant change in this policy towards the Jews and with his liberalizing reforms in 96 CE it is at last conceivable that building on the Temple Mount and in the City was permitted and, at the same time, the resumption of sacrificial activity

<sup>56</sup> M. *Pesahim* 10:6, *The Mishnah*, Eng trans Herbert Danby, Oxford: OUP, 1933; 151. R. Akiba Ben Yosef was born around 50 CE, was ordained and appointed a judge in 93 CE, was one of the leading rabbis from Jamnia to travel to Rome in 95-96 CE, founded his own academy in Bnei Barak and flourished in Judaea until his death under Roman torture in 132, having already proclaimed Bar Kochba the messiah in 131 CE (cf. Reuven Hammer, *Akiva: Life, Legend, Legacy*, xxi-xxii).

<sup>57</sup> TB *Pesahim* 75a.

<sup>58</sup> For a thorough survey see the essay by Kenneth Willis Clarke, 'Worship in the Jerusalem Temple after A.D.70', in *The Gentile Bias and Other Essays*, Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1980; 9-20.

too. It is undoubtedly to the post-96 CE period that the reports of cultic activity on the Temple Mount refer.

It is not known how or why this agreement broke down, though Jewish frustration at the lack of progress was one of the main causes of the violent diaspora rebellions from 115-118 and the final revolt in 132-135 CE.<sup>59</sup> William Horbury suggests that the Emperor Trajan withdrew his support sometime between 106-11 CE, because of “fears of unrest in the eastern provinces”, following the annexation of Arabia.<sup>60</sup> Almost certainly other factors contributed to the Emperor’s decision. He may have become aware of the messianic prophecies circulating at this time, which all associated the rebuilding of the temple with the appearance of the Davidic king-messiah, who would then judge and destroy the Roman Empire and oversee the transfer of power to Jerusalem.<sup>61</sup> Also to be considered is the Jewish tradition that mentions an intervention by the Jews’ ancient rivals, the Samaritans, who advised the emperor to withdraw permission and tipped him on how this could best be done.<sup>62</sup> According to this

<sup>59</sup> “The long-term consequences [of losing hope that the Jewish Temple might be rehabilitated within Roman society] were immense. Towards the end of Trajan’s rule, in 115 CE, a violent Jewish insurrection erupted in Egypt, Cyrene, Cyprus and Mesopotamia. Our sources of evidence—all either Christian or pagan, since the rabbis were silent on the whole affair—give no reason for the uprising, but the obvious cause will have been frustration at the continuing refusal of Rome to allow the Temple to be rebuilt.” Martin Goodman, ‘The Temple in First Century CE Judaism’, in *Temple and Worship in Biblical Israel*, Ed John Day, London and New York: T & T Clark International, 2005; 465.

<sup>60</sup> Horbury, *Jewish War*, 304.

<sup>61</sup> By this time at least three of these messianic prophecies were circulating in Greek: *4Ezra* (c. 100 CE), *2Baruch* (c. 105) and *Sib Or* 5 (c.110). In *4Ezra*, Trajan would have been identified with the last of the line of Roman emperors: if the third head of the Eagle in the 5<sup>th</sup> vision is identified with Domitian (*4Ezra* 12), then the two little wings who follow would be Nerva and Trajan. The vision then foresees the termination of Trajan’s reign by the Lion, who represents the messiah of the Jews. In this situation there was clearly little Trajan could have done to avoid Jewish messianic fervour aimed against himself and the Romans.

<sup>62</sup> The tradition derives from *Gen. R.* lxiv 10 on Gn 26,29, partially quoted above. It does not take much effort to imagine the strife that would have been caused by Jews returning to the properties they had abandoned 40 years previously. Undoubtedly many of those properties had been occupied by opportunists from Samaria and other neighbouring countries, not to mention properties that had been handed over to Roman army veterans as a reward for their services during the first revolt.

tradition, the cancellation of the 'order to rebuild the temple' can be dated quite accurately to 114-115 CE.<sup>63</sup> A tradition in the Scholion of *Megillat Ta'anit* reports that Trajan had to resort to executing Lulianus and Pappus, the Jewish bankers who were "active in organizing the movement of Jews into Palestine",<sup>64</sup> most likely in order to enforce his earlier prohibition on returning to Jerusalem and rebuilding the temple. The tradition goes on to connect this murderous deed with his own immediate death (117 CE). Though this coincidence is unlikely, Trajan's death could have followed quite soon after. Several Talmudic passages then report the cancellation of 'Trajan Day', in the wake of the killing of these two eminent Jews.<sup>65</sup>

Summarizing, it appears that around 114-115 CE Trajan reversed his permission for the Jews to return to Judaea and rebuild their temple because of local unrest, but they continued nonetheless. Soon several regions of the diaspora were in revolt (the War of Kitos/Quietus, 115-118 CE) and all means were necessary to prevent the violence spreading to Judaea. To enforce his earlier prohibition on immigration, Trajan or his commander Quietus executed the bankers Lulianus and Pappus in about 116-117 CE.

The picture that emerges from this arrangement of historical data is quite novel: a conspiracy of Jewish sympathizers amongst the Roman ruling elite finally succeeded in taking out the tyrannical Emperor Domitian in 96 CE and replacing him with their own man, Emperor Nerva. Nerva acted with speed to reverse the anti-Jewish taxes and laws introduced by his predecessor and abolish the abuses. Within a short time, the word spread around that the Jews had started rebuilding the temple in Jerusalem. This appears to have motivated a letter of passionate opposition by an Alexandrian Christian once identified with the apostle Barnabas, whose statements confirm the start of preparations for temple building. On the Jewish side, there is really no way, other than with the renewal of sacrifices, to explain the joyful combination of present attainment and future anticipation in the benediction that R. Akiba prescribed for the Seder on the first

<sup>63</sup> For our dating of the cancellation of the order, see note 54.

<sup>64</sup> Quote from Shimon Applebaum, 'Notes on the Jewish Revolt under Trajan', *Journal of Jewish Studies*, (1966) vol 2, 29.

<sup>65</sup> TY *Ta'an* 2:13, 66a; TY *Meg* 1:6, 70a; TB *Ta'an* 18b.

night of Passover.<sup>66</sup> This benediction fits well with the beginning of the process of restoration, around 100-110 CE, and suggests that an altar was in use on the Temple Mount at that time. It complements the literary evidence of an effort to help Jews return to Judaea and Jerusalem from the western diaspora and particularly from Cyprus.<sup>67</sup> A few modern scholars are beginning to recognize that 'something of the Temple worship was restored' at this time.<sup>68</sup>

The 'return' of the Jews continued well into the reign of Nerva's successor Trajan, and lasted until around 114-115 CE. So for 17 years, from late 96 to about 114, there was—or at least there appeared to be—a real expectation among the Jews that Jerusalem would be restored and the temple rebuilt, at first under Nerva and then under Trajan. For reasons unknown, but most likely included local unrest caused by Jewish immigration, Trajan then prohibited further activities leading towards resettlement of Jerusalem and rebuilding the temple (114-115). Messianic fervour coupled with frustration caused by Trajan's prohibition were the main causes of the violent diaspora revolts that lasted from 115-118, and contributed to the final revolt of 132-135 CE.

The foregoing interpretation of the literary evidence also supports, albeit indirectly, the current view that the rebel forces of Bar Kochba did not occupy or restore Jerusalem or its temple at this time (132-133/4 CE), as previously thought. From the remark of some early historians that the Emperor Hadrian 'destroyed' Jerusalem (132-135 CE), scholars have, in the past, inferred that the rebels had been able to recapture the city and rebuild it to a certain extent following the initial successes of the second revolt, before eventually being evicted and the city destroyed by Hadrian's massively

<sup>66</sup> M. *Pesahim* 10:6, quoted above.

<sup>67</sup> As mentioned above, under the direction of Lulianus and Pappus.

<sup>68</sup> Cf. K.W. Clarke, 'Worship in the Jerusalem Temple after A.D.70', *The Gentile Bias*, 9-20. In a talk 'On the Destruction of the Jerusalem Temple', at a recent conference on *Rethinking the Jewish War (66-74 CE)*, [Ecole Biblique, Jerusalem, from Oct 30–Nov 1, 2018], Prof. Etienne Nodet presented evidence culled from Jewish (Rabbinic and Josephus), pagan and Christian sources that concluded: "if we dispose of the early Rabbinic traditions, which represented a very limited portion of the Jewish people between 70 and 135, we may safely conclude that during this period the population increased in Judea, and that something of the Temple worship was restored". At the very least, the construction or repair of the outer altar is implied.

reinforced armies.<sup>69</sup> This inference, however, is nowadays challenged by the complete absence of rebel coinage in Jerusalem, despite its presence in every other rebel-held area. So, on balance, scholars these days tend to stress the absence of evidence for the rebel occupation of Jerusalem, leaving unanswered the question of how Hadrian could have destroyed the city if it had never been rebuilt since the destruction of the first revolt in 70 CE.

However, this statement about Hadrian would fit well with the period of restoration defined above, during the dates proposed (96-114/5 CE). It is quite probable that the Roman army's first response to the outbreak of the second revolt in 132 CE would have been to expel the resident Jewish population and destroy whatever they had managed to rebuild in these few years of rapprochement. By expelling the Jewish inhabitants, destroying their homes, preventing their access to basic resources, and by using force of arms as necessary, the Roman military garrison established in Jerusalem and in surrounding areas (Givat Ram, Ramat Rachel, Motza, Castel, Abu Ghosh, Emmaus Nicopolis) could have prevented the rebels from gaining a foothold in Jerusalem. A scorched-earth policy at the start of the revolt (132 CE) would not only explain the contemporaneous and sudden abandonment of a flourishing Jewish settlement recently excavated near Givat Sha'ul, 4 kms north of the Old City,<sup>70</sup> but would explain the historical reputation of Hadrian as a destroyer of Jerusalem, even though, after defeating the rebels, he proceeded with his pre-war plans to rebuild it as a Roman Colony renamed Aelia Capitolina.

#### A Change in Perspective

Although Emperor Domitian relied on informers to a great extent, it was no secret that the Jews had high hopes of restoring

<sup>69</sup> E.g., Samuel Abramsky on "Bar Kochba" in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed, Jerusalem: Keter, 1971; vol 4, col 234: "Appian, a contemporary of the revolt, Eusebius, in his *De Theophania*, and Jerome (fifth century C.E.), in his commentary on Jeremiah 31:15, all state that Jerusalem was destroyed in the days of Hadrian. It would therefore appear that Bar Kochba captured the city and only after his military defeat did Hadrian regain control and destroy it." For the counter argument, see Horbury, *Jewish War*, 347-48.

<sup>70</sup> Cf. Jonathan J. Price, 'The Jewish Population of Jerusalem', in *The Jewish Revolt Against Rome: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, ed Mladen Popović, Leiden: Brill, 2011; 414-17.

Jerusalem and rebuilding their temple. For this they prayed three times a day in their synagogues.<sup>71</sup> The destruction following their defeat in the first revolt (66-72 CE) had hit them badly, not only because of the huge human loss, displacement and enslavement, but also because of the pain and disorientation at the destruction of their religious and cultural centre. However, similar catastrophes had happened to them in the past, most memorably in 586 BCE, and yet they had returned 70 years later to restore their nation and rebuild their temple. Following the defeat in 70 CE, Jewish refugees from Judaea streamed into the main population centres of the Roman Empire—Rome, Ephesus, Alexandria, and Antioch—where they recovered quickly with help from the wealthy diaspora communities. As noted by the Church historian W.H.C. Frend, “The speed and extent of the Jewish recovery after 70 both in Palestine and the Dispersion have sometimes been underestimated. In these two generations Judaism was far from being a spent force politically or culturally”.<sup>72</sup>

Nevertheless, it is not uncommon for scholars to assume that Jewish religious and political ambitions ended completely with the destruction of the second temple in 70 CE. This is generally regarded as the watershed moment in Jewish history when Jews throughout the Roman Empire settled down in the diaspora and made a permanent adaptation to life without their temple, under the leadership of R. Yochanan Ben Zakkai and the Council of Jewish sages at Jamnia. Subsequently, according to this view, there were a few local Jewish uprisings in various places, but, in the words of Martin Noth, these

<sup>71</sup> Cf. Martin Goodman, *Rome and Jerusalem*, 448-9. Also ‘The Temple in First Century Judaism’, *Temple and Worship in Biblical Israel*, 2005; 463: “The Temple had been destroyed, so the task of Jews must be to ensure that, as rapidly as possible, it be rebuilt”. A prayer for the restoration of Jerusalem, the temple and the throne of David was one of the eighteen benedictions (*Shmoneh ‘Esreh*) pronounced thrice daily in the synagogues from antiquity.

<sup>72</sup> W.H.C. Frend, *The Early Church*, London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1984; 35. In his *Rise of Christianity*, the same author writes: “It would be a mistake to think that after the fall of Jerusalem Judaism turned in upon itself. In Palestine it reorganized itself quickly around the scholars of the academy at Jamnia under a leader (patriarch) of the house of Hillel”, *The Rise of Christianity*, Minneapolis: Fortress, 1982; 125.

form “an appendix to the history of Israel, which had already come to an end”.<sup>73</sup>

According to this view, the Jews were a spent force after 70 CE, on their way out of history, creating trouble here and there, but nothing to threaten the imperial authorities or the growth and expansion of the Christian churches. On the basis of this view, Domitian’s hostility from 90-96, but especially from 95-96 CE, had no particular motive and can only be understood as the cruel and vindictive violence of a psychopathic tyrant.

In fact, though poorly documented at the time, the subsequent uprisings and wars were much more extensive and destructive than the first, leading to the conclusion that the first revolt was just the beginning of a resolute and unrelenting Jewish nationalist movement increasing in intensity over the next 65 years and culminating in the second Jewish revolt, which ended with the virtual eradication of Jewish life in Judaea and Jerusalem. One scholar of the period justly observes “In long-term consequences, the Bar-Kokhba Rebellion of 132-135 CE, “the Last Revolt” against Roman rule, may well have been the greatest disaster in Jewish history, bar none”.<sup>74</sup> The true watershed moment for Jews, then, was the defeat of the second revolt in 135 CE, for only then did the surviving Jews settle down in the diaspora and make a permanent adaptation to life without their temple.

Contrasting with the former view presented above, this revised view holds that Jews had recovered so well by 90 CE that they were

<sup>73</sup> Martin Noth, rev Eng trans, *The History of Israel*, London: Adam and Charles Black, 1960; 448. Quoting from Isaac and Oppenheimer (‘The Revolt of Bar Kochba: Ideology and Modern Scholarship’, *Journal of Jewish Studies*, vol xxxv, no. 1, Spring 1985; 33), Daniel Gruber writes: “In a similar way, ‘Historians used to assume that the Jewish diaspora began after the destruction of the Second Temple. This view was determined by a theological concept, for in the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth scholars wished to represent the destruction of the Second Temple as divine punishment of the people of Israel since they saw the rise of Christianity as the true continuation of Judaism.’ This negated the importance of the Bar Kochba Rebellion, since “the issue” had already been decided in 70 CE. The theological conclusion distorted the history.” *Rabbi Akiba’s Messiah: The Origins of Rabbinic Authority*, Hanover: Elijah Publishing, 1999; 14.

<sup>74</sup> Daniel Gruber, *Rabbi Akiba’s Messiah: The Origins of Rabbinic Authority*, Hanover: Elijah Publishing, 1999; 1; who on p.1 also cites S. Abramsky on “Bar Kochba” in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, vol 4, col 2236: “In Jewish tradition the fall of Bethar [the headquarters of the Bar Kochba Revolt] was a disaster equal to the destruction of the First and Second Temples”.



perceived as a growing threat by Domitian, whose hostility can now be understood as a justifiable concern, and by 132 CE they were again ready to challenge the Romans with greater unity and strength than in the first revolt. According to this revised view the intervening period should therefore be redefined as an increasingly assertive resurgence of Jewish nationalism. It is this rising tide of Jewish nationalism that best explains subsequent history of the Jews and their tragic interactions with the Romans and Greeks, and indeed with Christians too. Since it better explains the history of the period 90 and 135 CE, it forms the genuine background for the interpretation of the Judeo-Christian literature produced in these years, including *4Ezra* 3-14, *2Baruch*, 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> *Sibylline Oracles*, *Apocalypse of Abraham*, the Johannine Corpus, the Letter of Barnabas, the Letters of Ignatius and the *Apocalypse of Peter*, amongst others, not to mention the reform of Judaism that was taking place under the rabbis at Jamnia, especially under R. Akiva, with the selection of the canon of Hebrew Scriptures and of an official text, the new translations of the texts into Greek and into Aramaic, and the collection of materials that would eventually be included in the Mishnah (the core of tractates *Tamid*, *Yoma* and *Middoth*).

In so far as this passionate yearning for the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem, and the resurgence of national restoration among Jews, from 90-135 CE, have not yet been grasped by scholars, it is an 'elephant in the room' of first-second century studies.

#### The Impact of the Jewish National Resurgence

At the end of the first century, the Christian churches were expanding rapidly in Asia Minor and elsewhere, but Christians were numerically still a small minority compared with the Jews, who comprised about 10% of the Roman Empire at that time, and about 5% of the population of Rome. Although the 'parting of the ways' had begun around 90 CE, with the establishment, official recognition and increasing influence of the Rabbinical Council of Jamnia under Rabbi Gamaliel II, there were still strong social and cultural ties between the Jewish and Christian communities. The introduction of the so-called *Birkat HaMinim* 'benediction' may have contributed to a liturgical

separation of members of both communities in the early 90's,<sup>75</sup> but the boundaries were still blurred by 95-96 CE, especially in the area of eschatology based on the book of Daniel. Both communities shared the hope for the establishment of the kingdom of God on earth by his messiah. Both communities regarded the Roman Empire to be the fourth beast of Daniel, more or less evil and destined for destruction by the messiah at the appointed time (Dn 7). So in this area of the faith, there was still room for agreement, despite sharp differences on other issues (e.g., Torah, Election, Monotheism and Temple<sup>76</sup>).

However, in 96 CE, with Emperor Nerva's reforms, the boundaries became clearer quite rapidly, as noted by Martin Goodman as follows: "All sorts of consequences may have resulted from this reform by Nerva. On the one hand it seems likely that the Roman state, and Romans in general, for the first time came properly to appreciate that people of non-Jewish origin could become Jews... On the other hand the definition of apostasy became startlingly clear for Jews... after A.D. 96 any ethnic Jew who publicly refused to pay the annual levy to the *fiscus Judaicus* on the grounds that he was no longer religiously Jewish thereby put his apostasy beyond doubt. It seems to me no accident that a clear distinction between Jews and Christians begins regularly to appear in pagan Roman texts after A.D. 96".<sup>77</sup>

It is easy to agree with Goodman about the significant effects of Nerva's reforms on 'the parting of the ways', but less easy to see this depending on the payment of the *Fiscus Judaicus*. It might have helped the Roman administration to identify who is a Jew, but why should the Jews themselves have based their identity on such an insulting obligation imposed by external authority? Nevertheless, Goodman's intuition is closer to the truth than at first may appear. It was not the

<sup>75</sup> "We may reasonably surmise that Jews willing to utter this 'benediction' tended to abandon Christianity, while Jews or proselytes unwilling to utter it were put out of the synagogue", Craig A. Evans 'Root Causes of the Jewish-Christian Rift from Jesus to Justin', *Christian-Jewish Relations through the Centuries*, eds. S. Porter and B. Pearson, JSNTS 192, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000; 22.

<sup>76</sup> Following the main categories ('the four pillars of Judaism') discussed by James D.G. Dunn, in his *Parting of the Ways: Between Christianity and Judaism and their Significance for the Character of Christianity*, London/Philadelphia: SCM Press/Trinity Press International, 1991.

<sup>77</sup> Goodman, 'Diaspora Reactions to the Destruction of the Temple', *Jews and Christians*, 1992; 33.

payment of the *Fiscus Judaicus* to the Romans that defined who was a Jew, but rather the original destination of that payment, the Jerusalem temple itself. Richard Bauckham is one of the few scholars to recognize “the centrality of the temple for the self-identity of common Judaism”.<sup>78</sup> By reflecting on what, in antiquity, was common among all the varieties of Jewish belief and practice (considering especially the Samaritans and the Qumran community), and what would therefore have excluded a particular group, Bauckham argues that participation in the Jerusalem temple cult was the most important criteria of Jewish identity in the first century, noting that “The role of the temple in ‘the parting of the ways’ has been comparatively underplayed in the literature on this issue”.<sup>79</sup>

For as long as the Jerusalem temple existed, Christians knew how to oppose it (e.g., Acts 6-8) and to appease it (e.g., Acts 21, 20-25), though fundamentally they saw the Church itself as the temple of the messianic age (e.g., 1Cor 3,16-17; 2Cor 6,16; 1Pet 2,5; 4,17; Eph 2,20-22; Heb 13,15-16; Rev 3,12; 11,1-2), and knew from Christ’s prophecy that the Jerusalem temple was doomed (e.g., Mt 23,38; 24,2; 26,61; 27,40; Mk 13,2; 14,58; 15,29; Lk 13,35; 19,44; 21,6; Jn 2,19).<sup>80</sup> Even after its destruction, however, Bauckham affirms “the issue of the temple did not disappear after 70 C.E., because the temple did not cease to be central to Jewish identity. Few Jews would have expected the loss to be permanent. The temple had been destroyed before—and rebuilt before, significantly after a period more or less the length of the period between 70 CE and the Bar Kochba revolt. Consequently, in Christian literature of this period, between the two Jewish revolts, the temple issue is alive and well precisely in texts in which the schism between Christianity and common Judaism is clear and painful: the Gospel of John, the Epistle of Barnabas”,<sup>81</sup> and one could certainly add the ‘Book of Revelation’ as well.

<sup>78</sup> Richard Bauckham, ‘The Parting of the Ways: What Happened and Why’, *Studia Theologica* 47, (1993); 135-151.

<sup>79</sup> Bauckham, *Parting of the Ways*, 142.

<sup>80</sup> Bauckham demonstrates that it was this basic insight that enabled Christians to redefine their attitudes to all the other ‘pillars of Judaism’ (Election, Monotheism and Torah), gradually bringing about the complete theological separation from the mother Faith (*Parting of the Ways*, 146-8).

<sup>81</sup> Bauckham, *Parting of the Ways*, 145

So, given the centrality of the issue of the temple for Jewish identity, it is at last possible to understand why in 96 CE, Emperor Nerva's reforms had such a huge impact: precisely because they introduced a series of changes that seemed to Jews and Christians to lead inexorably to a restored Jerusalem and a rebuilt temple. From this time onwards the difference between Jews and Christians became quite stark: Jews were in favour of rebuilding the temple and Christians were not. As one might expect, the Jewish Christians, who had hitherto formed a bridge between the two communities, found themselves forced to make a choice. Craig Evans states it like this: "The Jewish wars for liberation from Roman control and the hopes for rebuilding the Temple tended to pit gentile Christians against Jewish Christians. For Jewish Christians this proved to be especially difficult, often forcing them to choose between their faith in Jesus on the one hand, and loyalty to their nation and people on the other".<sup>82</sup>

The new Christian communities were composed of both gentile and Jewish believers in Christ. In the towns and cities of the diaspora, they were joined by many Jewish refugees from the first revolt in 70 CE, who were attracted to Christianity, firstly because of its charity, but also because Christ's prophecy of temple destruction had turned out to be true. However, as time went by and the prophecy of Christ's return became delayed, many of these Jewish Christians would have been tempted to reconsider the truth of Christ's claims to be the messiah. Among gentile converts also, the truth of this claim would have been questioned, with evidence being sought in the scriptures.<sup>83</sup> Into this situation of 'messianic uncertainty', which must have prevailed at the end of the first century (cf. 2Pet 3,1-10), Nerva's reforms of 96 CE would have had a polarizing effect. By opening a door to the restoration of Jerusalem and the rebuilding of the temple, many of those Jews and gentiles who had initially been persuaded that

<sup>82</sup> Craig Evans 'Root Causes of the Jewish-Christian Rift from Jesus to Justin', *Christian-Jewish Relations*, 22-3.

<sup>83</sup> "The main issue between the two communities concerned the proof from Scripture that Jesus was the Messiah. Qumran had had its Testimony literature in favour of the Righteous Teacher. Testimonies and proof texts derived from the Old Testament indicating that Jesus was Messiah played a crucial part in the debate.... Either Jesus did fulfill the prophecies and was Messiah, or he did not and was a fraud who suffered —a just reward for his deceit", W.H.C Frend, *The Rise of Christianity*, 124-5.

Christ was the messiah would have returned to the synagogue and its lure of a material messianic kingdom based in Jerusalem.

Confirmation that this 'desertion' of the church actually happened is recorded in the First Letter of John, where it is described in terms resonant of end-times 'apostasy' (cf. 2Thess 2,3; Mt 24,10): "Children, it is the last hour; and just as you heard that the antichrist was coming, so now many antichrists have appeared. Thus we know it is the last hour. They went out from us, but they were not really of our number; if they had been they would have remained with us. Their desertion shows that none of them was of our number.... Who is the liar? Whoever denies that Jesus is the Christ. Whoever denies the Father and the Son, this is the antichrist. No one who denies the Son has the Father, but whoever confesses the Son has the Father as well." (1Jn 2,18-19.22-23). So this can be dated fairly accurately to the reforms of Nerva that began in 96 CE and continued, under Trajan, until about 114 CE. As tradition holds that the author John died at the start of Trajan's reign (98 -117 CE),<sup>84</sup> the letter must have been written between 96-98 CE.

From precisely the same period, 96-98 CE, the Gospel of John was written to dispel unbelief and reinforce the faith of the believers, at this challenging time for the faith in Christ as the God-sent messiah, (Jn 20,31; 21,24-29; 20,27-29; 17,20-21; 14,10-12; 12,44.49; 11,25-26; 6,29; 3,16). Confronted by enthusiasm for the rebuilding of the temple, John's Gospel gives a prominent place to the 'cleansing of the temple', when Christ dismisses the old concept of temple and identifies the new messianic temple as his own risen body (Jn 3,20-22). He then goes on to announce the redundancy of the temple to the Samaritan woman, because "the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem... the hour is coming, and is now here, when true worshipers will worship the Father in Spirit and truth; and indeed the Father seeks such people to worship him. God is Spirit, and those who worship him must worship in Spirit and truth" (Jn 4,21.23-24). On the same note, there is no need for a temple since the disciples of Jesus will be temples for God the Father: "Whoever loves me will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our dwelling with

<sup>84</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, II.33.2; III.3.4, *apud* Eusebius, *History of the Church* III,23.2-3.

him" (Jn 14,23). All of these passages speak directly to the background described above, of anticipated Jewish national restoration.

Also relevant is the aptness and propriety of the language accusing the Jews of being 'sons of the devil' for wanting to kill Jesus (Jn 8,44) in the context of their claim to be sons of Abraham (8,31-47). The not-so-subtle message here is that the Jews should not feel entitled to return to the land of Israel, as they were planning at that time, because they are not sons of Abraham, to whose descendants the land was promised (Gn 15,18-21). The message is to 'the Jews' in general, not the leaders in particular, because the excitement generated by Nerva's reform affected all the Jews, even those who believed in Jesus (Jn 8,31). The language is appropriately strong so that the readers would understand that support for the Jewish nationalist revival was diabolically opposed to God and would end in disaster. Under the circumstances, which were perceived as being close to the end-times, strong language was clearly required to dissuade Jewish believers in Christ from choosing the wrong path.<sup>85</sup>

The mention of the antichrist and the devil in John's first letter and Gospel bring us back to the Book of Revelation, to consider the way in which the Jewish national revival under Nerva also appears in the background for this work.

### The Jewish National Resurgence and the Book of Revelation

Before presenting those aspects of the Book of Revelation that appear to respond to a background of Jewish national revival as outlined above, it is important to recall that the visions recorded in

<sup>85</sup> There is a modern tendency to feel embarrassment about, and to apologize for, the author's harsh language against 'the Jews' (e.g., *Anti-Judaism in the Fourth Gospel*, eds. R. Bieringer, D. Pollefeyt, F. Vandecasteele-Vanneuville, Louisville, London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001). It is helpful to remember that Jesus used the same language against his disciple Peter (cf. Mt 16, 23), indicating that this form of reproach was not unusual even among friends. If that is insufficient, the context here may help to explain why it was necessary to use such strong language: because it was quite simply a temptation of the devil, and perilous for the soul's salvation, to leave the Church and return to the Synagogue, for the Synagogue was heading the wrong way (this was made clear to everyone in 135 CE). John's use of this terminology was therefore appropriate and proportional to the dangers he foresaw in the immediate future. The subsequent misinterpretation and misuse of John's reproach is a separate issue and should be pondered deeply by those responsible for Church discipline.

the book were seen by the author John while he was exiled on Patmos in 95-96 CE, according to the text and to reliable tradition (Rev 1,9).<sup>86</sup> At exactly this time, in Rome, a senatorial conspiracy to depose Emperor Domitian was being hatched and the Emperor was responding by condemning the many aristocratic senators whom he suspected of conspiring against him, accusing them of 'drifting into Jewish ways'. John's visions therefore predate September 96 CE, when Domitian was assassinated, the Emperor Nerva took power and his reforms were enacted. Strange though it may seem, John directly benefitted from Nerva's takeover and reforms, for as a result he was quickly released from exile and free to publish his account of the visions in the Book of Revelation.<sup>87</sup> The same events that allowed the Book of Revelation to 'see the light', however, also unleashed a resurgence of Jewish nationalism involving principally the return of the Jews to Judaea and Jerusalem, with the aim of rebuilding the temple. Given that John's visions are presented as prophecy, it should not be surprising to find a prophetic relationship between his visions and the Jewish hopes and expectations unleashed by the reforms. In short, one might expect the Book of Revelation to give Christian discernment into these future hopes and expectations of the Jewish people.

At this point, it is also important to introduce a new element into the discussion of the Jewish national resurgence about to be unleashed on Jerusalem and Judaea. This revival of hope in restoration was spiritually supported by prayers for liberty and redemption and by those Scriptures evoking divine liberation from imperial domination, either in the past such as the 'exodus' from Egypt and later from Babylon, or in the future as prophesied in Daniel's visions of the destruction of the 4<sup>th</sup> beast and the blessed reign of his Holy Ones.<sup>88</sup> Since Rome had done exactly what Babylon did centuries

<sup>86</sup> Eusebius, *History of the Church* III, 18.1.

<sup>87</sup> In this respect, one could say that Nerva's reforms were also providential for John and for Christians.

<sup>88</sup> The particular prayers and Scriptural passages are presented and discussed by Horbury in *Jewish War*, 32-39; 137-49. Horbury lists the Eighteen Benedictions (*Shmoneh 'Esreh*), the Pentateuchal prophecies of Jacob, Balaam and Moses on the victorious future destiny of the Israelites and the Psalms of divine mercy as among the most authoritative literary sources of hope between at this time and, among the prophets, the world-historical prophecy in Daniel 7 was the most influential.

before, by destroying Jerusalem and her temple and silencing the Jewish leadership, it was a simple step to identify Rome with Babylon and see the ancient prophecies for the return from exile in Babylon, as applying literally to the situation of the Jews at the end of the first century. Selected passages from the ancient prophecies of Ezekiel, Isaiah, Zechariah, Daniel and others would have been interpreted anew, in the late first century CE, in order to fuel hope and enthusiasm for the restoration of Judaea, Jerusalem and the temple. The defeat, exile and slavery brought about by the destruction of Jerusalem and her temple in 70 CE had created a situation very similar to that of the Babylonian exile, such that the exilic prophecies from Babylonian times now came to life with new significance for the Jews. Furthermore, a prominent feature of these prophecies was the appearance of a messianic warrior king from the line of David, who would help to fulfil the prophecies of restoration, before going on to judge the nations and defeat the ruling powers.

Fuelled by the identification of the Roman Empire as the 4<sup>th</sup> beast of the prophet Daniel (Dn 7), prophecies of violent liberation from Roman rule had been forming and circulating among the Jewish people for over a century, causing numerous disturbances in the early parts of the first century, and likely playing a large role in the first revolt too.<sup>89</sup> Then, in the words of Joseph Klausner, “The idea of redemption was strengthened and given new life, especially in its purely political aspect, by the catastrophe of 70 CE... It is clear that the Messianic hopes awoke to a new and fuller life in the first decades after the Destruction. This new stage of development is most important for us because it is *explained* by the outstanding historical event that preceded it—the Second Destruction; and it in turn *explains* the almost as

Also, “Among writings of a prophetic kind, bitter anti-Romanism from the Flavian period or later, together with hope for Israelite national redemption at the hand of a messianic figure, marks not only the fifth Sibylline book, but also the apocalypses of Ezra (...), Baruch (...), and St John”, Ibid 34. Although Horbury does not mention, as a source of inspiration and hope, the prophecies of return from Babylonian exile, such as Ezekiel, Isaiah, Daniel and Zechariah, the adoption of the Babylonian setting and her Jewish scribes (Ezra, Baruch) in the apocalypses of this period, show dependence on these prophecies too. These are the facts on which the reconstruction presented here is built.

<sup>89</sup> For a clear and brief survey of the messianic movements in the first and second centuries, see Craig A. Evans ‘Root Causes of the Jewish-Christian Rift from Jesus to Justin’, *Christian-Jewish Relations*, 23-35.



outstanding historical event that followed it—the revolt of Bar-Cochba and R. Akiba’s participation therein”.<sup>90</sup> And again, more emphatically, “Through this great misfortune, which fell so heavily upon the Jewish people, the Messianic hopes, and particularly the politico-national part of them, were revived in full force. “Out of grief over the overthrow of the Sanctuary,” says Emil Schürer, the Messianic hope drew new nourishment, new strength. This was significant and portentous also for *political* relations.” It was quite natural that people should have started looking for that Messiah who would take vengeance on the Romans for the blood they had shed and restore Israel’s former glory. The political element certainly came to the fore at that time”.<sup>91</sup>

Under these volatile conditions, all that was needed to ignite the synagogues with messianic fervor was a timetable of events leading to the defeat of the last emperor and the end of the Roman Empire. This did indeed make an appearance towards the end of the first century or the start of the second. Around this time, the ‘popular prophecy’ outlined above<sup>92</sup> evolved into a precise, though encoded,

<sup>90</sup> Joseph Klausner, *The Messianic Idea in Israel: From its Beginning to the Completion of the Mishnah*, New York: Macmillan Company, 1955; 396-7.

<sup>91</sup> Klausner, *Messianic Idea*, 394, quoting from Schürer’s *Geschichte des jüdischen Volkes im Zeitalter Jesu Christi* (Leipzig, 1907), 14, 660.

<sup>92</sup> By ‘popular prophecy’ is meant the commonly held religious hopes and expectations of the Jewish people in the first century CE; for the origin of the term, see Klausner’s *Messianic Idea*, pp. 273, 393 (cited in note 80 of chapter 2 in this volume), and for a history and summary of the main components, see Emil Schürer, ‘Messianism’, ch 29 in *The History of the Jewish People*, pp. 488-554. Referring to these popular prophecies as ‘apocalyptic traditions’ or ‘shared apocalyptic motifs’, David Aune concludes that John’s Apocalypse does not show literary dependence on contemporary works of the same genre, but was “independently drawn from a written or oral stream of Palestinian Jewish apocalyptic traditions” (“The Apocalypse of John and Palestinian Jewish Apocalyptic”, *The Pseudepigrapha and Christian Origins*, Eds. G.S. Oegema and J.H. Charlesworth, New York and London: T&T Clark, 2008; 169-92, quote from 192). Affirming in this way that John was an independent author, it is inappropriate to describe him as “a card-carrying Jewish apocalypticist” (ibid.), falsely portraying him as a member of a professional body (‘conventicle’) of apocalypse writers. One must also recall that John did not write his Apocalypse in a library of apocalyptic works and other sacred texts, but rather in exile on a small Aegean island inhabited by Greek-speaking pagans, and far from any Jewish or Christian community. What he wrote, “in the Spirit on the Lord’s day”, must have come from the treasure of sacred texts, traditions and ‘apocalyptic motifs’ that he had learnt by heart over many years, all compiled in

plan with details about when the Roman Empire would yield to the reign of the Jewish messiah-king and his Torah-observant people, who would inhabit Jerusalem and restore the temple service on Mt. Zion.<sup>93</sup>

In brief, from a certain point in the 90's, the Jews began to expect the imminent transfer of power from Rome to Jerusalem, into the hands of a ruler descended from King David, who would ceremoniously complete the transfer of power with the judgment and execution of the last Roman Emperor. Under the burden of exacting taxation during Domitian's reign, this prophecy must have resounded loudly and longingly in the ears of the members of the Jewish community, in the diaspora and in Judaea.

But to the ears of a Roman emperor already shaken by threats to his throne, this prophecy would have been a serious provocation. It is tempting to think that it was Domitian's discovery of this messianic prophecy that accounts for his ruthless search for the 'offspring of David' and the violence of his reaction against those whom he saw 'drifting into Jewish ways', including his own family. It is hardly surprising that he reacted with anger, not least because he was identified as the last emperor, or one of the last.<sup>94</sup> His anger would have surged when he learnt that the father of the two nephews he had chosen as heirs, his cousin Clemens, was himself a Jewish sympathizer, and that his heirs were therefore being raised in a pro-Jewish environment. Not for long, for in mid-95 CE, Domitian executed Clemens, exiled his wife, and of their children nothing more is heard.

After Domitian's assassination and the enthronement of his successor Nerva in 96 CE, the credibility of the popular messianic prophecy would have been boosted considerably, giving it an important role in the Jewish national resurgence unleashed by Nerva's reforms. Although all the main elements of this 'popular

the apocalyptic style that he had been taught by a former Essene scribe when he was living in Jerusalem (33-63 CE); see 'The Author and His Text' in chapter 2 of this volume.

<sup>93</sup> E.g., see note 61 above.

<sup>94</sup> Cf. note 61. According to the sequence of Roman emperors in *4Ezra* 11-12, Nerva is the penultimate and Trajan is the last, although these last two emperors seem to have been added as an afterthought. Although completely conjectural, it is possible that the Domitian was originally supposed to be the last (as the 3<sup>rd</sup> head of the Eagle), but that this had to be modified afterwards in the light of events.

prophecy<sup>95</sup> were already known and circulating in the Jewish community, it found its clearest written expression in a pseudonymous work attributed to Ezra, datable to the year 100 CE.<sup>96</sup> Without doubt, the publication of this prophecy added a strong 'messianic fervour' to the nationalistic passions already aroused by Nerva's reform, sustaining them through the early years of the reign of his successor Trajan. Together with other written compositions,<sup>97</sup> it undoubtedly helped to inspire the violent insurrections in the diaspora (115-118 CE) and finally in Judaea (132-135 CE).

For Christians, however, the popular messianic prophecy of the Jews was deeply inadequate because, although referring to contemporary events, it made no reference to the first coming of the messiah in the form of Jesus Christ, nor to the salvation he had brought to the nations of the world through the preaching of the Gospel. It was begging to be replaced with a prophecy containing the complete truth about Jesus Christ and the way he would fulfil the ancient prophecies. For his believers, the Risen Christ responded in 95 CE with the visions and revelations given to his apostle John and circulated in the Book of Revelation.

The form and content of this book may seem strange to modern minds, but against the background of rival messianic expectation described above, it sits smartly and securely as the definitive 'Word of God and Witness of Jesus Christ'. Uppermost among the themes of the Book of Revelation that resonate with the hopes and expectations of the Jewish national revival is the theme of the messianic king: this is Jesus Christ who has already come into the world, where he was slain like a lamb, rose from the dead and ascended to heaven where he is now enthroned beside Almighty God in heaven (Rev 4-5). There Christ receives the scroll that will enable him to judge the world at the end of history (Rev 5,6-14; 20,11-15).

<sup>95</sup> See note 92.

<sup>96</sup> Preserved by the Christians, this writing is now called *4Ezra* 3-13. It can be dated accurately on the basis of *4Ezra* 3,1, and also from the sequence of Roman emperors represented by the multiple wings and heads of an Eagle in the 5<sup>th</sup> vision (*4Ezra* 11-12), concluding with 3 heads (Vespasian, Titus, Domitian) and 2 little wings (Nerva and Trajan; see note 61).

<sup>97</sup> *2Baruch* (which appears to be a Rabbinical revision and update of *4Ezra* in c. 105) and the 5<sup>th</sup> *Oracle* of the Jewish Greek Sibyl, c.110, whom Horbury describes as "almost the prophetess of the diaspora revolt" (*Jewish War*, 32).

The temple is the main unifying theme of the entire book, which reveals the heavenly sanctuary fully replacing its ruined and abandoned earthly copy in Jerusalem: Christ appears as the eternal expiatory whole offering (the *tamid*), the slain lamb, at the centre of a liturgy of atonement taking place within a sanctuary in heaven and involving the whole of creation, a liturgy which commenced with the sacrifice of the lamb (the Crucifixion) and concludes with the final judgment and the fulfilment of God's will for mankind. The furnishings of this sanctuary in heaven and the activities of the liturgy represent the annual service for the Day of Atonement in the second temple in Jerusalem.<sup>98</sup> There could be no better way to represent the eternal fulfilment of the temple in Jerusalem and thereby show that there is no longer any need for a temple 'made by human hands'. Not even in the final state of eternal perfection envisioned by John, will there be sanctuary or temple in the City where God will dwell with his peoples (cf. Rev 21,22).

The Book of Revelation says a lot about Jerusalem too. Only after the final judgment, when all evil is judged and removed from the world, will the holy city, New Jerusalem, come down from heaven, where it is being prepared, to become the place of God's dwelling on earth (Rev 21–22). In the meantime, especially during a brief period at the end of history, the earthly Jerusalem will be trampled and profaned by the nations, so that instead of being called Holy City (11,2), she becomes the 'Great City' (11,8); instead of 'Zion', her spiritual name becomes Sodom and Egypt (11,8).

In the description of Christ's messianic kingdom (Rev 20,4-6), the text again takes issue with the popular view: there is no mention of a restored earthly Jerusalem or a rebuilt temple of stones. The temple and Jerusalem are now identified unmistakably with Christ's faithful in heaven (3,12). And the people in heaven who are saved from God's judgment are not just Jews, but people from every nation, tribe, race and tongue (Rev 7,9-10). Even the frustrated longing for this messianic kingdom is shown to be vain by the large number of cross references to the eternal life of the faithful realized, in the present, through their participation in the heavenly liturgy: 'priests of

<sup>98</sup> See 'Heavenly Temple and Liturgy' in chapter 6 of this book, and also John and Gloria Ben-Daniel, *The Apocalypse in the Light of the Temple*, Jerusalem: Beit Yochanan, 2003.

God and of Christ' (20,6;1,6; 5,10); thrones for the faithful (20,4; 2,26-28; 3,21;5,10); the first resurrection untouched by the second death (20,5-6; 2,11; 14,12-13); the souls of the martyrs in heaven (20,4; 7,9-16; 15,2-3) and the author's own suffering in the kingdom of Jesus Christ, who is the highest of the kings of the earth (1,5-6.9). So there is really no need to wait for the messianic reign to be established after Christ's second coming, because it has existed by faith, if not yet by sight, from his first coming and ascension to heaven, and ever since it has been growing and expanding on earth. The rule of Christ and his saints is a heavenly and spiritual kingdom over the whole world and runs concurrently with the liturgy in heaven that represents the Day of Atonement. The vision of the kingdom is therefore retrospective, as suggested by the Psalm, "a thousand years in your sight (O Lord) are like a day, a day that is passing away" (Ps 90,4). The reign of Christ for a thousand years on earth are like one day in heaven—a Day of Atonement—a day that is passing away'. What appeared to be starting is, in fact, already passing away.

The future coming of the messiah is from heaven, in judgment, to defeat his enemies (19,11-17). Here the narrative in the Book of Revelation, as it stands, comes very close to the popular messianic paradigm forming the common core of Jewish messianism in late second-temple times, showing above all that the second coming of Jesus Christ will fulfil the traditional Jewish messianic expectation in the correct order and in every detail. It is in the Book of Revelation that "the fullest implementation of the traditional messianic prophecies is found",<sup>99</sup> even though the "traditional Davidic messianism is qualified here, as it is in the roughly contemporary 4 Ezra 13. The warrior messiah comes from heaven. But he is a warrior messiah",<sup>100</sup>

Another point of contact with traditional messianic prophecy is the identification of the messiah's ultimate adversary with imperial power and military might on a global scale, identified as the instrument and embodiment of radical evil (Rev 11,7; 13; 17,3-18). The superficial similarity between the vision of Christ's return in the

<sup>99</sup> Quoted from John J. Collins, *The Scepter and the Star: Messianism in the Light of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed, Grand Rapids MI, Cambridge UK: Eerdmans, 1995; 234-5.

<sup>100</sup> Collins, *Scepter and Star*, 235.

Book of Revelation and the coming of the messiah in judgment, according to the popular Jewish paradigm, has caused many interpreters to confuse the two prophecies and therefore misinterpret the Book of Revelation.<sup>101</sup> The most important point has been missed: the Book of Revelation presents a different vision of the judgment—a cosmic vision that takes account of Christ's prior universal mission of salvation. The judgment has therefore been postponed and the adversary is going to be a beast, or rather a double beast, of a different order.

So, at this point, there are important differences to consider, because this imperial 'beast from the sea' is headed by a man (13,18) who will wield more power than anyone the world has ever seen. His brief 42-month rule over all the earth, immediately prior to Christ's second coming (13,5-7, cf. 17,14), presumes the establishment of a one-world government. During his reign, he acts decisively against Christ and his followers: he kills the two witnesses (11,7), persecutes the saints (12,17;13,7; 15,2) and goes off to make war against the Lamb (17,14). However, many aspects of his rule emulate the redemptive actions of Christ, especially his passion, resurrection, ascension and worship in heaven: one of the heads of the beast is fatally wounded (13,3), but his recovery (13,12.14) leads to the ascension of the beast from the abyss (11,7; 13,1), the full manifestation of its power in the world (13,2-8) and the worship of his person (13,4.8.12.15). This combination of hostility to Christ and his followers, together with imitation of the true redeemer, leads to the conclusion that the beast is a false redeemer, a false messiah, the last and most powerful manifestation of the antichristian spirit, known in Christian tradition as the Antichrist.

The identification of the sea-beast as a false messiah is clinched by the fact he is promoted by another beast, a 'beast from the land' identified as a false prophet (cf. 13,11-17; 16,13; 19,20; 20,10), who deceives people with his 'signs', especially by bringing 'fire down from heaven to earth in the sight of men' (13,13). This sign is packed with

<sup>101</sup> The misinterpretation is called the Preterist interpretation, which assumes that Christ's adversaries in Revelation, the beasts of the sea and the land, refer to figures contemporary with the author. The fact that Revelation is taking a stand against the prevailing messianism of the time, by postponing judgment until all the world has had an opportunity to hear the Gospel, means that this vision is still very much in the author's future.

significance for identifying the nature of the cult promoted by the false-prophet. Firstly it suggests that he wishes to identify himself with the ancient Israelite prophet Elijah (cf. 2Kgs 1,9-14; 1Kgs 18,30-40), who is expected to return and prepare for the messianic age (Mal 3,1-24), and secondly it recalls the divine consecration of a new altar (Lev 9,24; 1Chr 21,26; 2Chr 7,1; 2Macc 1,18-36). The imitation of this sign by the false prophet therefore implies his participation in the dedication of a new altar connected to the ancient Israelite cult. In view of the central importance of the temple in Jerusalem for the performance of this cult, the dedication of a new altar by the false prophet, in this impressive but inauthentic way, presumes the reconstruction of the temple in Jerusalem. Furthermore it is clear from the text that the renewed cult is not directed to the worship of God, but rather to the false messiah and his patron, the devil, even though it is based on the site of the ancient temple in Jerusalem (cf. 2Thess 2,4; Mt 24,15; Mk 13,14).

It is important to stress that the time of the final conflict, though imminent, is also postponed into the future. It has been delayed to the end of the heavenly liturgy whose duration corresponds to at least a thousand years on earth, or perhaps much more.<sup>102</sup>

So, the Book of Revelation differs significantly from, and firmly 'takes issue' with, the most important aspects of popular messianic prophecies of mainstream Judaism at the time and recasts them, with Jesus Christ in the leading role, into a new and all-embracing 'history of salvation', from beginning to end, and finally to the vision of creation renewed. The greatest convergence is in the representation of the second coming of Christ as the coming of the messiah in the popular expectation. The greatest divergence is in the representation of the ultimate adversary of Christ as the leader of a global but brief pseudo-messianic empire—a leader who has his throne in Jerusalem and is worshipped in a rebuilt temple. Here finally, at the end of history, the Jerusalem temple is rebuilt, not by the messiah of God, but by his ultimate adversaries, the devil's messiah and his prophet.

<sup>102</sup> Accepting, according to Ps 90,4, the temporal equivalence and concurrence of the heavenly liturgy (one day in heaven) and the messianic reign of Christ and his saints (1000 years on earth; Rev 20,4-6), then the final events (clustered around the second coming of Christ) are both imminent from a heavenly point of view and delayed from an earthly point of view.

The lesson from this should be clear to all people in every age: the Book of Revelation speaks prophetically of a time immediately preceding the second coming of Jesus, when the Jews will again return to their land, restore Jerusalem and rebuild their temple. The rebuilding of the Jerusalem temple will indeed happen, but it will be a diabolical deceit.

By taking issue with the popular messianic prophecies in such a specific and comprehensive way, the content of the Book of Revelation confirms that its original setting was the revival of Jewish nationalist hopes and expectations at the end of the first century. There can be little doubt that John's prophecy contributed to the process of separation between Christians and Jews, 'the parting of the ways', by revealing to Christ's followers a way that was different to that of the Jews—a way guided by a messiah whom most Jews continued to reject. Strong language, such as "Synagogue of Satan" (Rev 2,9; 3,9), warned Christians away from the rival messianic movement of the Jews. It was a timely warning, for a mere 35 years later the popular prophecies which inspired the Jewish national revival proved disastrously false.<sup>103</sup> Instead of the restoration of Jerusalem and her temple, and the defeat of the Roman Empire, Jewish civilization in Jerusalem and Judaea was totally erased by the Emperor Hadrian acting in response to the Bar Kochba revolt (132-135 CE).

### Final Thoughts

In researching the background for the Book of Revelation, and contemporary writings, the focus has been on the history of the period, the last decade of the first century. For the period in question, the historical record is fragmentary and often unreliable. Nevertheless, contemporary writings do exist from many different sources, Jewish, pagan and Christian, and all of them agree about a revival of Jewish nationalist hopes and expectations when Emperor Nerva took over the principate from Domitian in 96 CE, and initiated his reforms. Roman support for Jewish national restoration lasted well into the reign of Nerva's successor, Trajan, but appears to have come to end around 114 CE for reasons that are not at all clear.

<sup>103</sup> Cf. note 85.



At the root of this revival was the simple desire to restore what had been destroyed in the first Jewish revolt of 66-70 CE: the temple, Jerusalem and daily life in Judaea. Up to 96 CE, the Roman emperors of the Flavian dynasty had been unwilling to relax the social and financial pressures that had been placed on Jews since their defeat in the first Jewish revolt. Goodman and other historians insist that this oppression was for propaganda reasons, as the Flavian dynasty had built its political capital on victory over the rebellious Jews and therefore ignored the many precedents for allowing defeated populations to resume their traditional worship.<sup>104</sup> However, this argument cannot stand, as 25 years had passed since the suppression of the first revolt and the victory meant little to the new generation of Romans. In fact, the new generation felt uneasy about the humiliation of the Jews, as reflected in Suetonius' account of the genital examination of a 90 year old Jew in a crowded courthouse.<sup>105</sup> Similarly, both Pliny and Tacitus portrayed the opponents of Domitian as heroes.<sup>106</sup> It is much more likely that Domitian, as a pious pagan emperor zealous to uphold traditional religious customs, was alarmed at the rising, empire-wide interest in Judaism and in its Christian offshoot, especially among the ruling classes in Rome, and for this reason he kept up the pressure on the Jews, aiming to deter proselytism and conversion. In the end, due to a change in public attitudes, the emperors' harsh policy had the opposite effect of incubating a conspiracy of Jewish sympathizers in his own government.

It is hardly surprising that a conspiracy of Jewish sympathizers should then act to relieve the punitive measures that had been imposed on the Jews 25 years previously and allow a return to the *status quo ante*. This alone must have been 'good news' for the Jews, and a cause of renewed hope in the imminent restoration of their national and religious life. It ignores, however, the injection of messianism, which entered into the situation in the last decade of the first century through popular prophecy, because of Roman harshness and injustice and also, arguably, a growing rivalry with Christianity.

<sup>104</sup> E.g., Martin Goodman, *Rome and Jerusalem*, 448-9, 464-5.

<sup>105</sup> Suetonius, *Domitian*, 12:2.

<sup>106</sup> Goodman, 'The Fiscus Iudaicus and Attitudes to Judaism', *Flavius Josephus and Flavian Rome*, 2005; 175.

It is difficult to know when, exactly, in this period, the 'messianic factor' started to come to the fore. It was certainly a major driving force in the later diaspora revolts from 115-118 CE, and again, in Judaea, from 132-135 CE, so it would be reasonable to assume that it was on the rise in the 90's CE, prompting Emperor Domitian to search for and eliminate the descendants of King David. The rumour that a Jewish king-messiah would kill the Roman Emperor and then rule over the Roman Empire might have been the unknown 'factor' that provoked Domitian into taking drastic action against several aristocratic Senators, even his own family, for 'drifting into Jewish ways'.

Of all the various causes leading to the failure of Jewish national restoration in the early second century, the evidence suggests that the greatest contribution came from the 'messianic factor'. By the end of the first decade of the second century, at least three versions of the popular messianic prophecy were circulating, all predicting the imminent downfall of Rome (*4Ezra* 3-14, *2Baruch* and *5<sup>th</sup> Sibylline Oracle*), and in the new translation of the Aramaic Targum of Isaiah 53 the portrait of the Jewish messiah as a victorious warrior had replaced the 'suffering servant'.<sup>107</sup> The proliferation of seditious literature would not have escaped the notice of Emperor Trajan and, together with the sporadic outbreaks of local unrest, must have contributed to his decision to withdraw Roman support for the rehabilitation of the Jews in about 114-115 CE. Trajan's decision then provoked a violent and destructive backlash in Cyrene, Egypt and Cyprus, again inspired by the 'messianic factor'. Only about 15 years later a second revolt broke out in Judaea, again inspired by the 'messianic factor'. This time the leader, Simon Bar Kochba<sup>108</sup> was hailed as messiah by the greatest rabbi of the age, R. Akiba Ben Yosef. The bloodshed and destruction

<sup>107</sup> This early 2<sup>nd</sup> century expression of militant Jewish messianism is generally neglected. For a full examination of the topic see the study by Jostein Ådna, 'The Servant of Isaiah 53 as Triumphant and Interceding Messiah: The Reception of Isaiah 52:13-53:12 in the Targum of Isaiah with Special Attention to the Concept of the Messiah', in *The Suffering Servant" Isaiah 53 in Jewish and Christian Sources*, eds. B. Janowski and P. Stuhlmacher, Eng trans by D. Bailey, Grand Rapids MI/Cambridge UK: Eerdmans, 2004; 189-224.

<sup>108</sup> Simon's real name was Bar Kosiba, which became Bar Kochba ('son of the star') after being proclaimed messiah (according to the messianic prophecy at Num 24,17) and Bar Koziba ('son of the lie') following his death and defeat.

was greater than anything witnessed in the land before or since, as the Emperor Hadrian employed all the resources necessary to crush it and then obliterate Jewish presence from Jerusalem and most of Judaea. Whatever level of restoration the Jews had managed to achieve in the period from 96-114 CE, under Nerva's reforms, all was completely destroyed in the Roman suppression of the second and final revolt. The 'messianic factor' that had promised to the Jews, at the end of the first century, a holy and blessed kingdom of Israel on the ashes of the Roman Empire, now turned out to be catastrophically false.<sup>109</sup>

On the other hand, the Book of Revelation and the other Johannine writings steered Christians in completely the opposite direction, away from the restoration of Jerusalem and its temple 'made with human hands' and out into the larger world, preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ and inviting the pagan nations to join the Church, the new Israel. As seen above, the Book of Revelation reflects this mission by presenting the plan of God's salvation in the light of Christ's first coming, and by revealing how his first coming has changed the significance of the issues linked to Jewish national restoration. In brief, there is no longer any need for a temple or another king-messiah.

However, the prophetic visions of Revelation achieve this crucial modification, not by abolishing the messianic judgment of 'popular prophecy', but by postponing it to the time of Christ's second coming. What the Jews had keenly expected at the end of the first century, on a local level, the Christians now expect at the end of history, on a cosmic and global scale. Far from ridding the world of the 'messianic factor', the Book of Revelation simply postponed the world-shattering event, and reaffirmed that Jesus Christ is the messiah who will come again to judge at the end of history. At his return to perform judgment, he will conquer all his adversaries, chief of whom is the militarily invincible but false messiah, aided by a false prophet and worshipped at a rebuilt temple in Jerusalem—a scenario that has all the appearances of a final pseudo-messianic revival of the undying Jewish nationalist project.

It is surely no coincidence that the conditions that formed the background to John's reception of Christ's Revelation, in 95 CE,

<sup>109</sup> For the importance of 'messianism' as a factor in the origin of the revolts, see Horbury, *Jewish War*, 275-7.

reappear on a far greater scale when it comes to be fulfilled at the end of history, only now the Jewish nationalist movement will not be fighting against the dominant political and military power, but will instead be leading it, before finally fighting against Christ himself at his return (Rev 13;17;19). In other words, the Jewish nationalist revival that lay behind the visions of the Book of Revelation at the end of the first century is just a small anticipation of the Jewish nationalist movement that will accompany the fulfilment of its prophecies at the end of history. Developing this insight further, the first century setting of the Book of Revelation gives the right framework for understanding its significance as a prophetic warning of the events immediately preceding the second coming of Christ. Because the historical setting of the Book of Revelation is analogous, in many ways, to the situation prior to judgment at the end of history, the historical setting not only helps to explain the origin of the Book of Revelation, but also its ultimate significance. This, perhaps, is the greatest contribution that the study of the historical background can make to the understanding of the Book of Revelation.

In other ways, too, this study has helped in the comprehension of the text, both its form and content. As mentioned above, the context of a Jewish national revival, inspired by popular messianic prophecy, explains the dire need for a Christian version of the Jewish prophecies that were gaining popularity at that time among Jews, Christians and even among gentiles.<sup>110</sup> It is probable that many Jewish Christians were returning to the Synagogue on account of the nationalistic hopes inspired by these prophecies. Competition and rivalry between the Church and the Synagogue were tense. In this context, the transmission of the Revelation of Jesus Christ to John seems both divine and providential, not only as a specifically Christian view of the

<sup>110</sup> The rising enthusiasm for a literal fulfilment of the 'popular prophecy' at this time may also explain some rather odd comments of Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch, indicating that even gentiles were promoting Judaism (proselytizing): "All the same, if anyone should make use of them (the ancient prophets) to propound Judaism to you, do not listen to him. Better hear talk of Christianity from a man who is circumcised than of Judaism from one who is not—though in my judgment both of them alike, if they fail to preach Jesus Christ, are no more than tombstones and graves of the dead, which limit their inscriptions to the names of mere mortal men", Letter to the Philadelphians, 6; in *Early Christian Writings: The Apostolic Fathers*, Eng trans Maxwell Staniforth, London: Penguin Classics, 1968; 112-3.

Plan of God, but also as an antidote to the uncritical acceptance of, and belief in, the popular messianic prophecies. Written in the formal prophetic style of the time, the Book of Revelation is an effective antidote precisely because it can be trusted: it is a Revelation of Jesus Christ (Rev 1,1), authenticated by God (1,1.8) and given to John the beloved apostle of Christ (1,1.4.9). Its words are trustworthy and true (19,9; 22.6) and it provides the believer with a complete and coherent view of the divine will for mankind and Christ's central role in the realization of that vision. This emphasis on Revelation's divine origin and authority would have contrasted starkly with the anonymous, or pseudonymous, prophecies transmitted informally, by hearsay, among members of the Synagogue communities.

As was the case then, when the Book of Revelation reinforced Christian faith in the sovereign messiahship of Jesus Christ against the rival messianic claims of Jewish nationalism, so too in these days of rising Jewish nationalism the Book of Revelation has a similar, even more critical, role to play.

It is to be hoped, finally, that the clarification of the historical setting of the Book of Revelation can shed light on the many other writings and events of the time, helping to populate the lacuna that has hitherto existed in our knowledge of the end of the first century CE and the start of the second.

## CHAPTER 5

### The Composition and Structure of the Book of Revelation

#### Introduction

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. In the 1970's, the Yale scholar Adela Yarbro Collins famously observed: "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>1</sup> Summing up the progress 30 years later, the French scholar Pierre Prigent wrote: "important studies have been devoted in recent years to the quest for the outline of Revelation. These efforts testify to a courage and a hopefulness that cannot avoid a certain degree of naïveté: can one reasonably expect today to discover a structure that has remained elusive for so long, after so many attempts that critical review has always ended up rejecting? But this sense of discouragement must not evolve into laziness: the task of exegesis never remains entirely without results. One is therefore obliged to enter into this overly plowed field with the hope of gleaning some fruits".<sup>2</sup> After surveying recent attempts, he aptly refers to this field as "the troubling sphere of subjectivity" and warns against over-interpretation or, in his own poetic way, against "yielding to the fever of calculations with no longer any clear understanding of whether or not they are solely the products of our intellectual virtuosity". Instead, he gives the following common-sense

<sup>1</sup> Adela Yarbro Collins, *The Combat Myth in the Book of Revelation*, Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2001; 8.

<sup>2</sup> Pierre Prigent, *Commentary on the Apocalypse of St. John*, Eng trans. Wendy Pradels, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001; 93.

working principle: “A structure, an outline (and therefore an intention) should only be identified if it appears clearly. It should leap out before our eyes, or rather our ears, for it should not be forgotten that the book of Revelation was intended to be read aloud in public”.<sup>3</sup>

This scholarly reflection on the excesses of scholarship in this area not only warns us to try, as much as possible, to keep our investigation simple and clear, but also forces us to question our own intention. What are the fruits that can be gleaned from this “overly plowed field”? What precisely has been, or is to be, gained from these studies on the composition and structure of this text?

The most important finding so far has been the opposite of what we would expect: the rediscovery of the literary unity of the Book of Revelation. Modern scholarship has never taken this for granted, as the history of interpretation shows. For the first 100 years of critical research on this book, it was confidently assumed to have been a compilation of pre-existing and ill-assorted sources, redacted at different times by a more or less competent editor, or editors. Undoubtedly the most outstanding example of this approach is the commentary of R.H. Charles, who explained the apparent discontinuities in Rev 20 as the editorial work of “a faithful but unintelligent disciple”.<sup>4</sup> The last serious source-critical study appeared in the late 1990’s, in the commentary by David Aune,<sup>5</sup> but by this time the tide had turned and scholars were no longer able to accept the assumptions of this approach. Compelling criticisms against Aune’s compositional theory have been written by both Pierre Prigent and Ian Paul.<sup>6</sup> Since the 1980’s, scholars have been offering more and more evidence of the single authorship and literary unity of the text, as well as the literary techniques of cross-references (‘interlinking’)

<sup>3</sup> Pierre Prigent, *Commentary on the Apocalypse*, 96-7.

<sup>4</sup> R.H. Charles, *The Book of Revelation*, International Critical Commentary, vol. II, Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1920, 147.

<sup>5</sup> David Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, Word Biblical Commentary, Dallas TX: Word Books, 1997, cxviii-cxxxiv.

<sup>6</sup> Prigent, *Commentary on the Apocalypse*, 84-92; Ian Paul, ‘Source, Structure, and Composition in the Book of Revelation’, *The Book of Revelation: Currents in British Research on the Apocalypse*, eds. G.V. Allen, I. Paul, S.P. Woodman, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015; 41-54.

and ‘interlocking’ which the author has used to unite its different elements.<sup>7</sup>

At the same time, there has been a parallel re-evaluation of the significance of the text’s structural dimension. Importing the insights of structural analysis, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza was a pioneer in this development: “The unitary composition of Rev. does not result from a final redactor’s arbitrary compilation but from the author’s theological conception and literary composition. An interpretation of Rev., therefore, must not only highlight the theological themes and intentions of the author but also show how he embodied his theology in a unique fusion of content and form... Against the old dichotomy of content and form, the New Criticism maintains that the form is not a container for the content but the patterning and arrangement of it. If one changes the order of a text one changes its meaning.”<sup>8</sup> These insights on the hermeneutical significance of textual composition remain valid to this day, judging by the following affirmation in a recent commentary on the Book of Revelation: “As always, the text’s form is not a mere container of content but is meaningful in itself. The medium conveys the message”.<sup>9</sup>

Compared to the situation 50 years ago, then, substantial gains have been made: the text is no longer submitted to routine surgery and anatomical dissection in attempts to explain its existence, but is now treated as the product of a single author, who worked diligently to create a unified text, whose many parts relate to each other and work together in a meaningful way. Although it would be going too far to claim that the text’s structure is the key to discovering the meaning of the text, it would be no exaggeration to say that the meaning of the text is reflected in its structure, which then helps to confirm and double-check its meaning. Herein lies the value of compositional studies, including the present one.

<sup>7</sup> Yarbro Collins, *The Combat Myth*, 16-18; R. J. Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy: Studies on the Book of Revelation*, Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993; 9; Leonard L. Thompson, *The Book of Revelation: Apocalypse and Empire*, New York, Oxford: OUP, 1990; 37-73.

<sup>8</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *The Book of Revelation: Justice and Judgment*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985; 159.

<sup>9</sup> Peter J. Leithart, *Revelation 12-22*, Vol 2, International Theological Commentary, London, New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2018; 13.



## How the Text was Composed

The two terms 'composition' and 'structure' are often used synonymously, but there is a slight difference in meaning that needs to be explained: 'structure' refers to the form of the text as it is now, whereas 'composition' refers not only to this present form, but also to the process whereby it reached the present form. In brief, composition is a broader term that refers not only to how the text is composed now (its structure), but how it was composed originally. The importance of this difference is that a study on the composition of the Book of Revelation must therefore include both aspects: not only an account of its formation but also a description of its final structure. It should deal with how it *was* composed, as well as how it *is* composed.

In his text, the author states clearly and repeatedly that, in obedience to divine imperative, he wrote down what he saw and heard while experiencing a supernatural vision or visions (Rev 1,1.11.19; 4,1; 17,7; 21,9-10; 22,8), which he variously calls a 'Revelation' (1,1), 'Word of God and Witness of Jesus' (1,2.9) or just 'prophecy' (1,3; 22,7.10). The visionary quality of his work is manifest not only in the symbolic character of its content, but also in the frequent use of the verbs "and I saw" or "and I heard" to introduce new sections of his vision. Furthermore, the author's frequent use of the expressions "after this" and "after these things" (Rev 4,1; 7,1.9; 15,5; 18,1; 19,1) to join larger sections of text, and his continuous use of the conjunction "and" for joining the smaller units, reflecting the 'waw consecutive' of ancient Hebrew narrative style, gives the impression that the entire text is a narration of successive events. So strong is this impression that there is now a scholarly consensus in favour of the linguistic, literary and narrative unity of the Book of Revelation, as it has come down to us.<sup>10</sup> Richard Bauckham surely speaks for most when he says the Book of Revelation is "one of the most unified works in the New Testament."<sup>11</sup> Since its literary features are closely linked to the foundational visionary material, as noted above, it is a short step to argue from literary unity to visionary unity and agree with

<sup>10</sup> Cf. L.L.Thompson, *The Book of Revelation*, 37-73; Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, cvii-cx. For other authors, see Antoninus King Wai Siew, *The War Between the Two Beasts and the Two Witnesses: A Chiastic Reading of Revelation 11.1-14.5*, LNTS 283; London: T & T Clark 2005; 8-10 and note 15.

<sup>11</sup> Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy*, 1, n. 1.

Bauckham when he writes: "Revelation, by contrast, is really (from 1:10 to 22:6) a single vision".<sup>12</sup>

If there is still any doubt that the author is describing a spiritual and prophetic experience granted to him, there are numerous descriptions in the text which solidify that impression: on four different occasions, he found himself 'in the Spirit', which is to say spiritually elevated and enlightened (1,10) or lifted up (4,1) or carried away (17,3; 21,10). Immediately after the opening vision, all his strength leaves him and he falls 'as if dead' from fear (1,17), only to be restored by the Risen Christ. On countless other occasions, the author converses with angels and other heavenly figures. In the centre of the book, he receives a renewal of his prophetic calling and so becomes an active participant in his own vision (10,11–11,2)—a vision that extends spatially from the earth up to God's throne in heaven and down to the abyss, and temporally from the birth of Christ up to the final judgment at the end of history and beyond, to the renewal and transformation of creation.

In summary, the Book of Revelation presents itself as the precise and complete account of a spiritual or mystical experience granted to the human author. Under divine instruction, John was fully conscious but physically passive, although in the initial stage he was able to write what he saw and heard. He received visions, heard locutions, and experienced sensations which touched all five senses in a spiritual way. He also experienced ecstasy, rapture, and spiritual transport, and received prophetic revelations which regard all the world and its peoples up to, and beyond, the end of the present age. He recorded all these things in obedience to a command from the Risen Christ (1,19) and the account of this extraordinary experience forms the substance of the Book of Revelation.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, Cambridge: CUP, 1993; 10.

<sup>13</sup> It is important, at this stage, to point out the gulf, unbridgeable by the human will, between ordinary states of prayer/inspiration and mystic or extraordinary states. This gulf is actually a part of the definition of mystical states: "We apply the word mystic to those supernatural acts or states which our own industry is powerless to produce, even in a low degree, even momentarily", Augustin Poulain SJ, *The Graces of Interior Prayer: A Treatise on Mystical Theology*, Eng trans of *Des Grâces d'Oraison* (1901), Caritas Publishing, 2016; Part I, ch. 1, 1-6.

Faced with such a wealth of detail describing the literary origin of the Book of Revelation as an intense ecstatic and spiritual experience, there are two possible reactions:

1. To dismiss it completely out of ignorance of mystical phenomena and disbelief in the Godhead, despite their foundational role in Revealed Religion and Sacred Scripture.
2. To accept the existence of God and the importance of mystical phenomena, but to reject the author's claim to have written his book as an account of a genuine spiritual experience that was granted to him.

To those who hold the first of these two views, little can be said. One could suggest reading *Varieties of Religious Experience*, by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century psychologist William James, in the hope that it may open the window on a dimension of human life that they have evidently overlooked or ignored. Those raised in Western Culture may benefit from reading criticism of Sigmund Freud's reductionist and mechanistic model of the soul, for Freud's incapacity to conceive of the soul as open to, and strongly influenced by, spiritual experience has helped to close the minds of millions of people over the last century. Freud's rupture with Carl Jung in 1912 can be understood as a direct consequence of his narrow conceptual framework, aided by a certain 'psychological resistance' to belief in a 'Supreme Being'.<sup>14</sup> Jung went on to devote most of his professional life to investigate, in his own way, the relationship between spiritual experience and psychological wholeness. So to this group of deniers, one might usefully suggest close attention to Freud's many critics, including Carl Jung, not to mention more modern works on mysticism.

Among modern biblical scholars, however, the second view is more prevalent, due to a skeptical attitude, widespread in academic circles, towards the author's claims. The author may have claimed to write his book as an account of a spiritual experience, and that its words are faithful and true (Rev 19,9; 22,6) and that those who

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Carl Jung, *Memories, Dreams and Reflections*, ed Aniela Jaffé, Eng trans Richard and Clara Winston, New York: Vintage Books, 1961-63; 163-9; idem, *Symbols of Transformation*, Eng trans R.F.C. Hull, Bollingen Series, Collected Works, Vol 5, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 1976; Foreward to Fourth (Swiss) Edition, xxiii-xxvi; Sigmund Freud, *Origins of Religion: Moses and Monotheism*, Vol 13, Penguin Freud Library, London: Penguin, 1990; 370-1.

contemplate them are blessed (1,3; 22,7), but for the skeptics this is just a ‘way of speaking’, a ‘literary fiction’, to give his writing the aura of authority. According to this view, what is described as a ‘revelation’ of heavenly mysteries obtained through spiritual experience is really just a creative invention of the author’s imagination, springing from contemplation of the scriptures and expressed in traditional apocalyptic style—all to give it the look of a genuine revelation and, again, lend it an aura of authority.

The skeptic’s argument derives from the indisputable affinity of the Book of Revelation with other works of the same ‘apocalyptic genre’—a group of Jewish writings from antiquity (250 BCE to 200 CE) that were once, in the past, defined by certain common characteristics, which included the device of ‘pseudonymity’—attributing the authorship of the work to a famous figure from the past. Many of these writings contain reports of spiritual experiences involving the revelation of heavenly mysteries, described in a stereotyped and traditional way similar to the account in the Book of Revelation.<sup>15</sup> So, on the basis of its association with other members of this genre, several modern scholars assumed the Book of Revelation was also written pseudonymously.<sup>16</sup> Although the motives for

<sup>15</sup> It should be stressed that some of the earliest researchers, above all R.H. Charles, accepted the authenticity of the apocalypses without question, equating their inspiration with that of prophecy (*Eschatology: The Doctrine of a Future Life*, New York: Schocken Books, 1963; 174-77). Half a century later, the issue was debated, and still maintained by D.S. Russell, “To distinguish between the two (conventional inspiration of a literary kind and genuine religious experience) is no easy matter, but such an examination indicates that there is probably more evidence of genuine inspiration in the apocalyptic writers than might at first be imagined”, *Method and Message of Jewish Apocalyptic*, Philadelphia: Westminster, 1964; 158-178, quote from 159. Fifty years later still, Michael Stone and Christopher Rowland are among the few modern scholars still holding the view that apocalypses may describe authentic religious experience, cf. Michael Stone, *Ancient Judaism: New Visions and Views*, Grand Rapids MI/Cambridge UK: Eerdmans, 2011; 91-96 (reprint of his ‘Reconsideration of Apocalyptic Visions’, *Harvard Theological Review*, Vol 96:2 [April 2003], 167-80) and Christopher Rowland with Patricia Gibbons and Vicente Dobroruka ‘Visionary Experience in Ancient Judaism and Christianity’, in *Paradise Now: Essays in Early Jewish and Christian Mysticism*, April De Conick ed., Atlanta, GA: SBL, 2006; 41-56.

<sup>16</sup> For the names, see Craig R. Koester, *Revelation: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, The Anchor Yale Bible, New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 2014; 67-8. Rev Prof Ugo Vanni SJ, the highly influential Catholic

attributing these writings to a celebrated personality from the past are still debated by modern scholars,<sup>17</sup> the effect of this false attribution of authorship has been to cast a cloud over the authenticity of the works in their entirety.<sup>18</sup> Basically, the pseudonymous attribution of the vast majority of apocalyptic writings has negatively impacted the scholarly appraisal of their truth value, including that of the Book of Revelation.<sup>19</sup>

However, concerning the Book of Revelation in particular, the skeptic's argument has been outdated by new developments. Firstly, the definition of an apocalypse was redefined in 1979 with the

scholar, was among these, cf. *L'Apocalisse: Ermeneutica, Esegese, Teologia*, Associazione Biblica Italiana, Supplementi alla Rivista Biblica 17, Bologna: Edizioni Dehoniane Bologna, 1988; pp. 76 and 117.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. John J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to Jewish Apocalyptic Literature*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Grand Rapids MI/Cambridge UK: Eerdmans, 1998, 39-40.

<sup>18</sup> Christopher Rowland states it clearly as follows: "One of the reasons why the Jewish apocalypses have not seemed to be a likely source of authentic visions is the fact that without exception all these visions are said to have been given to figures of the past. The device of pseudonymity has merely increased suspicions that we are dealing in the apocalypses with literary constructions which have little or no contact with actual experience... the stories of the heavenly journeys of patriarchs and prophets is so obviously fictitious that one is tempted to regard the whole corpus of apocalyptic literature as little more than the flights of fancy of certain individuals with a particular theological axe to grind. The question inevitably arises how we are to relate the phenomenon of pseudonymity to the indications that apocalyptic literature does in fact contain relics of visionary experience", *The Open Heaven: A Study of Apocalyptic in Judaism and Early Christianity*, New York: Crossroad, 1982; 240.

<sup>19</sup> Peter Schäfer unintentionally illustrates the point: "Falsehood is a completely inappropriate (not to say false) category. Invoking this category means that one fails to understand the concept of pseudepigraphy. The authors of ascent apocalypses clearly believed that their heroes (that is, they themselves) had certain experiences, but this does not necessarily mean that these experiences were genuine experiences and not literary constructs", *The Origins of Jewish Mysticism*, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009; 338. He seems to be saying that the author's religious experience is remote from, and barely related to, his literary reconstruction described in traditional style. In other words, the pseudonymous apocalypse is like a novel: as a novel may take aspects of experience and dramatize them in a certain way, so with the apocalypticist in his account. And no one would think of criticizing a novel for being false, because if it were true it would not be called a novel. However, Schäfer does not account for the fact that there are apocalypses, like those of John and Hermas, which are not pseudonymous and do claim to speak the truth (Rev 19,9; 22,6).

publication of the results of the Society of Biblical Literature's Genres Project on Apocalypse, led by John J. Collins, and the new definition does not include pseudonymity as one of the defining characteristics of the genre.<sup>20</sup> A work can be a true apocalypse, arguably even more true, without being pseudonymous, the main examples being the Book of Revelation and the Shepherd of Hermas.

Secondly, since 1984 Adela Yarbro Collins has argued cogently against the use of pseudonymity in the Book of Revelation and her arguments have been accepted by the majority: "In modern times, some scholars have argued that the book of Revelation was written pseudonymously, because pseudonymity is a typical feature of ancient Jewish apocalypses. This argument is not compelling because there was a revival of prophecy among the followers of Jesus, which led, for a short time at least, to the willingness to prophesy and write books of prophecy in one's own name. The apocalyptic work from the second century called The Shepherd of Hermas, for example, was written by a Christian in Rome, Hermas, in his own name. Another reason that this argument is unpersuasive is that the author would probably have taken care to specify more clearly that he was an apostle or a disciple of the Lord, if he had intended to be so recognized".<sup>21</sup> And so if the author of the text speaks truthfully about his name and about his location at the time of writing—the Island of Patmos—there is no *a priori* rationale for doubting his account of the

<sup>20</sup> John J. Collins, 'Pseudonymity, Historical Reviews and the Genre of the Revelation of John', *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, 39, (1977): 329-343; J.J. Collins, ed., *Apocalypse: The Morphology of a Genre*, *Semeia* 14; Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1979, quoted in John J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination*, 4-5: "The thesis presented in *Semeia* 14 is that a corpus of texts that has been traditionally called "apocalyptic" does indeed share a significant cluster of traits that distinguish it from other works. Specifically, an apocalypse is defined as: "a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial insofar as it involves another, supernatural world". This definition has withstood well the test of time, cf. idem, *Apocalypse, Prophecy, and Pseudepigraphy: On Jewish Apocalyptic Literature*, Grand Rapids MI/Cambridge UK: Eerdmans, 2015; 1-20.

<sup>21</sup> Adela Yarbro Collins, 'The Book of Revelation', in *The Encyclopedia of Apocalypticism*, Vol 1, ed. John J. Collins, New York, London: Continuum, 2000; 385; also Adela Yarbro Collins in *Crisis and Catharsis: The Power of the Apocalypse*, Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1984; 27-8. For other arguments, see Koester, *Revelation*, 106-7.

text's origins in a supernatural revelation, which is to say by means of an extraordinary or mystical state of prayer.

Having overcome the false accusation of pseudonymity, however, we are sadly no closer to acknowledging the supernatural origins of the Book of Revelation. John J. Collins, author of a hugely influential introduction to Jewish apocalyptic literature, skips the issue by blurring the difference between supernatural revelation and inspired literary activity: "The contrast between 'authentic religious experience' and literary activity may be overdrawn. The composition of highly symbolic literature involves a vivid use of the imagination, which may be difficult to distinguish from visionary experience in any case".<sup>22</sup> In a similar way, Ugo Vanni proposes the author's conscious state was somewhere between ordinary inspiration and non-ecstatic mysticism by identifying it with a liturgical experience.<sup>23</sup> The tendency here is not only to confuse ordinary states of prayer and/or inspiration with mystical states,<sup>24</sup> but also to play down the mystical origin of the Book of Revelation on the grounds that the end product is more or less the same as a piece of inspired creative writing.

The tendency to play down the ecstatic mystical origin of the Book of Revelation may indeed be a reflection of the author's original intent, for although the experience he describes must have been extraordinary, unique, intense, and 'out-of-this-world' in the fullest sense of the words, his description of it is extremely economical, not dwelling on the phenomenon itself, but rather on the content of the

<sup>22</sup> Collins, *Apocalyptic Imagination*, 40.

<sup>23</sup> "En vue d'une approche mystique de l'Apocalisse—qui n'est pas celle d'extases et de visions présumées—il faut tenir compte de la situation d'une expérience liturgique, du langage typique et du symbolisme de l'auteur qui réussit à communiquer ainsi un sens qui s'ajoute au discours conceptuel", Ugo Vanni, 'Linguaggio, simboli ed esperienza mistica nel libro dell'Apocalisse. I', *Gregorianum*, Rome: Pontificia Universitas Gregoriana, 79/1 (1998), 28 (Résumé). And also: "Un esame più ravvicinato porta ad approfondire. Lo stato estatico di cui si è parlato è, di per sé, un contatto in profondità con lo Spirito, i cui effetti esigono di essere ulteriormente precisati. Le visioni sono anzitutto un espediente letterario tramite il quale l'autore apocalittico comunica il suo messaggio in termini simbolici. Non c'è nell'Apocalisse un misticismo scontato, di primo mano. Ma proprio il contatto con lo Spirito, il linguaggio usato e il simbolismo introducono a quella che è una esperienza mistica vera e propria, tipica dell'Apocalisse. Quanto stiamo vedendo richiede alcune precisazioni. Anzitutto occorre tener presente la situazione liturgica nella quale è collocato il testo dell'Apocalisse....", op. cit. 6.

<sup>24</sup> See note 13.

visions and auditions presented to him.<sup>25</sup> The stereotyped language of traditional apocalyptic helps him, in this respect, to downplay the details of the experience, in order to direct attention to its content—the divine message that he was told to transmit to the churches.<sup>26</sup>

However, the fact that the author deliberately plays down the description of his mystical experience in order to stress its prophetic content<sup>27</sup> is not to deny that it occurred and that it generated the Book of Revelation. This is certainly not the same as saying that there is little difference between ‘authentic religious experience’ and inspired literary activity, as Collins has proposed. Perhaps the historico-critical scholar is not able to discern any difference, but to the prophet, the mystic, the mystical theologian and to the churches, there is a huge gulf between the fallible output of the human imagination, even if inspired and scripturally saturated, and the infallible outpourings of divine religious experience.<sup>28</sup> More significantly, in addition to the

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Pierre Prigent, in his comments on the expression “in the spirit” (Rev 1,10) writes: “The expression occurs again at 4:2 (cf. also 17,3 and 21:10). It undoubtedly refers to a phenomenon more or less resembling that of ecstasy. In similar fashion Peter (Acts 11:5), after having prayed, fell into ecstasy and had a vision. Likewise Paul (Acts 22,17, the narratives of his conversion, and 2Cor 12:1ff). As in these texts, we note here the moderation in tone: no importance is given to the manner in which the ecstasy occurs; the phenomenon does not elicit even the slightest commentary; only the vision thus revealed and the reality of its inspiration are of importance”, *The Apocalypse of St. John*, 128.

<sup>26</sup> Even Martha Himmelfarb recognizes that “Conventional language, then, does not preclude actual visionary experience” (*Ascent to Heaven in Jewish and Christian Apocalypses*, New York/Oxford: OUP, 1993; 113), even though she finally rejects the mystical origin of the ascents in the pseudonymous apocalypses: “Taking account of how they [the authors] worked argues for reading the apocalypses not as fictionalized accounts of personal experiences but as works of fiction from start to finish, although the authors themselves would never have accepted this anachronistic labeling of the genre in which they wrote”, *Ascent to Heaven*, 113.

<sup>27</sup> The downplaying of mystical experience is also the reason for Paul’s preference to boast of his weaknesses (2Cor 12,1-10), where his description of the experience suddenly changes to the third person (2Cor 12,2-4). This raises the possibility, so far not discussed in the literature as far as I am aware, that an important reason for using the device of ‘pseudonymity’ was to prevent boasting and preserve the seer-author’s humility.

<sup>28</sup> See note 13. This is not to suggest that all ‘the outpourings of divine religious experience’ are always infallible, for discernment is especially necessary in this area, cf. Poulain’s *Graces of Interior Prayer*, Part IV, pp 273-363. But it does mean that a work that has been discerned and approved by the early Church and then



question of fallibility, there is an issue of credibility. The Book of Revelation claims to contain true God-given insight into the present and future states of the universe and this claim has been endorsed by generations of Church leaders and faithful. If this claim is proven to be untrue, then the writing is a false prophecy calling for immediate rejection, avoidance and contempt. There is no middle ground here for those to whom the Book of Revelation was originally addressed and entrusted: the Church faithful.

So, although on a literary and historical level, it may matter little whether the Book of Revelation is the fruit of 'authentic religious experience' or a work of creative human imagination, it is a matter of great importance on the spiritual, moral and theological level. And so it is noteworthy that there are indeed scholars who lean towards the former. The pioneer of this understanding in the English-speaking world is Christopher Rowland, who in his book "The Open Heaven" builds on the work of Johannes Lindblom, the German scholar of ancient Israelite prophecy.<sup>29</sup>

### Visionary Evidence

In his chapter 'Towards an Understanding of the Origins of Apocalyptic', Rowland surveys the evidence of mystical experience in various apocalyptic texts, noting the occasional descriptive reference to the preparations (fasting, prayer, mourning) or internal sensations (cold or heat, vertical and horizontal movement) of religious experience and their similarity to descriptions in later mystical writings. He concludes "The likelihood is...that we have indications

placed in the New Testament Canon can reasonably be expected to have the necessary properties of infallibility.

<sup>29</sup> Christopher Rowland, *Open Heaven: A Study of Apocalyptic in Judaism and Early Christianity*, New York: Crossroad, 1982; 235-40; J. Lindblom, *Gesichte und Offenbarungen*, Lund, 1968. There is only one other biblical scholar whose work has made an impression in this field, Michael Stone. However, Stone's research has concentrated on the Pseudepigrapha, and particularly on *4Ezra*, where he has argued that the author's account is of a genuine religious experience because it realistically describes his spiritual transformation and this is vital to the understanding his work. A good summary can be found in Michael E. Stone, *Ancient Judaism, New Visions and Views*, Grand Rapids MI/Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 2011; 90-109; *Fourth Ezra: A Commentary on the Book of Fourth Ezra*, Hermeneia Series, Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990; 32-33. Reference to his writings will be made where appropriate.

here of the experiences of early Jewish visionaries". He then qualifies these observations, "That is not to suggest, however, that all apocalyptic literature can be explained in this way. There are clear signs that some of the visionary material now found in the apocalypses has been subject to considerable redactional activity (e.g. 4 Ezra 11–12), so that often it is impossible to discern the character of an original vision. Indeed, in some instances one must suppose that what purports to be a vision is in fact an artificial construction which has been put together to coincide exactly with the message which the seer wants to get across to the readers. But the point should be made that it cannot be assumed without further investigation that all the visions in the apocalypses arose in this way. It is necessary, therefore, to judge each vision on its merits".<sup>30</sup> This quickly leads Rowland "to try to work towards some kind of criterion for separating out the authentic visions which are contained in the apocalypses".<sup>31</sup>

Choosing to focus on the Book of Revelation for this purpose, because it is not complicated by the device of pseudonymity, Rowland affirms: "The fact that we can be almost certain that we have the writing of an individual who lived in the first century AD rather than the fictitious claims of the Jewish apocalypses that they contain the experiences of men who lived long ago makes Revelation a natural place to start our discussion of this issue. Denial of the claim of the book to contain actual visionary experiences has been widespread, but there have been those who have been prepared to support its claim to incorporate the products of visionary experience." As one of these, Johannes Lindblom defined his own criteria for authentic visionary experience, listed as follows by Rowland: "(i) spontaneity; (ii) concise visions which are only expanded later; (iii) dreamlike character of the experience: the vision may be clear in its detail but as a whole has an unreal and fantastic quality; (iv) the vision is entirely fresh and unsophisticated in its form and content; (v) the vision concerns things on an other-worldly plane; (vi) there are difficulties in expressing the experience in words; (vii) the experience has emotional side-effects; and (viii) mention is made of the date and place of the vision".<sup>32</sup> According to these criteria, Lindblom then

<sup>30</sup> Rowland, *Open Heaven*, 234.

<sup>31</sup> Rowland, *Open Heaven*, 235.

<sup>32</sup> Rowland, *Open Heaven*, 235.

identified authentic visionary material in 11 short passages in the text of Revelation, considering the rest to be “the result of more conventional literary activity”.<sup>33</sup> Rightly excluding two of these criteria, (i) and (v),<sup>34</sup> Rowland moves on to propose a criterion of his own: the absence of any signs of conscious interference complicating a vision whose originality is evident in the way familiar images are re-envisioned with new elements and in novel combinations. The authentic vision has a certain autonomy and independence (or transcendence) from the one who experiences and records it. Rowland illustrates his new criterion with an analysis of the vision in Rev 17, showing how the vision (Rev 17,3-6) contains an abundance of novel imagery, which leaves the seer in a state of awe and wonder, not grasping what exactly he saw: “And seeing her I was struck with great wonder” (Rev 17,6), whereupon the angel interprets a few of the more salient aspects, but leaves most of the vision unexplained. Although Rowland initially presents the interpretations (Rev 17,7-18) as the author’s own post-visionary reflections, he later modifies this: “No doubt the visionary believed that the interpretation itself was just as much under the influence of divine guidance as the original vision. Although the part which reflection played on the original vision was probably considerable, the evidence which we possess of the apocalyptic seer preparing himself to learn more about the vision which he has already seen suggests that he considered the reflective process itself and the answers which emerged equally the results of divine guidance”.<sup>35</sup> Clearly, there is no discontinuity in the vision report, when the seer reports the angel’s interpretation (17,7-18), or that of the elder in heaven (5,5; 7,13-15), or that of ‘one like a son of man’ (1,20), and he is still very much ‘in the Spirit’. One can only add

<sup>33</sup> Rowland, *Open Heaven*, 235; these were Rev 1.9-20; 4,1-5. 8; 11,19; 12,13-18; 15,1-4; 15,5-8; 19,9-10; 19,11-16; 19,17-18; 22,8. At this point Rowland notes “On the basis of the criteria which he enunciated it is difficult to see why he is so reluctant to limit the quantity of authentic visionary material to this relatively small amount. Although one does not want to deny the existence of a considerable degree of redaction in the book as we have it, there seems no reason *not [my correction]* to suppose that the bulk of the material in it did actually originate in a series of visions” n. 48, op. cit. 482.

<sup>34</sup> Rowland, *Open Heaven*, 236. In brief, spontaneity (i) is rejected because there is evidence of prior preparation; other-worldliness (v) is excluded because this-worldly visions are also included (e.g., Rev 11,3-13).

<sup>35</sup> Rowland, *Open Heaven*, 239-40.

that it would be a serious mistake to attribute to the human author what the human author himself attributes to the interpreting angel, even though it offers a tempting way to demystify the text somewhat, and bring it down to a more human level.

Returning to Rowland's criteria, it is the aspect of untampered surplus signification, beyond the author's control and interference, that seems to appeal to Rowland as a reliable criterion of authentic visionary material: "While there are parallels to many of the images used in Revelation, one cannot fail to be impressed by the remarkable freshness of the visions and the lack of any labored endeavours to make sure that the images say all that the author wishes them to. Bizarre and extravagant the imagery may be, but it lacks any hint of the self-conscious desire to make these images as relevant as possible".<sup>36</sup>

The criteria of both Lindblom and Rowland can now usefully be combined and taken to their ultimate conclusion.<sup>37</sup> According to these two scholars, the characteristics of the authentic visionary material in the text can be listed as follows: known author, date or place of

<sup>36</sup> Rowland, *Open Heaven*, 238-9. And indeed some of the earliest reactions to the Book of Revelation confirm that there was no noticeable effort, by the author or by anyone else, to make it relevant, or even comprehensible. For example, Bishop Dionysius of Alexandria (c. 250 CE) tells us that "Some of our predecessors rejected the book and pulled it entirely to pieces, criticizing it chapter by chapter, pronouncing it unintelligible and illogical and false. They say it is not John's and is not a revelation at all, since it is heavily veiled by its thick curtain of incomprehensibility", Eusebius, *History of the Church* VII.25, quoted here from: *History of the Church*, Eng. trans. G.A. Williamson, Rev. ed. Andrew Louth, London: Penguin Classics, 1989; 240. To those expecting the antichrist, Irenaeus (c. 180 CE) felt the need to mention the silence of the Book of Revelation: "Had there been any need for his name to be openly announced at the present time, it would have been stated by the one who saw the actual revelation. For it was seen not a long time back, but almost in my own lifetime, at the end of Domitian's reign", op. cit. 81 (*Against Heresies*, III, 18.2-3; *apud* Eusebius, *History of the Church* III, 18.3).

<sup>37</sup> Michael Stone is less certain about the possibility of creating useful criteria for the pseudepigraphic apocalypses, though does not rule it out: "We cannot yet (and indeed may never be able to) provide a litmus tests that will tell us in which description in which work the author is relating his/her own experience through the seer and in which he/she is drawing on a transmitted pool of knowledge in describing what went on in the world of the pseudepigraphic author. However, perhaps reading the works with this factor in mind will itself lead to the emergence of tools or criteria to facilitate in this task. The consideration of the fourth vision of 4 Ezra is a good example of a relevant instance", *Ancient Judaism*, 108.

occurrence; difficulty to express the experience in words (but helped by use of stereotyped expressions); affecting the seer's emotions; concise and condensed; fresh and clear, with a surrealistic quality ('unreal and dream-like'); unsophisticated, with surplus uninterpreted meaning; untampered and uncomplicated by author's intentional interference.

On reading this check list of features one wonders whether there is any part of the Book of Revelation that does not score highly on all or most of them. Taken together, they seem to describe the unique and somewhat strange character of the entire book. The very fact that scholars have variously described its imagery as bizarre,<sup>38</sup> extravagant,<sup>39</sup> surreal,<sup>40</sup> vivid and often grotesque,<sup>41</sup> strange and sometimes weird or even monstrous,<sup>42</sup> etc., can therefore be included as evidence for the divine authenticity of its visions, according to the criteria above. A more human approach would certainly have made extensive modifications and added much more explanatory material. Add this to the observation, stated in the introduction, that the visions in the Book of Revelation all form part of a single multifaceted vision, and there is a strong impression that no author, no matter how creative his imagination, would, or even could, have set out to willfully create such "a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma",<sup>43</sup> and then not even attempt to render it more comprehensible for his readers. The enigmatic character of the almost-seamlessly united visionary sequence underlying the entire Book of Revelation is the most patent sign that it is the product of an authentic mystical experience.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>38</sup> John Sweet, 'Revelation' in *Early Christian Thought in its Jewish Context*, Eds. John Barclay and John Sweet, Cambridge: CUP 1996, 161.

<sup>39</sup> Rowland, *Open Heaven*, 238.

<sup>40</sup> G. Biguzzi, 'A Figurative and Narrative Language Grammar of Revelation', *Novum Testamentum*, XLV, 4, (2003), 399.

<sup>41</sup> Ian Paul, 'The Book of Revelation: Image, Symbol and Metaphor', *Studies in the Book of Revelation*, Ed. Steve Moyse, Edinburgh/New York: T&T Clarke 2001, 131.

<sup>42</sup> H.B. Swete, *Apocalypse of John*, 3rd ed., London: Macmillan 1917, cxxxi.

<sup>43</sup> Sir Winston Churchill's expression for the role the Soviet Union might play in World War II (1939): "I cannot forecast to you the action of Russia. It is a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma, but perhaps there is a key. That key is Russian national interest."

<sup>44</sup> It is of note that one of the least attractive qualities of the text, its incomprehensibility, is that which confirms its authenticity. We have made a similar observation regarding authorship: it is precisely the unattractive Semitic quality of the

One further criterion could be added to those of Lindblom and Rowland, perhaps the least obvious of all: the author shows a profound knowledge of the gradations of mystical experience in his description of the preparation, calling and progress of the 144,000 (Rev 7,1-9; 12,1-17; 14,1-5),<sup>45</sup> and this suggests that he himself had experienced these states. According to the descriptions in the text, his visionary experience alone, and its aftermath, would have been more than sufficient for him to personally identify with the spiritual calling and mission of the 144,000 celibate males described in his narrative.

This raises another important point, which touches on Michael Stone's criterion of 'spiritual transformation' as a sign of authentic religious experience.<sup>46</sup> Is it possible that the author of the Book of Revelation underwent a 'spiritual transformation' after his visionary experience on the Island of Patmos and, if so, are there signs of this in his text? For the answer to this question, we must turn to a passage that he certainly wrote after returning to Ephesus, in which he refers to his exile on Patmos in the past tense: "I, John, your brother and companion in the hardship and kingdom and endurance in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos because of the Word of God and the Witness of Jesus" (Rev 1,9). In the same passage, the author conveys a greeting to the seven churches in Asia from the Godhead, in an early formulation of the Holy Trinity (Rev 1,4-6), and then cites an interjection from the Almighty God himself (1,8). There are similar passages in the Epilogue that convey the author's supreme closeness to the Godhead (22,7.12-13.16.17.20), often acting as spokesman. Either these passages can be understood as a literary invention loaded with deception and/or presumption, or they can be seen as evidence that the author was indeed in a state of supreme divine union. Unless the reader has a very negative impression of the author's intent, the second option is certainly the most consistent with truth claims in the same passage (22,6), in which case it represents the author in a state of supreme divine union that endured long after his visionary experience on Patmos. And this, in and of itself, is good evidence of a

language of the Greek text that, *contra* Dionysius of Alexandria (c. 250 CE), helps to confirm it was written by the Galilean apostle called John.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. John Ben-Daniel, 'Towards a Mystical Interpretation of Revelation 12', *Revue Biblique*, Vol. 114-4 (2007), 594-614.

<sup>46</sup> See note 29.

‘spiritual transformation’ that is well-documented in the mystical tradition.

Having experienced the ecstatic states indicated in the text by being ‘in the Spirit’—ecstasy (1,10), rapture (4,1), and spiritual transport (17,3 and 21,10)—the author would, according to mystical tradition, have been spiritually prepared to enter into the highest state of divine union—a state that would exactly explain the divine interjections, despite the fact that he was no longer in a state of ecstasy. This mystical state is variously called ‘spiritual marriage’, ‘transforming union’, ‘consummated union’, ‘supreme union’ or, in Teresa of Avila’s classification, ‘the seventh mansion’,<sup>47</sup> and is described as “a state in which the soul is habitually conscious of the divine cooperation in all her higher operations and in the depths of her being. No union of a more intimate kind can be imagined. This grace can be considered under another aspect, which gives a still higher idea of it: in concurring in our spiritual acts God makes them His own: He renders them his own; He renders them divine and shows that He does so. There is therefore a transformation of the higher faculties with regard to their manner of operation. The soul is aware that in the supernatural acts of her intellect, her love or her will, she participates in the divine life, in those analogous acts that are in God. This is the essential part of the spiritual marriage”.<sup>48</sup> Another feature of this state of supreme union is a continual, or habitual, intellectual vision of the Godhead.<sup>49</sup> All this is important for understanding that, in the aftermath of his ‘authentic religious experience’ and until the end of his earthly life, the author remained in a state of divine union, in which he possessed the supernatural gifts and the divine authority to write, revise, supplement and shape the account of his visions, so producing the text of the Book of Revelation as it has come down to us today.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>47</sup> Poulain, *Graces of Interior Prayer*, 259.

<sup>48</sup> Poulain, *Graces of Interior Prayer*, 262-3.

<sup>49</sup> Poulain, *Graces of Interior Prayer*, 264-7.

<sup>50</sup> Poulain confirms that it would not be unusual for the author, John, in his old age, to have been granted both ecstatic mystical experiences and supreme union: “For with several saints, ecstasies have not seemed to diminish at the end of their life, and yet we may admit the probability of their having arrived at the supreme union”, *Graces of Interior Prayer*, 262. And it must be added, this author’s state of supreme union would perfectly explain the mystical immediacy and closeness to Jesus in the Fourth Gospel (i.e., the “unhistorical” portrayal), providing further

## How the Text *is* Composed

Having established that the text *was* indeed composed by means of a genuine and extensive visionary experience granted to its author John, it is possible to move on to consider how this has resulted in the composition of the text as it stands today, that is to say in its present structure and outline.

The argument, presented above, that John wrote the Prologue and Epilogue of the Book of Revelation after his return to Ephesus in Autumn 96 CE, can be extended to the rest of the text, which everywhere shows evidence of editorial insertions, including divine interjections (e.g., 9,6.20-21; 13,9-10; 14,12-13; 16.15; 19,9-10; 20,6). This implies that he wrote the final text of his Book of Revelation after his return to Ephesus, no doubt using and incorporating the transcripts, notes and memories of the divine experience he had witnessed while he was on the Island of Patmos. Though the author would not have been in the same ecstatic state as for the original visionary material, according to the mystical doctrine referenced above he would have attained an even higher state of divine union, and was in this condition when he wrote the final text of his account of the entire revelation. This would have been an opportunity for him to re-live his visionary experience and to complete an inspired revision, recollection and contemplation of its content.

So, soon after his return to Ephesus, no more than a few months after he had been granted his divine revelation,<sup>51</sup> John wrote his near-seamless narrative of the entire revelation in his own Galilean Jewish Greek, with some assistance from a bilingual Aramaic-Greek speaker, using as a basis for his account the original visionary material that he had recorded at the time, in his own language, Aramaic, on scraps of leather, wood or papyrus.<sup>52</sup> The present text of the Book of Revelation

evidence of common authorship with the Book of Revelation, during the same period (96-98 CE).

<sup>51</sup> John would have been sent to Patmos sometime during 95 CE and released not before Autumn 96 CE (the start of Emperor Nerva's reign). So his stay on Patmos would have been from 9-18 months long and there is no indication when exactly the Revelation was experienced by him.

<sup>52</sup> There is little doubt that the mother tongue of the author of the Book of Revelation was Aramaic/Hebrew and that Greek was secondarily acquired. As communication during mystical experience is in the mother tongue of the seer, it is



should therefore be expected to contain both original visionary material and inspired recollections and editorial additions in narrative form, making it extremely difficult to separate the two sources, both of which were anyway written, translated and then compiled by the same author in a process called 'redaction'.

So Rowland is quite correct when he writes: "Although we would want to argue that a substantial number of authentic visions have been included, there is no doubt that redaction of that material took place to enable the book to have the considerable degree of order which it manifests".<sup>53</sup> Our only objection to this statement is the implied negative attitude towards the process of redaction, in comparison to 'authentic visions'. We propose it is mistaken to think of 'redaction' in this case as being less worthy, or even 'inauthentic', when compared to the original visions, as if John merely copied out his Patmos notes and filled in the gaps as best he could from his own limited imagination or knowledge of literary devices. As we explained above, being in the highest known state of mystical union, he was now in the best position to know God's will in its fullness, and to write the entire 'Word of God and the Witness of Jesus' in his Book of Revelation. Furthermore, by writing this book he was accomplishing the task assigned to him at the midpoint of the vision itself (Rev 10,11-11,2).

Before starting on the process of dividing the text into its smaller units, it is essential to repeat and emphasize the scholarly consensus, fruit of the last 30 years of research, on the fundamental visionary and literary unity of the Book of Revelation. It is necessary to keep this unity and continuity always in mind in order to make sense of the few interruptions and discontinuities that do exist in the text, to the puzzlement and confusion of many readers. To this end, it is worth outlining the mechanisms by which unity is created and maintained. On the literary level, a superficial reading of the book reveals the author recounting a continuous visionary experience which took place on the Lord's day (Sunday), while he was on the Island of Patmos. He recounts a single continuous vision, moving relentlessly from start finish, with an almost unlimited repetition of the

therefore most likely that John wrote his first accounts in Aramaic/Hebrew, which he later translated into Greek (cf. chapter 2 'The Author of the Book of Revelation').

<sup>53</sup> Rowland, *Open Heaven*, 414.

conjugation 'and', as well as 'and I saw', 'and I heard' and 'after these things'. The unity of the author's vision is maintained by the use of a variety of literary techniques including (i) sequential numbering of smaller visionary units, (ii) 'interlinking' with inter- and intra-textual cross-references and allusions, and by using repetitions of stock phrases with minor variations, (iii) 'interlocking' (sometimes termed 'interweaving') of consecutive sections, (iv) 'intercalating' (inserting a section as in a parenthesis), and (v) 'recapitulation' or 'overlapping' of parts of the text. Richard Bauckham strikes a chord when he writes "There have been many divergent attempts to discern the structure of Revelation by identifying its major divisions. The difficulty that has been experienced in these attempts results partly from the fact, as Barr puts it, that 'whereas our concern is to divide the book, John's concern was to bind it together'. As we shall see, John has taken considerable care to integrate the various parts of his work into a literary whole".<sup>54</sup>

Lying behind the text's literary unity, it is not surprising to find a dominant and extensive visionary unity, which has not been widely acknowledged by modern scholarship. However, Bauckham is aware of it and describes it as follows: "Revelation, by contrast, is really (from 1:10 to 22:6) a single vision. The imagery is common to the whole. From time to time the scene shifts and fresh images may be introduced, but, once introduced, they may recur throughout the book. Thus John's vision creates a single symbolic universe in which its readers may live for the time it takes them to read (or hear) the book. Both the profusion of the visual imagery and the unity and continuity of the visionary sequence make Revelation distinctive among the apocalypses".<sup>55</sup>

<sup>54</sup> Bauckham, *Climax of Prophecy*, ch 1. p.2; quoting from David L. Barr, "The Apocalypse as a Symbolic Transformation of the World: A Literary Analysis, *Interpretation*, 38 (1984), 43.

<sup>55</sup> Bauckham *Theology*, 10. See also Leonard L. Thompson: "Revelation discloses in its depth or innerness a wholeness of vision consonant with the intertexture found at the surface level of his language. At all levels signifiers, signifieds, deep structures, and surface structures form homologies, not contradictory oppositions. The logic of the vision does not progress from oppositions to their resolution. Rather, in all its aspects the language speaks from unbroken wholeness to unbroken wholeness", *The Book of Revelation: Apocalypse and Empire*, New York/London: OUP, 1990; 74-91, quote from 91.

As for identifying the single vision described by Bauckham, one does not have to look further than the activities surrounding the throne of God in heaven, which the author was privileged to observe and describe in detail. These activities are mostly liturgical in character and are performed in a way that evokes the liturgical services for the Day of Atonement in the second temple and in a setting that recalls many features of that temple in Jerusalem. We have presented elsewhere our analysis of this symbolism<sup>56</sup> and the reasons for regarding this temple-liturgical imagery of the text as the dominant visionary theme.<sup>57</sup> This is the elusive “organizing principle”, which both unites and orders all the various visions into a single and coherent vision of a liturgy of reconciliation taking place around the throne of God in the heavenly sanctuary, and of its consequences for the lives of the peoples, believers and non-believers, on earth. Everything in the vision that happens on earth is initiated and controlled by the liturgical activity around the throne in heavenly sanctuary.

Having stressed the reciprocal literary and visionary unity in the Book of Revelation, it is now appropriate to move on and identify the smaller units of which it is composed. As no more than a few months passed between the author’s divine revelation and the final composition, it is not unreasonable to suppose that the inspired narrative in which the visions were recounted would somehow reflect the order in which the visions were originally received. An authentic way to examine the composition of the text would therefore be to look for literary markers of the original visionary material.

### Apocalyptic Structural Convention

Out of the many ways that have been proposed by scholars, few have studied carefully the structural conventions of contemporary apocalyptic literature in order to see if the Book of Revelation also follows those conventions. In 1994, however, Christopher R. Smith demonstrated that not only does the sacred text use these

<sup>56</sup> John and Gloria Ben-Daniel, *The Apocalypse in the Light of the Temple: A New Approach to the Book of Revelation*, Jerusalem: Beit Yochanan, 2003, available at [www.newtorah.org](http://www.newtorah.org).

<sup>57</sup> In chapter 6 of this volume, ‘Imagery in the Book of Revelation and its Dominant Theme’.

conventions, but that the text divided in this way gives us a glimpse of how it was composed by the author after his return to Ephesus in 96-97 CE.<sup>58</sup> After studying five other ascent apocalypses from the same era (4*Ezra*, 2*Baruch*, 3*Baruch*, 2*Enoch*, *Ascension of Isaiah*), Smith finds that significant thematic divisions are indicated by a recurring convention, which follows a similar pattern, although the precise wording varies. It basically consists of the re-entry of a heavenly intermediary (an angel) into the narrative, along with a reference to a change in the disposition of the seer. New information about the angelic guide and the seer is a widespread, though not universal (2*Baruch* does not use it), convention used to mark major thematic divisions.

Returning to the Book of Revelation, Smith finds the use of the phrase 'in the Spirit' corresponds exactly to that of the typical apocalyptic structural convention defined above: "We observe that each of the four occurrences of this phrase are in a context in which an otherworldly intermediary enters the narrative. These contexts are deliberately reminiscent of one another".<sup>59</sup> He then quotes the four markers (1,10-11; 4,1-2; 17,1-3; 21,9-10) and recalls the observation of a previous commentator that 'each occurrence of this phrase locates the seer in a different place: Patmos, heaven, a wilderness, and a great, high mountain'.<sup>60</sup> Accepting the scholarly consensus on the presence of Prologue (1,1-9) and Epilogue (22,10,21), the body of the text then falls neatly into four corresponding sections: the letters (1,9-3,22), the Babylon vision (17,1-19,10), the New Jerusalem vision (21,9-22,9) and the 'long vision' (the rest of the text).

At this point, Smith discovers a fifth structural division in the centre of the 'long vision' "There is yet one more significant intrusion into the narrative and vision sequence by interaction between the seer and a heavenly intermediary. This intrusion is significant because it repeats John's heavenly commission. It does not involve the phrase 'in the Spirit', but as we have seen, apocalyptic writers vary their structural conventions".<sup>61</sup> Smith then quotes the new structural

<sup>58</sup> Christopher R. Smith, 'The Structure of the Book of Revelation in Light of Apocalyptic Literary Conventions', *Novum Testamentum* XXXVI, 4 (1994), 373-393.

<sup>59</sup> Smith, 'The Structure of the Book of Revelation', 387.

<sup>60</sup> Merril C. Tenney, *Interpreting Revelation*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957, 32-3.

<sup>61</sup> Smith, 'The Structure of the Book of Revelation', 387.

marker (10,8-11) and proceeds to explain why it is “at least a minor structural divide”. Having agreed with Smith’s analysis up to here, we differ in our assessment of the importance of this marker: in our view it is not only a major structural divide, but also the most significant of all the structural divisions in the text. The angel’s intrusion (10,1) also causes a significant change in the author’s disposition, as it results in him returning from heaven to earth and being told ‘to prophesy again’ (10,11), all at a critical time just before the last trumpet (10,7). If the expression ‘in the Spirit’ is not stated, it is implied, for the author’s new location is analogous to what it was in the introductory vision, when he was on Patmos ‘in the Spirit’ on the Lord’s day, before being lifted up to the heavenly throne-room (1,10-3,22). In its present context within the vision narrative, the author’s change in location represents, after a considerable absence, his personal reconnection with the affairs of the world just before the last trumpet.<sup>62</sup>

What makes this structural marker and the subsequent vision so significant is that it precisely envisions the chain of transmission in the opening verse of the book: “The Revelation of Jesus Christ which God gave to him to show his servants what must happen soon, and which he made known by sending his angel to his servant John, who bears witness to the Word of God and the Witness of Jesus Christ, of all that he saw” (Rev 1,1-2). Although not stated explicitly, it is implied that here, at the centre of the book, we have the true beginning, the central part to which all the previous narrative was leading. Furthermore, comparing the two passages, the little open scroll represents ‘the Revelation of Jesus Christ’, which on one hand was given to John to show God’s servants what must happen soon (1,1), and on the other hand, once digested, it contains the ‘bitter and sweet’ content of his renewed prophecy (10,8-11). In summary, this structural division contains the most important part of the whole book.

If the above conclusion is not obvious it is because this third section of the book is not continuous, but split into two parts by the seventh and last trumpet (11,15-19): the first part is narrated before the last trumpet (10,1-11,14) and the second part is narrated after

<sup>62</sup> One cannot help connecting this with the expected return, from heaven, of the prophets Moses and Elijah, whose powers are given to the two witnesses (Rev 11, 5-6).

(12,1–15,4). The two parts are related to each other by the mention of the same two temporal expressions, 1260 days (11,3 and 12,6) and 42 months (11,2 and 13,5), and by the vision of the beast that rises from the abyss or sea (11,7 and 13,1). The beast and the two time periods not only link these two halves of the enigmatic third section to each other, but also suggest overlap, in particular a temporal overlap, which is to say that they describe events in the same period of time. If the two parts are to be read in parallel, as concurrent, the problem is then to determine which part is displaced. The solution is given by the recognition that Rev 12,1–15,4 is an *'inclusio'* (an 'inclusion', 'intercalation' or 'interpolation') enclosed by a 'doublet'—a pair of similar expressions—at 11,19 ("And the Sanctuary of God in heaven was opened..") and then again at 15,5 ("and the Sanctuary of the Tent of Witness in heaven was opened.."). The doublet identifies the beginning and end of the inclusion (12,1–15,4) and functions as a parenthesis, marking the 'included' passage as a parallel account, or expansion, of what preceded (especially 11,1–14). The elusive third section of the Book of Revelation therefore comprises two passages (10,1–11,14 and 12,1–15,4), which are to be read in parallel and understood as describing events that are concurrent and immediately preceding the seventh trumpet blast and the final judgment (10,7; 11,15–19).

The reason for the division of this section into two parts, as described above, becomes apparent when we focus on its internal structure, which is dictated by the two temporal expressions, 1260 days (11,3; 12,6) and 42 months (11,2; 13,5), found in both parts.

If the two time-periods, 1,260 days and 42 months, refer to the same period of time, as most scholars assert, then it is legitimate to ask why the author has chosen two different temporal expressions when one would suffice. Firstly, whichever calendar was used, 1,260 days is not exactly the same as 42 months, and the author must have been aware of this.<sup>63</sup> Secondly, according to the contents of the text,

<sup>63</sup> At the author's time, two calendars were known: the Hebrew luni-solar calendar in which 42 months lasted 1,239 days (21 days less than 1,260) and the sectarian (Essene) 364-day solar calendar in which 42 months lasted 1,274 days (14 days more than 1,260). The expression "time, two times and half-a-time", cited at Rev 12,14 and meaning 'three and a half years', informs us exactly which calendar the author had in mind. By evoking the time of persecution under the tyrannical "little horn" of Daniel (Dan 7,23–25; 12,7), this circumlocution for 3½ years

the events that characterize each time period are mutually exclusive: the mission of the two prophets during the 1,260 days cannot take place during the 42-month reign of the sea-beast, as they are adversaries of each other, and both the prophets and the sea-beast have the power to destroy their enemies (11,5 and 13,7). If the mission of the two prophets and the reign of the beast were concurrent, they would quickly degenerate into mortal combat, but instead the text notes: “whenever they (the two prophets) finish their witnessing, the beast that is coming up out of the abyss will make war against them and overcome them and kill them” (11,7), which is to say that the mission of the two prophets for 1,260 days comes first and is then followed by the reign of the beast for 42 months. These two temporal expressions refer to two different but consecutive time periods of more or less the same duration, which together add up to seven years and provide a clear temporal structure to this end-time prophecy. Moreover, the 42-month reign of the beast is terminated at the final battle and the second coming of Christ (16,12-16; 19,11-21), so the seven-year period is indeed a final ‘week of years’, or septennium (cf. Dan 9,24-27). The separation of the two parts, before and after the last trumpet, allows the author to focus on different aspects of his prophecy for this final time period: firstly the way the prophecy will be publicly announced (11,1-14) and secondly the content of the prophecy itself (12,1-15,4).

Before summarizing the findings so far, we should recall that the author of the Book of Revelation invested heavily in uniting the various sections of his work, so the process of detecting the original structural divisions has to take into account the ways used by the author to merge its sections. This has been called ‘interlocking’ or ‘interweaving’ and, as the name implies, it involves a gradual introduction of the new section, together with a gradual fading of the previous one. This merging is achieved so successfully that it is often difficult to define exactly where the former section ends and where

corresponds to the 42-month reign of the beast. Under the Hebrew luni-solar calendar, however, 3½ years contained at least 43 months, due to the ‘intercalated’ month added every 2-3 years. The author was therefore guided by the sectarian 364-day solar calendar in which 3½ years were equal to 42 months and 1,274 days.

the new section begins.<sup>64</sup> This partly explains the multiplicity of scholarly proposals for defining the structure of the text. And for this reason, our results differ slightly from those of Smith's study, especially on the precise ending of the Babylon and New Jerusalem Visions.

Bearing these minor variations in mind, and basing ourselves on the five structural conventions presented above, there is close agreement between Smith's analysis<sup>65</sup> and our own proposal for the basic structural divisions of the text presented below:

<i>No.</i>	<i>and Name of Section</i>	<i>Ch/vs</i>	<i>Connection</i>
	Prologue	1,1-9	Linked to 22,6-21
1	Initial Vision and Letters	1,10-3,22	Linked to 21,9-22,5
2	Heavenly Ascent and Liturgy	4,1-9,21 11,15-19 15,5-16,21 19,1-21,8	Sequel of 1,10-20 (4,1)
3	Prophecy of final period	10,1-11,14 12,1-15,4	Expansion of 7,1-17
4	Babylon Vision	17,1-18,24	Expansion of 14,8; 16,19
5	New Jerusalem Vision	21,9-22,5	Expansion of 21,2
	Epilogue	22,6-21	Linked to 1,1-9

<sup>64</sup> Aptly described as follows by S. Bar-Efrat: "In the field of biblical narrative particularly it seems to be impossible to define the boundaries of the literary units rigidly. In the Bible narratives which are more or less complete in themselves link up with one another so as to create larger literary units. In other words, narratives which on the one hand can be considered as self-contained units, may be regarded on the other hand as parts of larger wholes", 'Some Observations on the Analysis of Structure in Biblical Narrative', *Vetus Testamentum*, 30 (1980), 156.

<sup>65</sup> Smith has the Babylon Vision ending at 19,10, and the New Jerusalem Vision ending at 22,9. The other difference concerns the ending of the central "Prophecy" section, which he calls the 'historical Vision' and concludes at 21,8. The terminology here reveals our main disagreement: what we take as prophecy, Smith takes as history. This result is that although the prophecy is well defined by the literary markers of "intercalation" explained above, it is quite possible that John's original vision made no distinction here, and what started as renewal of prophetic activity, ended by completing the heavenly liturgy vision. In other words, there is a difference here between the literary structure and the visionary structure, most probably explained by the author's redaction activity. This will be explained below.



Clearly the identification of these five basic structural divisions of the text does not preclude further refinement. In fact, the many smaller textual units identified within these divisions can be further arranged in a symmetrical pattern around the centre of the text, in an arrangement called 'concentric parallelism', one of the more common forms known to rhetorical analysts and studied at the macro and micro level of biblical texts. Other examples abound, in a way that is now recognized as an important feature of biblical literary tradition: "The third characteristic of Hebrew rhetoric is the specific manner in which it composes parallel dispositions and most of all concentric arrangements. Instead of developing its argumentation in a linear way, in the Graeco-Roman fashion, to a conclusion which is the point of resolution of the discourse, it is organized most of the time in an involutive manner around a centre which is the focal point, the keystone, through which the rest finds cohesion".<sup>1</sup>

The concentric arrangement of the text is strongly suggested by the symmetrical arrangement of the 'Prophecy of the final period' (F and F') around a central point (\*), easily identifiable as the last trumpet (11,15-19). Extending the arrangement in both directions, with more or less the same textual units as those defined by Smith's method, a concentric structure emerges in which there is further division of a part of Smith's 'long vision' (4,1-9,21) into three sections (C,D,E), with close parallels to later sections (C',D',E'). The parallelism between the Trumpets (E) and the Libation Bowls (E'), and between the 'Throne and Judge with Scroll' (C) and the 'Throne and the Final Judgment' (C') are both quite straightforward, but the parallelism of the other section is more unusual, because the 'Vision of Zion' (D) compared with the 'Babylon Vision' (D') is an example of 'antithetical parallelism'. Another example is the Babylon Vision (D') in relation to the New Jerusalem Vision (B').

According to these divisions, the concentric arrangement of the text can now be expressed as follows:

<sup>1</sup> Roland Meynet, *Rhetorical Analysis: An Introduction to Biblical Rhetoric*, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998; 175.

<i>Symbol</i>	<i>Name for Section</i>	<i>Ch/vs in Rev</i>
A	Prologue	1,1-9
B	Initial Vision and Letters	1,10-3,22
C	Throne and Judge with Scroll	4,1-6,17
D	Vision of Zion: City of God	7,1-17 (ant. parallelism)
E	The Trumpets	8,1-9,21
F	Prophecy of final period	10,1-11,14 (prophecy)
*	The Final Trumpet	11,15-19
F'	Prophecy of final period	12,1-15,4 (prophecy)
E'	The Libation Bowls	15,5-16,21
D'	Babylon Vision	17,1-18,24 (ant. parallelism)
C'	Throne and Final Judgment	19,1-21,8
B'	New Jerusalem Vision	21,9-22,5
A'	Epilogue	22,6-21

Although not identical, this result bears a clear resemblance to the scheme proposed by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza. Perhaps the main message, and the principal point of resemblance, concerns and confirms the centrality, in location and in significance, of the prophecy that issues from the little scroll: "In choosing the concentric pattern ABCDC'B'A' the author makes the small scroll of prophecy in Rev 10:1-15:4 the climactic center of the action. The author has fused his materials, patterns, and theological perspective into the unique form-content configuration (*Gestalt*) of Rev".<sup>2</sup>

#### Discussion of Results

What is especially revealing about Smith's method of structuring the text is that his structural conventions are not only literary markers but also markers of new visions or revelatory activity. This is further evidence that the literary unity is just a facet of the book's original visionary unity, and that it contains a redacted though faithful account of the author's original visionary experience, one that avoids dwelling on the experience, but rather on the divine content. The advantage of this method is that it gives an insight into the various parts of the

<sup>2</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *The Book of Revelation: Justice and Judgment*, Philadelphia: Fortress 1985; 175-7, quote is from 177.

revelatory process and the way these were combined to compose the final text of Book of Revelation.

There is general agreement that the Prologue and the Epilogue are not based on the author's visionary experience on Patmos, but were added at the time of the writing of the final version of the text, after the author had returned to the mainland.<sup>3</sup> The Prologue (1,1-8) consists of basic introductory material on the origin, transmission, purpose and nature of the book, much of which is reaffirmed in the Epilogue (Rev 22,6-21). It has the typical form of the 'prescript' of an ancient letter, with the details of the sender, addressee and a greeting (1,4-5). As mentioned earlier, the Trinitarian greeting (1,4-5) and the direct interjection from Almighty God (1,8) act as divine authentication of the author John's work and indicate that he was in a state of supreme divine union when he wrote this text. `

The first major section of the Book of Revelation is easily identified by the first occurrence of the marker 'in the Spirit' (1,10) and before the second (4,1). It starts with the author's initial vision of the angel of the Risen Christ among seven golden lampstands (1,10-20), which is the preparation for his ensuing dictation of messages to the angels of the same seven churches (Rev 2-3). The seven messages contain cross references back to the appearance of the Risen Christ in the initial vision and forward to the rewards of the faithful, more fully described at the end of the book. The messages to the seven churches are organized in a series of seven and ordered according to the location of the church on a circular route heading north out of Ephesus, then east and south. It is the first of four different series of seven elements in the text, all with a liturgical reference: the seven churches are represented by seven lampstands (1,20), which correspond to the seven-branched candelabra that used to stand in the sanctuary of the Jerusalem temple. The symbolism here refers to the high priest tending the lampstand at the start of the morning service (the *tamid* sacrifice) on the Day of Atonement in the ancient temple. The temple and liturgical symbolism unites this vision to the next, which in turn embraces all the other visions in the Book of Revelation.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> See discussion in the section above, entitled "Visionary Evidence".

<sup>4</sup> For the identification of the liturgical elements and activities with those of the Day of Atonement in the temple, see John and Gloria Ben-Daniel, *The Apocalypse*

The second and largest section begins with the second mention of 'in the Spirit' (4,1), which follows on directly, without any interruption, from the first. The same revealing angel accompanies the author on this occasion, as in the first vision (1,10; 4,1), but this vision involves an immediate ascent to the throne of God in heaven (Rev 4). With this ascent, the author begins a narration of successive events that continues through to the end of the book, broken only by the three remaining sections. He narrates the events as the progress of a liturgy surrounding the throne of God in the heavenly sanctuary. Every liturgical action initiated in the heavenly sanctuary has effects on the earth, the inhabitants of the earth and all creation.

This is not the place to describe the details of this section, but rather just to outline the narrative sequence, which is conveniently structured into three successive series of seven judgments: the breaking of the seven seals of the Lamb's scroll leads directly to the blowing of the seven trumpets, which ends in the outpouring of the seven bowls of libation, all of which are determined by the progress of the liturgy in heaven. The beginning of this sequence is the ascension of Christ the Lamb to the divine throne in heaven and the end-point is the final judgment at the end of history and the fulfillment of the plan of God. Reflecting the temporal progression of the heavenly liturgy, this 'baseline prophetic narrative' progresses in a linear fashion, like a telescope extending and giving greater attention to the final elements. The seventh and last element 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. On approaching the final consummation, the pace and severity of these judgments increase 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.<sup>5</sup>

The end-point of the 'baseline prophetic narrative', the culmination of the three series of seven judgments, is described in great detail

*in the Light of the Temple: A New Approach to the Book of Revelation*, Jerusalem: Beit Yochanan, 2003; 3-79, available at [www.newtorah.org](http://www.newtorah.org).

<sup>5</sup> As many scholars have done, following the commentary of Victorinus of Petau 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 Jauhiainen 'Recapitulation and Chronological Progression in John's Apocalypse: Towards a New Perspective', *New Testament Studies*, 49 (2003); 543-59.

indicating that this was the focus of the author's attention from the start (Rev 1,1-3). The main events include the second coming of Christ, the defeat of the devil and his agents, the final judgment and the new creation, all traditional eschatological events associated with the fulfilment of the plan of God.<sup>6</sup>

The third section is the most important of all the sections: it is embedded in the 'baseline prophetic narrative' at the centre of the book (10,1-15,4) and is divided in two parts by the account of the last trumpet (11,15-19), indicating inspired editorial work by the author, as noted above. The section is presented as a new start, bringing a renewed prophetic commission for the author and a prophecy for the final period of history, the time immediately preceding the last trumpet and the second coming of Christ. There is nevertheless, an unmistakable verbal-thematic link with the 'baseline prophetic narrative' into which it is embedded: the mighty angel holding the little open scroll (10,1-2) recalls the mighty angel guarding access to the scroll at the throne of God in heaven, before it was given to Christ the Lamb (5,1-7). The little open scroll in this section, which prepares the author to write the prophecy for the final period of history, is clearly related to the scroll of Christ the Lamb, although is not to be identified with it. Without going into the details of the relationship between the two scrolls, it is sufficient to say that this relationship connects John's renewed prophetic role at this point in the text with the higher purpose of the scroll of the Lamb in heaven, which is none other than the scroll of Life.<sup>7</sup> Later in this section, the link is confirmed by the expansion and development of certain themes from the 'baseline prophetic narrative', especially concerning the 144,000 (7,1-8 and 14,1-5) and the great crowd of martyrs in heaven (7,9-17 and 15,2-4; 19,1-6).

The last two sections defined by the structural markers, also articulate with the 'baseline prophetic narrative' and are structurally very similar. Both are revealed and interpreted by one of the seven angels that poured the libation bowls, both take the author to a particular location 'in the Spirit', both expand upon and complete a

<sup>6</sup> For the chronology of the problematic millennial reign of Christ with his saints, see our 'Revelation 20,1-6: the Millennium and the Mystery of Iniquity' available at [www.newtorah.org](http://www.newtorah.org) (Academic Articles).

<sup>7</sup> For our identification of the seven-sealed scroll in heaven with the scroll of Life and its relation to the little scroll, see 'The Final Judgment in the Book of Revelation', available at [www.newtorah.org](http://www.newtorah.org) (Academic Articles).

previous reference in the text (14,8; 16,19; 21.2), both are eschatological events, and both concern cities described as women, the 'fall' (judgment) of Babylon (17,1-18,24) and the 'descent' (realization) of the New Jerusalem (21,9-22,5). The order and complementarity of this pair of visions indicates that they too are to be understood in succession: first Babylon must fall before the New Jerusalem can descend.<sup>8</sup>

The Epilogue brings the Book of Revelation to a close, repeating many of the themes that were raised in other parts of the text and especially in the Prologue: this is an authentic prophecy (1,3 and 22,6.9-10.18-19) by a recognized servant of God (1,1-2.9-10 and 22,8-10) to inform the churches (1,1.3.11 and 22,16) and to encourage the faithful (1,3 and 22,7.12.14). Together, the Prologue and Epilogue prepare the reader specifically for the second coming of Christ and leave no doubt that this book is to be understood as a sacred prophecy, written for the faithful by John in response to a divine command and according to God's will. Taken at its word, this is a uniquely important document, with which there is little to compare in the canon of sacred Scripture (cf. Deut 4,2; Gal 1,6-9).

### The Visionary Origins

Our analysis of the structure of the Book of Revelation, using the traditional structural markers identified by Smith, has divided the text into five separate though interconnected sections: the first two sections (Rev 1,10-3,22 and 4,1-21,9) are visionary accounts in sequence and can be read straight through from start to finish as a single vision of successive events on heaven and on earth, from Christ's Ascension to the final judgment and consummation of the plan of God for mankind. We have renamed the second section, which Smith called the 'long vision', the 'baseline prophetic narrative'. The last three sections are to be read in parallel with parts of the longer section, or 'baseline prophetic narrative'. The third section is a prophetic expansion of the period of history immediately preceding the last trumpet (10,1-11,14 and 12,1-15,4), and the fourth and fifth sections are expansions of the 'fall of Babylon' (17,1-18,24) and the 'descent of the New Jerusalem' (21,9-22,5) respectively. There are signs of authorial

<sup>8</sup> Bauckham explains this well in his *Climax of Prophecy*, 3-7.

redaction, especially around the central section, as discussed above. This redaction seems to have been necessary to relate the parallel visions more precisely to the 'baseline prophetic narrative', which functions like a temporal framework spanning the entire course of salvation history from beginning to end. The redactions, then, serve to relate the various sections to the temporal dimension signified by the heavenly liturgy.

However, as we noted previously, the traditional structural markers are not only literary markers for the hearer/reader of the Book of Revelation, but also they are markers of original visionary material experienced by the author. It should therefore be possible to propose a reconstruction of the author's visionary experience. Assuming that this took place over a short period, but not all at once, we suggest that the author experienced these visions in three successive sittings, with pauses in between in order to write and contemplate the material from the previous session:

1. In the first session, the author seems to have experienced the content of the first two sections, starting with the initial vision of the angel of the Risen Christ (1,10) and letters (Rev 2-3), progressing without a break through the throne vision, seals, trumpets (while omitting 10,1-11,14) and ending with the description of the last trumpet (11,15-19). This indeed brings the vision to a preliminary ending, with the announcement of the main events surrounding the judgment at the end of history. The contents of the vision following the breaking of the sixth seal—a vision of the traditional Day of Lord, withheld for the sealing of the 144,000 and of the countless martyrs in heaven (cf. Joel 3,3-5)—would have created a need for further elaboration in the next session.

2. In the second session, the author's visionary experience begins afresh with his encounter with a mighty angel who invites him to swallow a little open scroll (Rev 10,1). This results in a renewal of his prophetic calling and generates a new prophecy which takes up and enlarges on the issues that were left unfinished in the previous session (7,1-17). This vision generates all the material in the rest of the book, including the three signs in heaven, the eschatological harvest, the pouring of the seven libation bowls, the final battle, the final judgment, and ending with the introduction to the New Jerusalem (21,8), while

skipping the account of the last trumpet given in the previous session (11,15-19) and the Babylon and New Jerusalem visions (17,1-18,24 and 21,9-22,5) which will be given in the next session.

3. In a third session, the author's visionary experience enlarged upon the two cities mentioned in the previous session, Babylon which fell to the ground (14,8; 16,19) and the New Jerusalem which descended from heaven to be at the centre of the New Heavens and New Earth (21,2). These two visions were given to him by the same bowl angel as a complementary but antithetical pair, in a sequence starting with Babylon (17,1-18,24) and ending with New Jerusalem (21,9-22,5).

4. At this point, the visionary experience seems to have ended, but John remained in a state of supreme divine union for the rest of his life. It was in this state that he later redacted the three visionary experiences into one continuous vision, uniting them into the unifying vision of heavenly liturgy by means of the literary techniques of interlinking, interweaving and intercalating the constituent sections. The function of the author's redaction seems to have been mainly to join up the separate visions into a single unified vision with subtle clues as to how they all fit into the time line.

5. After this work was done, the author wrote and then added the Prologue and Epilogue.

#### Summary and Conclusion

The composition of the Book of Revelation has baffled the minds of generations of great scholars up to the present day. Many different approaches have been tried, focusing either on 'external factors', such as the text's resemblance to Greek drama, imperial games, Christian Pascal liturgy, etc., or on 'internal factors' suggested by literary and numerical markers (septenary structure) and/or by thematic/dramatic structure (chiastic or bipartate). One aspect that has rarely been considered, however, is whether the composition of the book may actually be a reflection of the author's original visionary experience. After showing that, according to existing criteria, a great deal of the text is indeed derived from authentic visionary material, as stated unambiguously by the author himself, we have employed a structural method proposed by an American scholar, Christopher Smith, which



is based upon traditional structural divisions employed in a variety of apocalyptic works that are more or less contemporary with the Book of Revelation. The results of this approach not only satisfactorily explain the present thematic/dramatic structure of the book, but also lead us to a plausible reconstruction of the author's original visionary experiences and the nature and extent of subsequent redaction by the same author.

The most important conclusion to emerge from this study is that the composition of the Book of Revelation itself is a witness to the truth of the author's claim that it is the product of authentic visionary experience and follows quite closely the order in which the visions were given to him. The author's redaction appears to be limited to uniting his separate visionary experiences in the correct temporal order, within the unifying vision of a liturgy in the heavenly temple, and to writing the Prologue and Epilogue, as well as adding some extra-visionary exhortations and interjections. This was done after the author had returned to Ephesus in Autumn 96 CE, while in a state of supreme divine union. It was the author himself who wrote the first draft of the account in Greek, working from memory of his experience, and from his Aramaic field notes, although he was most likely aided, in a rather limited way, by a team of assistants.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup> For further reflections on the production and distribution of the first manuscript of the Book of Revelation, see chapter 2 of the present work: 'The Author of the Book of Revelation'.

## CHAPTER 6

### Imagery in the Book of Revelation and its Dominant Theme

#### Introduction

The Book of Revelation starts by stating how its content was made known: Jesus Christ “*signified by sending his angel to his servant John, who witnesses the Word of God and the Witness of Jesus, all that he saw*” (Rev 1,1). There are two verbs in this sentence that imply that this Revelation was communicated primarily by means of visual images, or visions, which the author then transcribed into words. This is confirmed in the text, when the author is twice commanded to “*write in a book what you see*” (1,11; cf. 1,19) and also later, in the narrative, with the endless repetition of the phrase “*And then I saw*”, or “*And then was seen*”, followed by another vision.<sup>1</sup>

The imagery, then, is not a secondary feature of this book, but instead represents the origin and foundation of most of the text. Except for the small amount of oracular (e.g., 1,8; 2,1–3,22; 13,9–10; 14,13; 16,15) and narrative prophecy (e.g., 11,3–13) in the text, every word is either directly related to, or dependent upon, the visionary material revealed to the author.<sup>2</sup> From the very first reading of the text, it is the imagery that makes the greatest impact on the reader. It has been variously described by scholars as bizarre,<sup>3</sup> surreal,<sup>4</sup> vivid

<sup>1</sup> Cf. G.K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, NIGTC, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1999; 50–52.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, Cambridge: CUP 1993, 3; Ian Boxall, *The Revelation of St. John*, Black’s New Testament Commentary, London: Continuum 2006, 3–5.

<sup>3</sup> John Sweet, ‘Revelation’ in *Early Christian Thought in its Jewish Context*, Eds. John Barclay and John Sweet, Cambridge: CUP 1996, 161.

<sup>4</sup> G. Biguzzi, ‘A Figurative and Narrative Language Grammar of Revelation’, *Novum Testamentum*, XLV, 4, (2003), 399.

and often grotesque,<sup>5</sup> strange and sometimes weird or even monstrous.<sup>6</sup>

The images that compose John's visions are described in various combinations of literal and figurative (non-literal) language, which includes forms such as simile, metaphor, allegory (extended metaphor), metonymy and personification.<sup>7</sup> The type of language employed in a particular text is identified by examining its literary character and context, and this helps in deciding its meaning (i.e., to what it refers, its 'referent'). This in turn contributes towards the clarification of the primary meaning of the text, its 'literal sense', upon which all other senses depend.<sup>8</sup>

However, in the text of Revelation, identifying the type of language employed by the author can be problematic. Although the transitions between literal and figurative description are sometimes indicated in the text (e.g., 'in the Spirit', 'and I saw [in vision]'), they are often not evident, in which case it may be difficult to distinguish whether the text is to be understood literally or figuratively.<sup>9</sup> This is compounded by the fact that the same words may have a literal sense in some contexts and a figurative sense in others.<sup>10</sup> In this area of uncertainty, interpretive decisions must be made about the literal or

<sup>5</sup> Ian Paul, 'The Book of Revelation: Image, Symbol and Metaphor', *Studies in the Book of Revelation*, Ed. Steve Moyse, Edinburgh/New York: T & T Clarke 2001, 131.

<sup>6</sup> H.B. Swete, *The Apocalypse of St. John: The Greek Text with Introduction Notes and Indices*, London: Macmillan and Co, 1906, cxxxii.

<sup>7</sup> For a useful review of the author's use of simile and metaphor, see James L. Resseguie, *The Revelation of John: A Narrative Commentary*, Grand Rapids: Baker Academic 2009, 18-23.

<sup>8</sup> *Catechism of Catholic Church*, London: Geoffrey Chapman 1994, para. 116, citing St. Thomas, *Summa Theologiae* I, 10, ad 1.

<sup>9</sup> "Our difficulties begin when we try to decide how far to take the picture language literally and how far to take it figuratively", G.B. Caird, *A Commentary on the Revelation of St. John the Divine*, BNTC, London: A. & C. Black 1966, 6-7. A classic case in point is Rev 11,3-13: is this a straightforward piece of narrative prophecy, expressed in literal language and therefore asking to be interpreted literally for the most part, or is this a figurative (allegorical) description of persons, places and actions that is to be interpreted non-literally, because they represent referents other than those described?

<sup>10</sup> E.g., sky/heaven, star/angel or demon, thunders/divine voices, sea or waters/abyss; Cf. Ugo Vanni, *L'Apocalisse: Ermeneutica, Egesesi, Teologia* (Supplementi alla Revista Biblica, 17) Bologna: Centro Editoriale Dehoniana 1988, 34-5.

figurative nature of the imagery. Although scholars have proposed a number of useful guidelines to identify figurative language,<sup>11</sup> there remains disagreement. Lack of agreement in these decisions helps to explain the great variety of interpretations proposed for the text.<sup>12</sup> However, it is important to stress that there is no connection between the reality or truth of a thing and the type of language used to describe it: literal language does not imply real existence, just as non-literal (i.e., figurative) language does not imply unreality or non-existence. Both literal and figurative language can represent events or objects (referents) that are real and true.<sup>13</sup>

Unrelated to whether the language is literal or figurative, many of the images described in the text also have a symbolical character, especially those associated with vision reports. "A symbol is an image that evokes an objective, concrete reality and prompts that reality to suggest another level of meaning".<sup>14</sup> So the symbolism of a text enables it to evoke levels of meaning that augment or transcend its literal sense. By means of its symbols, a text can resonate with multiple levels of meaning (polyvalency). In the case of Revelation, most of the symbols are derived from the Old Testament (OT), either through the adoption of its symbols (e.g., Scroll of Life, Tree of Life, Water of Life) or symbolical systems (e.g., Ezekiel's plan of restoration, the gems on the high priest's breastplate), or through the symbolical use of OT metaphors (e.g., the Lamb and Lion of the Tribe of Judah, the Root of David, the Beasts, the Prostitute), or just through the symbolical use

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Beale, *Revelation*, 57; G.B. Caird, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible*, Pennsylvania: Westminster Press 1980, 186-197.

<sup>12</sup> I.e., there is a spectrum of interpretation from non-literal (often termed 'symbolical', but see next paragraph) at one end, to literal at the other.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Caird puts it like this "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", G.B. Caird, *Language and Imagery*, 131.

<sup>14</sup> C. Hugh Holman, *A Handbook to Literature*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., Indianapolis, New York: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1972; 1973; 519: with context: "If we consider an image to have a concrete referent in the objective world and to function as image when it powerfully evokes that referent, then a symbol is like an image in doing the same thing but different from it in going beyond the evoking of the objective referent by making the referent suggest a meaning beyond itself: in other words, a symbol is an image that evokes an objective, concrete reality and prompts that reality to suggest another level of meaning."

of places, persons and objects mentioned in the Old Testament (e.g., Jezebel, Balaam, Babylon, Egypt, Sodom, the sacred objects and places).<sup>15</sup> In the Book of Revelation, in fact, almost every image that evokes an image in the Old Testament can be called a symbol, because its corresponding context in the OT suggests a level of meaning over and above the meaning evoked by its immediate context. And if the image in Revelation evokes several OT images, then several levels of meaning may be perceived over and above the literal sense (e.g., the sounding of the trumpet can evoke, at the same time, divine worship, a call for repentance, the New Year convocation, assembly for war and the 'end of the world'; the celestial woman in Rev 12 evokes Eve, Wisdom, Zion, the Church, Mary and the chaste soul). The additional level, or levels, of meaning can then, in turn, exert influence over the literal sense, giving it more precision or depth, and demonstrating the important role of symbolism in the interpretation of the text.<sup>16</sup> This aspect of symbolism will be taken up later in our study of the larger symbolical themes, or 'macro-symbolism' of the text.

Scholars of the Book of Revelation often speak loosely of its 'symbolism' and 'symbolic language', thereby implying that all the images found there are symbols, or that they all have the same symbolical value. However, some caution is needed here. Despite the extensive symbolism of the vision reports, it has rightly been observed that "much of the imagery of the Apocalypse is doubtless not symbolism"<sup>17</sup> and "it should be obvious from a reading of Revelation that the author's imagery and symbolism are not all of a single kind".<sup>18</sup> All symbols are images, but not all images are symbols. Since not all the images of Revelation are symbols, it is preferable, when speaking generally about the image-evoking language of Revelation, to refer to its 'imagery', rather than to its 'symbolism'.

On the basis of Revelation's extensive symbolism and narrative structure, some scholars have deemed it, or parts of it, as belonging to

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Swete, *Apocalypse*, cxxxii-cxxxiii.

<sup>16</sup> Of course, it also shows how previous OT patterns of behaviour or expectation have become 'fulfilled' in, or through, the present text. Clearly we are touching on an aspect of literary study that has been called 'intertextuality'.

<sup>17</sup> Swete, *Apocalypse*, cxxxiii, who gives as an example Babylon's trade list in Rev 18,12-13.

<sup>18</sup> John M. Court, *Revelation*, New Testament Guides, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press 1999, 91.

the genre of 'myth', going so far as describing it as an 'eschatological myth'.<sup>19</sup> This is a highly contentious assertion, because of the derogatory significance given to the term 'myth' in the New Testament (2Pet 1,16; 1Tim 1,4; 2Tim 4,4; Titus 1,14) and persisting among the public up to this day. All attempts to redefine the term and rehabilitate the status of 'myth' have had no effect in removing its negative connotations.<sup>20</sup> In the popular mind a myth is, at best, a fictional story invented by men for a particular purpose, or, at worst, an outright lie. Furthermore, the mid-twentieth century initiative to de-mythologize the NT writings, led by the German theologian Rudolf Bultmann, only endorsed negative attitudes towards 'myth' by strongly rejecting the mythological elements that survive in these writings.<sup>21</sup>

Returning to the claim that the Book of Revelation is a kind of myth, there is good reason to believe that this is based on a misunderstanding of the way in which the total mythical worldview of Near-

<sup>19</sup> The most extreme protagonist of this view was S.H. Hooke, a British scholar of the 'Myth and Ritual' School, whose 'functional' definition of myth is capable of including almost any "product of the human imagination arising out of a definite situation and intended to do something" (*Middle Eastern Mythology*, Harmondsworth: Penguin 1963, 11). So it is not surprising that when speaking of the Book of Revelation (op. cit. 15-16), he does not distinguish between the use of mythical allusions as a form of symbolism and myth *per se*, with all that this term implies about the worldview, religious customs and social structures of those whom it embraces (cf. also 'Myth and Ritual Pattern in Jewish and Christian Apocalyptic' in *The Siege Perilous: Essays in Biblical Anthropology*, S.H. Hooke, London: SCM Press, 1956, 124-43). Among the scholars of Revelation none have gone so far as to call the book a myth, but many have come very close: e.g., M.E. Boring ('Revelation's pictorial language uses myth as the vehicle of truth'), A.Y. Collins ('the combat myth is the conceptual framework that underlies the book as a whole'), G.B. Caird ('he pictured the crisis of his own time in the archetypal symbols of myth and infused into the old myths the vitality of his own creative imagination'), Steven J. Friesen ('Revelation...created and deployed myths to show that ultimate authority was not located in this world'), and Gregory C. Jenks ('*The Antichrist Myth*'), to mention a few.

<sup>20</sup> One thinks especially of the work of Prof. Mircea Eliade, cf. *Myth and Reality*, New York: Harper and Row 1963, esp. 1-20 (ch.1).

<sup>21</sup> Cf. 'New Testament and Mythology' by Rudolf Bultmann in *Kerygma and Myth: A Theological Debate*, ed. H.W. Bartsch, New York: Harper and Row 1961, 1-44. The point should be made, though, that Bultmann's working definition of myth, or 'mythical worldview', is quite 'unbiblical': it basically included everything that could not be explained by modern science, and which he therefore considered obsolete.

Eastern societies was gradually overthrown by the faith of the ancient Israelites. As far as we know, Israelite worship never tried to recall and recreate the conditions of a primordial time (*in illo tempore*), through ritual re-enactments of elaborate myths, because the focus of Israel's faith was upon a God who acts in history on their behalf. Israelite prophets looked forward to an ideal consummation in the eschatological future, though sometimes using mythological motifs as metaphors to describe its realization.<sup>22</sup> The mythical and eschatological worldviews are so fundamentally opposed to each other that the mythical worldview first had to perish before the eschatological worldview could arise.<sup>23</sup> Myth, in its fullest and most authentic sense, is based on an entirely different set of theological beliefs than those of eschatological prophecy. The Book of Revelation clearly falls into the latter category (Rev 1,3; 22,7.10).

Instead, it is worth recalling that the particular language and imagery of the Book of Revelation have led to its identification as an example, arguably the most brilliant, of the genre of 'apocalypse'—a distinct group of writings with a similar form and content, produced between the years 250 BC and 200 AD. In writings of this genre the importance of biblical and mythological allusions is generally admitted, but "it should be clear that a mythological allusion does not carry the same meaning and reference in an apocalyptic context as it did in the original myth... Mythological allusions, like biblical allusions, are not simple copies of the original source. Rather they transfer motifs from one context to another. By so doing they build associations and analogies and so enrich the communicative power of language".<sup>24</sup> Clearly, the use of mythological allusion in the Book of Revelation does not mean that these writings are myths, or that they are derived directly from myths, or that they participate in any kind of mythical

<sup>22</sup> Cf. James Barr, 'The Meaning of 'Mythology' in Relation to the Old Testament', *Vetus Testamentum* 1959, vol. 9, 1-10. This process has been termed 'historicization' of myths, i.e., abolishing their reference to a primordial time and applying them to historical time: historical persons, institutions and events in the past, present or future.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. S.B. Frost, 'Eschatology and Myth', *Vetus Testamentum*, Jan 1952, 70-80. On the finer differences between ancient myths of cosmic cataclysm and Judeo-Christian Eschatology, see also Mircea Eliade's *Myth and Reality*, 54-67 (ch 4).

<sup>24</sup> J.J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998, 19.

worldview. In fact, the mythological allusions in Revelation are far more likely to have been taken from the Old Testament, as noted by Pierre Prigent: "It therefore seems hardly reasonable to have recourse to the hypothesis of a borrowing from mythology in order to account for an image that comes straight out of the OT and Judaism. I am surprised that the majority of commentators still feel obliged today to refer as if to a dogma to the shaky parallels pointed out by the school of comparative mythologies and their father, E. Depuis".<sup>25</sup>

### Modern scholarship

Most commentators, ancient and modern, agree that the imagery of Revelation is of central importance in the interpretation of the text, although it is barely given the attention it deserves.<sup>26</sup> It has undoubtedly "proved problematic for academic study... Scholarship is not always consistent in the importance it gives to the images in Revelation".<sup>27</sup> Indeed, in a rapid survey of some of the most available works on the subject, we find that R.H. Charles devoted only two paragraphs to imagery in his two-volume commentary on Revelation. Incredibly, he used these two paragraphs to apologize for the text's symbolical language, explaining it as a consequence of the author's inability to understand and clearly express what he had seen in his visions.<sup>28</sup> David Aune writes nothing whatsoever on Revelation's imagery or symbolism in the introduction to his three volume commentary.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Pierre Prigent, *Commentary on the Apocalypse of St. John*, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2001, 381, in reference to the dragon image of Rev 12,5; Cf. *ibid.* 16.

<sup>26</sup> Ugo Vanni, *L'Apocalisse*, 31.

<sup>27</sup> Ian Paul, 'Image, Symbol and Metaphor', *Studies in the Book of Revelation*, 131.

<sup>28</sup> "Thus the seer laboured under a twofold disability. His psychical powers were generally unequal to the task of apprehending the full meaning of the heavenly vision, and his powers of expression were frequently unable to set forth the things he had apprehended" R.H. Charles, *The Revelation of St. John*, Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1920, Vol. I, cvi-cvii. There is indeed some evidence of this in the text itself (Rev 7,13-14; 17,6; 19,10), though one should not underestimate the amount of information given from inner commentary and explanation: some indispensable interpretations are given by heavenly figures in the text itself (e.g., 1,20; 5,5; 7,14; 11,4; 12,9; 13,18; 17,1-2.7-18; 19,8; 21,90), or by the commentary of the heavenly choruses (e.g., 5,9; 11,16-18; 12,10-12; 15,3-4; 18,4-8; 19,1-8; 21,3-4) or simply slipped into text by the author (e.g., 4,5; 5,6; 11,8; 12,9; 19,8).

<sup>29</sup> David E. Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, WBC 52A, Dallas: Word Books 1997, xlvi-ccxi (Introduction).



On the other hand, H.B. Swete included a simple, brief and useful summary of Revelation's symbolism in his commentary.<sup>30</sup> Ugo Vanni has provided perhaps the only comprehensive analysis of the symbolism in the text, giving us valuable insight into its structure, development and theological potential; of especial interest is his observation on the author's dual use of the same terms in both literal and in symbolical contexts.<sup>31</sup>

Confronting 'fundamentalist' exegesis, M.E. Boring proposes a new hermeneutic principle according to which factual inferences should not be made from the 'pictorial' image-evoking language of Revelation, because it totally differs from the 'propositional' language of normal 'logical' communication and conveys truths of a different kind.<sup>32</sup> G.K. Beale critiques Boring's now-widely accepted 'new hermeneutic', because of the limitations it imposes on the cognitive value of Revelation's images. Instead, he sees the interpretive errors of the 'fundamentalist' school as a lack of attention to the symbolical character of Revelation. He goes on to present a method for ensuring that the significance of its metaphors is taken into account, and concludes with a section on its numerical symbolism.<sup>33</sup>

Richard Bauckham offers a psychological explanation of the role of the 'symbolical world' of Revelation, before outlining a guide to the interpretation of its enduring theological significance.<sup>34</sup> David Barr is

<sup>30</sup> Swete, *Apocalypse*, cxxxi-cxxxix.

<sup>31</sup> Ugo Vanni, 'Il simbolismo dell'Apocalisse' (ch. 2), in *L'Apocalisse*, 31-61 (only in Italian).

<sup>32</sup> M. Eugene Boring, *Revelation: Interpretation, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, Louisville, Ky: John Knox Press, 1989, 51-9. The proposal appears to be based on the common, but false, identity between the literal and the real and, conversely, between the non-literal and the non-real (cf. Caird, *Language and Imagery*, 131). The type of the language we use, whether literal or symbolical, has very little to do with the reality or non-reality, existence or non-existence, of the things we describe or refer to. As noted by Grant R. Osborne "Revelation is a symbolic book, but that does not mean that symbols do not depict literal events..." *Revelation*, Grand Rapids: Baker Academic 2002, 16.

<sup>33</sup> Beale, *Revelation*, 50-69. The method is that of Vern Sheridan Poythress, outlined in his 'Genre and Hermeneutics in Rev 20:1-6', in *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 36/1 (March 1993), 41-54.

<sup>34</sup> Bauckham, 'Understanding the Imagery' in *Theology*, 17-22. His preterist view is inherent: "We have already noticed the unusual profusion of visual imagery in Revelation and its capacity to create a symbolic world which its readers can enter and thereby have their perception of the world in which they lived transformed.

struck by “the pedestrian nature of the prosaic reality” to which some of the images of Revelation refer and by the ‘remarkable symbolical transformations’ that other images perform, reversing “the value of certain symbols of power and conquest by transforming them into images of suffering or weakness”.<sup>35</sup> Ian Paul proposes a new methodology for the interpretation of Revelation’s images, based on Paul Ricoeur’s ‘hermeneutic of metaphor’. His explanation and application of the method turn out to be somewhat more complex and confusing than the imagery he is attempting to analyze.<sup>36</sup> Finally, G. Biguzzi provides a ‘grammar’—a kind of compendium—of the inconsistencies he has identified in the figurative language of Revelation, offering this as evidence of compositional unity and a single source.<sup>37</sup>

After reading this representative selection of scholarly works on the imagery of Revelation, one is left with the impression that there has been little progress since Jerome wrote “*The apocalypse of John has as many mysteries as words. In saying this I have said less than the book deserves. All praise of it is inadequate; manifold meanings lie hidden in its every word*”.<sup>38</sup> Many valuable observations have been made, especially in the chapters by Swete and Vanni, that illustrate and confirm these comments of Jerome. Some interesting, though rather

To appreciate the importance of this we should remember that Revelation’s readers in the great cities of the province of Asia were constantly confronted with powerful images of the Roman vision of the world... In this context, Revelation provides a set of Christian prophetic counter-images which impress on its readers a different vision of world: how it looks from the heaven to which John is caught up in chapter 4. The visual power of the book effects a kind of purging of the Christian imagination, refurbishing it with alternative visions of how the world is and will be” (op. cit. 17).

<sup>35</sup> David L. Barr, ‘The Apocalypse as a Symbolic Transformation of the World: A Literary Analysis’, *Interpretation*, 38 (1984), 39-50.

<sup>36</sup> Ian Paul, ‘Image, Symbol and Metaphor’, *Studies in the Book of Revelation*, 131-47. As an example of the complexity into which he leads us: “But within the metaphorization of apocalyptic symbolization, the discourse is folded back within itself and retains a narrative temporality which is accessed by means of the diachronic analysis of the semantic impertinence of the metaphor” (op. cit. 144).

<sup>37</sup> G. Biguzzi, ‘A Figurative and Narrative Language Grammar of Revelation’, *Novum Testamentum*, XLV, 4, (2003), 382-402,

<sup>38</sup> In his letter to Paulinus, Bishop of Nola (*Ad Paulinum*, LIII, 8, dated to A.D. 394) Jerome wrote “*Apocalypsis Joannis tot habet sacramenta, quot verba. Parum dixi pro merito voluminis. Laus omnis inferior est: in verbis singulis multiplices latent intelligentiae*”.

limited, interpretive approaches have been proposed, especially by Beale and Bauckham. Nevertheless, as demonstrated by Biguzzi's recent contribution, scholarship can still do little more than list and classify what it perceives to be the oddities and apparent inconsistencies of Revelation's figurative language.

### Search for the Dominant Symbolical Theme

In most of the works reviewed above, and indeed in most of the commentaries, the study of the imagery of Revelation rarely ventures beyond an analysis of individual images and figures. However, in the original visions described by the author, these images and figures are always parts of a vision narrative. They are embedded in a larger visionary context. Interpreting the images without considering them in their larger context can be expected to lead to spurious results, especially since the larger context is often the only guide to the literal or figurative character of a particular image or text.

The visions revealed to the author, as the basis of the Book of Revelation, can be described as a re-visioning of mainly Old Testament imagery<sup>39</sup> in a completely new setting—that of the messianic age established by the Risen Christ. It is this new setting, then, that forms the larger visionary context for the individual images and figures under examination. The larger context informs and guides the interpretation of its individual component parts. In fact, we suggest that it is only through an understanding of this larger context that the full significance of particular images and scenes can be grasped.

Furthermore, since this larger context is the way by which the author integrates the various parts of his book, it is the only real check we have on the full meaning of the text and that of its different parts. The clarification of this larger context has, therefore, a specific hermeneutic importance. Before studying the particularities of the imagery

<sup>39</sup> Austin Farrer referred to this process as "a rebirth of images". The great majority of images in Revelation are derived from the OT, drawing also from its symbols and metaphors (Swete, *Apocalypse*, cxxxii). "The Apocalyptist, however, does not limit himself to O.T. imagery, but has much that is his own, or that belongs to the common stock of the later apocalyptists" (ibid. cxxxiii). A large part of the interpretation of these images therefore lies in comparing the text of Revelation with the corresponding part of the OT or apocalyptic literature. There remains, however, a considerable amount of imagery whose significance cannot be determined from other sources, precisely because it is original to Revelation.

and symbolism of the text, efforts must be directed towards a clarification of its major imaginal or symbolical theme, or themes.

There is now a scholarly consensus in favour of the linguistic, literary and narrative unity of this book, as it has come down to us.<sup>40</sup> Bauckham surely speaks for most when he says the Book of Revelation is “one of the most unified works in the New Testament”.<sup>41</sup> For Resseguie this is not only axiomatic, but also essential for the work of interpretation: “A basic premise of a literary approach is the understanding that the work is a unified whole. The parts cannot be understood without understanding the whole”.<sup>42</sup> Since its literary characteristics are closely linked to the foundational visionary material, as noted above, it is a short step to argue from literary unity to figurative unity and agree with Bauckham when he writes: “Revelation, by contrast, is really (from 1:10 to 22:6) a single vision. The imagery is common to the whole. From time to time the scene shifts and fresh images may be introduced, but, once introduced, they may recur throughout the book. Thus John’s vision creates a single symbolic universe in which its readers may live for the time it takes them to read (or hear) the book. Both the profusion of the visual imagery and the unity and continuity of the visionary sequence make Revelation distinctive among the apocalypses”.<sup>43</sup>

If indeed the greater part of Revelation constitutes a single vision, it is reasonable to suppose that there is a uniform set of imagery responsible for creating, maintaining and characterizing this unity. For the reasons given above, it not only makes good sense, but it also becomes imperative, to look for and identify this dominant symbolic framework, for this is the ‘big picture’ that embraces all the other images and determines their fullest meaning. When this symbolic framework has been identified, the work of interpreting particular images

<sup>40</sup> Cf. Swete, *Apocalypse*, xlii-l; L.L.Thompson, *The Book of Revelation*, Oxford: OUP 1990, 37-73; Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, cvii-cx. For other authors, see Antoninus King Wai Siew, *The War Between the Two Beasts and the Two Witnesses: A Chiastic Reading of Revelation 11.1-14.5*, LNTS 283; London: T & T Clark 2005, 8-10 and note 15.

<sup>41</sup> Richard Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy: Studies on the Book of Revelation*, Edinburgh: T&T Clark 1993, 1, note 1.

<sup>42</sup> James L. Resseguie, *The Revelation of John: A Narrative Commentary*, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic 2009, 17.

<sup>43</sup> Bauckham, *Theology*, 10.

within the vision can be brought to completion. Indeed, as argued above, it is only by integrating the interpretation of particular images with the overall visionary structure that their original and fullest sense can be known.

An important step in the interpretation of Revelation's imagery is, therefore, the identification of the dominant symbolic framework. There are several possibilities that need to be considered for this role. Richard Bauckham lays the foundation for this work in his identification of three major symbolic themes in the text of Revelation: 'the messianic war', 'the eschatological exodus' and 'witness'.<sup>44</sup> Anticipating the argument outlined above, Bauckham presents these grand symbolical themes as an aid to the interpretation of the author's vision of Christ's messianic mission, that is, the 'new setting' mentioned previously: "In order to find our way through the rather complex imagery in which John expresses his understanding of Christ's work, it will be helpful initially to recognize the three major symbolic themes—or complexes of symbols—which are all used of all three stages of the work of Christ".<sup>45</sup>

In the study that follows, we propose and describe five major symbolical themes that can be considered for the role of a dominant symbolical framework governing the entire text of Revelation: 'the messianic war', 'the eschatological exodus', 'The justice and judgment of God', 'the cosmic transformation and the new creation' and 'the heavenly temple and its liturgy'. The first two are developed from the first two themes proposed by Bauckham ('the messianic war', 'the eschatological exodus'); in the third, Bauckham's third theme has been modified and expanded considerably ('witness' has become an aspect of 'the justice and judgment of God'), and the final two are new proposals ('the cosmic transformation and the new creation' and 'the heavenly temple and its liturgy').

### The Messianic War

In early Jewish eschatological expectation, the awaited messiah was to bring final victory in a battle against the enemies of God and his people. For the most part, this expectation was based on the Old

<sup>44</sup> Bauckham, *Theology*, 67-73.

<sup>45</sup> Bauckham, *Theology*, 67.

Testament holy war traditions, in which victory is won by God, alone or accompanied by his heavenly armies. In its most ideal form, victory was attained without any human combat (e.g., Ex 14,13-14; 2Kgs 19,32-35; Ezek 38-39; 2Chron 20). Descriptions of the eschatological war in later OT writings (Is 59,16; 63,3; Joel 3,11, Zech 14,5) remain true to this ideal. Early apocalyptic literature (Daniel, *Testament of Moses*) follows the same ideal of supernatural victory, with Israel's angelic patron, Michael, as the divine warrior. Identifying the divine warrior with the long-awaited messiah, later apocalyptic and early post-biblical literature continued to speak about victory gained in a miraculous and supernatural way, without the need for active human combat (cf. 2Bar 40,1; 1En 62,2-3; 4Ezra 12,31-33;13,9-11;37-38; Ps Sol 22-25; 1QSb 5,24-25).<sup>46</sup> It is in this literary and historical context that the theme of messianic war is encountered in the Book of Revelation.<sup>47</sup>

The messianic war theme is introduced in the opening vision, where the divine warrior is identified by the sharp two-edged sword coming out of his mouth (Rev 1,16; 2,12, cf. Is 11,4; Heb 4,12-13). This is the Risen Christ, who will use the sword to fight the unrepentant followers of the Nicolaitans (Rev 2,15-16), before employing it later in the final battle to strike the nations (19,15) and slaughter the armies of his opponents (19,21). From the supernatural nature of the warrior and his weapon, it is clear that Revelation closely follows the holy war tradition of previous Scriptural and contemporary writings.

Further evidence of the war theme can be found at the end of the messages to the seven churches (2,7.11.17.28; 3,5.12.21), in the promise of great rewards for the hearer who 'conquers', or 'overcomes' (νικάω). These exhortations resonate with the author's vision of a

<sup>46</sup> This paragraph is summarized from Bauckham, *Climax*, 210-11. He goes on to show how the pattern of supernatural combat and victory is broken by the 'War Rule' from Qumran (1QM, 4QM), because of the description of man to man combat that is described there.

<sup>47</sup> Several modern authors have written books or articles on the theme of war in Revelation, and some have gone so far as to propose this as a structuring principle, e.g., C.H. Giblin, *The Book of Revelation: The Open Book of Prophecy*, Collegeville, Minnesota, Liturgical Press 1991; A. Yarbro Collins, *The Combat Myth in the Book of Revelation*, Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2001; R. Bauckham, 'The Apocalypse as a Christian War Scroll' in *The Climax of Prophecy: Studies on the Book of Revelation*, Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993, 210-37.

messianic figure in heaven whose 'victory' makes him worthy to take the scroll from the heavenly throne and then open it: "*Behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered so to open the scroll and its seven seals*" (Rev 5,5; cf. Gen 49,9; Is 11,10; 4Ezra 12,31-2). However, the contrast between these war-like titles and the one to whom they refer—'a Lamb standing as one that had been slain' (Rev 5,6)—indicates a change in the way victory is understood. Since the Lamb that was slain represents Jesus Christ, the 'victory' of the Lamb refers to his martyrdom on the cross, followed by his resurrection and ascension. In this context, it can be inferred that, in a similar way, the 'victory' of his followers also refers to their lives of self-donation, even up to death by martyrdom (cf. 7,9-17; 15,2-4). This is most clearly stated in a passage that reveals the precise identity of the enemy in this war: it describes the vision of a spiritual battle in heaven leading to the defeat of the devil and his fall to the earth (Rev 12). At this point, the heavenly chorus attributes the devil's defeat to those who "*conquered him because of the blood of the Lamb and because of the word of their witness, and they loved not their lives up to death*" (12,11).

The theme of Christ's victory is continued in a vision of the opening of the first of the scroll's seals (Rev 6,1-2): "*And I looked and behold, a white horse, and one sitting on it had a bow and a crown was given to him, and he came out conquering and so to overcome.*" Assimilating two messianic passages in the Old Testament (Is 49,2; Ps 45,4-5), and evoking the imagery of the horses in Zechariah's visions (Zech 1,7-17; 6,1-8), this figure represents the invincible force that leads to the establishment of the Kingdom of God amongst men and is evident in the Church's mission to evangelize the world before the end of history (Mt 24,14). Although the riders of the second and fourth horses (Rev 6,4.8) bring war to the earth, this effect cannot be identified specifically with the messianic war, but rather as a judgment of God (cf. Lev 26,14-46; Dt 28,15-69; Jer 29,17-19; Ezek 5,1-17).

By following verbal and thematic links in the text, it becomes evident that, from this point onwards, the references to war relate more specifically to the final battle in the war between the forces of good and evil. The first of these references is to be found in the vision of the sealing of the 144,000 servants of God with the seal of the living God, 12,000 from each of the twelve tribes of Israel (Rev 7,1-8). Although the act of sealing with a seal, or branding, refers to divine protection

(9,4; cf. Ezek 9,2-4) and is also a mark of possession,<sup>48</sup> there is little doubt that the list of those who are sealed from the 12 tribes (Rev 7,4-8) alludes to the census that God commanded Moses to perform in the desert of Sinai (Num 1), of all the fighting men in each tribe except Levi, as a preparation for the military organization of their camp (Num 2).<sup>49</sup> In brief, the sealing of the 144,000 appears to signify their selection as members of an army with a very special mission, for they are the only ones to be spared from the plague that follows the blowing of the 5<sup>th</sup> trumpet (Rev 9,4). In general, the blowing of the trumpets (8,6-12; 9,1-21), without the battle-cry, is a signal for the assembly of the combatants (Num 10,7).

The next mention of the 144,000 comes in a later vision where they are seen with Christ the Lamb on Mt. Zion (Rev 14,1-5).<sup>50</sup> They are men of the highest moral quality, who are loyal to Christ and, though on earth,<sup>51</sup> are in close communion with the celestial choruses in heaven. The assembly of the 144,000 in the presence of the Lamb

<sup>48</sup> As in the practice of branding servants and slaves (δοῦλος).

<sup>49</sup> A closer comparison can be made between this passage in Revelation (7,4-8) and the law for the king in Qumran's "Temple Scroll" (11QT; col. LVII; 2<sup>nd</sup> cent. BC): "This is the law [that they shall write for him]... [They shall count,] on the day that they appoint hi[m] king, the sons of Israel from the age of twenty to sixty years according to their standard (units). He shall install at their head captains of thousands, captains of hundreds, captains of fifties and captains of tens in all their cities. He shall select from among them one thousand by tribe to be with him: twelve thousand warriors who shall not leave him alone to be captured by the nations. All the selected men whom he has selected shall be men of truth, God-fearers, haters of unjust gain and mighty warriors. They shall be with him always, day and night. They shall guard him from anything sinful, and from any foreign nation in order not to be captured by them" (*The Complete Dead Sea Scrolls in English*, trans Geza Vermes, rev. ed., London: Penguin Classics, 2004, 214). The parallels between the 144,000 (12 x 12,000) and the 12,000 strong army of the King of Israel will become even more striking when considering subsequent visions of this group in Revelation (i.e., Rev 14,1-5; 17,14; 20,7-10).

<sup>50</sup> After the statement indicating that the spiritual name of the city where Jesus was crucified (Jerusalem) is no longer Zion, but rather Egypt and Sodom (11,8), it is no longer probable that Mt. Zion in this vision is identified with that city. As a consequence of the eschatological exodus (see next section, 6<sup>th</sup> paragraph), the location of this mount has changed.

<sup>51</sup> Only men of flesh and blood have the capacity to learn (14,3) and the need to resist temptation with women (14,4). They are therefore alive on earth and must be considered as a group distinct from the countless multitude in heaven (7,1-8 vs 7,9-17 and 14,1-5 vs 15,2-4).



confirms that they form a messianic army<sup>52</sup> and the reference to Mt. Zion in this context alludes to Psalm 2, which speaks about the imminent victory of the Lord's messiah over all the rebellious nations of the earth. The impression is that this is an army preparing for an eschatological holy war.

In the meantime, the devil's human embodiment, the 'beast from the sea' (Rev 13) wages war against the two witnesses and kills them (11,7-13), before being given "*authority over every tribe and race and tongue and nation*" (13,5.7) for a short period (42 months). During this period, the beast "*was allowed to make war against the saints and to overcome them*" (13,5.7), in a terrible persecution of all those who would not show him their loyalty and devotion (13,11-17). However, those who were overcome by the beast and martyred in the 'great tribulation' (7,14) are seen worshipping God in heaven (7,9-17), where they are identified as 'those who overcame the beast' (15,2-4), in a joyful reversal that recalls the original victory of Christ and his followers over the devil (12,11). Though celebrated in advance, theirs is nevertheless a genuine victory, because at the end of history their persecutor, the beast, and his allies "*will make war against the Lamb and the Lamb will overcome them, because he is Lord of lords and King of kings, and those with him are called and chosen and faithful*" (17,14).

This final battle, which is called the 'battle of the great day of Almighty God', is convoked in a place called 'Harmagedon',<sup>53</sup> as a consequence of the outpouring of the sixth and penultimate bowl plague (16,12-16). The combatants and outcome of the battle are described in a later vision (19,11-21), where the risen Christ and his heavenly armies defeat the assembled forces and their leaders, the beast and

<sup>52</sup> Bauckham (*Climax*, 219-20) gives abundant evidence from ancient literary sources showing why "the notion of a messianic army composed of all twelve tribes is not at all surprising. Not only was the return of the ten tribes and the reunion of all Israel a traditional element in the eschatological hope (Isa 11:11-12, 15-16; 27:12-13; Jer 31:7-9; Ezek 37: 15-23; Sir 36:11; Tob 13:13; 2 Bar 78:5-7; TJos 19:4; cf. Matt 19:28; m. Sanh. 10:3; j. Sanh. 10:6), but there is also evidence for the expectation that the ten tribes would return specifically in order to take part in the messianic war" (ibid 219).

<sup>53</sup> Harmagedon is a Hebrew word referring to the Mountain overlooking the Plain of Megiddon (cf. Zech 12,11). Since this is the place where the Beast and his armies attempt to demonstrate their power, in opposition to Christ and his armies (17,14), it can be seen as the evil counterpart to Mt. Zion—the mount of the assembly of the Messiah (14,1-5; cf. Ps 2).

his false prophet, are captured and punished. This represents Christ's 'second coming'. The sword from his mouth strikes the nations and slaughters the armies of his opponents (19.5,21). But that is not yet the end of the final battle, because a second phase follows immediately upon the release of the devil.<sup>54</sup>

Then the devil "*will go out to deceive the nations in the four corners of the earth, the Gog and Magog, whose number is as the sand of the sea, to assemble them to the battle. And they went up over the breadth of the land and surrounded the camp of the saints and the Beloved City, and fire came down from heaven and consumed them*" (Rev 20,8-9; cf. Ezek 38-39). In this phase of the final battle, it is clear that the attackers are people from all over the world, under the deceitful leadership of the devil, but it is not so clear who are the defenders in the camp of the saints, the beloved city. There are two clues to their identity: the first is that the Greek term for 'camp' (παρεμβολή) is frequently used in a military sense (e.g., Dt 23,10-15 in the LXX), and the second is that the 'beloved city' is another name for Mt. Zion (cf. Ps 78,68; 87,1-3). Both of these details take us back to the vision of the saintly messianic army on Mt. Zion (Rev 14,1-5) and their very special role in the eschatological holy war. Without raising a weapon, fire comes down from heaven and destroys their enemies (20,9).

This army of saints is encountered once more in the final vision (20,10), when the author is carried away onto a great and high mountain and from there sees the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God. Since 'the great and high mountain' is another allusion to Mt. Zion (Ezek 40,2; cf. Is 2,2-3; Mic 4,1-2), the author seems to be indicating that the new Jerusalem will be realized within view of the camp of the 144,000 saints on Mt. Zion. The final act of holy war, as described in the Old Testament, involved the consecration of the enemy's possessions to God (Heb: *קדש*),<sup>55</sup> thus explaining the origin of the precious stones and metals that will be taken into the holy city and used in its construction (Rev 21,18-21.24-26).

<sup>54</sup> From the 'amillennialist' point of view, which sees the so-called millennial reign of Christ with his saints as a retrospective vision of the present age; for arguments in favour of this view see our 'Revelation 20,1-6: the Millennium and the Mystery of Iniquity' available at [www.newtorah.org](http://www.newtorah.org) (Academic Articles).

<sup>55</sup> Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel and its Customs*, London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1961; 260.

This quick survey has shown how much of Revelation is taken up with the theme of war, and especially with holy war in its most authentically biblical sense—a war in which God fights in favour of his people (cf. Dt 1,30-31). The implication of this is that God’s faithful do not actually need to fight with physical force in order to win: they are either martyred and go to heaven to await victory at the end of history, or when that time comes they are selected for a special group, who are rescued supernaturally from the enemies of God, by ‘fire from heaven’. It is clearly not correct to say that ‘warfare’ in Revelation has been transformed or spiritualized, for real wars and persecutions are described. Instead, this is a war with a historical and an eschatological component. Throughout history, victory has been defined spiritually as keeping the Faith and attaining heaven. But this ‘spiritual’ victory is only part of the story; it is merely a preparation for the final and complete victory at the end of history, which will be realized spiritually and physically at Christ’s second coming.

### The Eschatological Exodus

This exodus theme in the Book of Revelation<sup>56</sup> regards allusions to the liberation of the Israelites from Egypt narrated in the book of Exodus. It includes the preparations leading up to Israel’s Exodus and their subsequent wanderings in the desert, up to their entrance into the Promised Land. From the time of Deutero-Isaiah the Exodus account had become the model for expressing the eschatological liberation expected in the future, so the occurrence of this theme in the Book of Revelation follows a very ancient tradition.

The first mention of the exodus theme in Revelation is in praise of Jesus Christ: “*who loves us and freed us from his sins with his blood, and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be the glory and the might for ever and ever, amen*” (Rev 1,5-6). Just as God freed the Israelites from Egypt and invited them to become “a

<sup>56</sup> Useful studies on the exodus theme in the Book of Revelation include: Håkan Ulfsgård, *Feast and Future: Revelation 7:9-17 and the Feast of Tabernacles*, Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell, 1989; 35-41; Bauckham, *Theology*, 70-72; Pierre Prigent, *Commentary on the Apocalypse of St. John*, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001; 371-2, 377; and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Redemption as Liberation (Revelation 1:5-6 and 5:9-10), ch. 2 in *The Book of Revelation: Justice and Judgment*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985; 68-81.

*kingdom of priests and a holy nation*" (Ex 19,6), so Christ, through the shedding of his blood, has freed us from sin and made us a kingdom and priests to God. This is the text's first affirmation of the representation of the Christian life as a new exodus, not from Egypt, but from sin, in a way that combines the exodus theme of redemption with divine reconciliation and expiation of sin. Later in the text, Christ is portrayed as a Lamb (Rev 5,6), whose blood "*bought people for God, from every tribe and tongue and people and nation, and made them a kingdom and priests for our God, and they shall reign on the earth*" (5,9-10). There seems to be a parallel, here, between Christ the Lamb and the Passover lambs, whose blood preserved the Israelites from death on the first Passover night and helped bring about their departure from Egypt, so they could go on to become God's Covenant people (cf. 1Cor 5:7). On reflection, however, the role of the first Passover lambs cannot be compared with the redemptive role of Christ.<sup>57</sup> Nevertheless, the broader exodus theme of liberating slaves or prisoners, in order to bring them close to God, is certainly present in this passage.

After a considerable pause, the next time we meet the exodus theme is in the descriptions of the judgment 'plagues' that follow the seven trumpets blasts (Rev 8-9) and bowl outpourings (Rev 16). Here there are several allusions to the plagues of Egypt that Moses announced. The 1st trumpet plague (8,7) recalls the plague of the hail (Ex 9,23-25; Wis 16,16-19); the 2nd plague (Rev 8,8-9) recalls the plague of blood (Ex 7,20-21); the 4th plague (Rev 8,12) recalls the plague of darkness (Ex 10,21-23); the 5th plague (Rev 9,1-11) recalls the plague of the locusts (Ex 10,12-15) and the intervention of the destroying angel (Ex 12,23); the death of a third of mankind (Rev 9,18) in the 6th plague (9,13-19) may allude to the death of the first-born (Ex 11,29-30) and the refusal of people to repent (Rev 9,20-21) recalls various passages of reflection and commentary on the plagues of Egypt (Wis 11-12).

<sup>57</sup> In brief, the sacrifice of the Passover lambs had no power to expiate sin, something very clearly associated with the blood of the Lamb in the Book of Revelation (Rev 1,5): "but the Israelite Passover never had any expiatory purpose" (de Vaux, *Ancient Israel*, 488); "The sacrifice of the Passover lamb was not a means of expiation from sins in early Judaism..." (Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 372); "the Lamb of Ex 12 is translated πρόβατον by the LXX, and although it is sacrificed (...) there is never any question in Exodus of the expiatory value of this sacrifice" (Prigent, *The Apocalypse*, 43).

The 7<sup>th</sup> trumpet leads into the outpouring of the 7 bowls (the 3<sup>rd</sup> woe; Rev 11,14-15), whose plagues are even more severe than those of the trumpet series. In the same way, however, some of the bowl plagues are described with partial allusions to the plagues of Egypt: the 1<sup>st</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> bowl plagues (Rev 16,2,10-11) resemble the plague of boils (Ex 9,8-12); the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> bowl plagues (Rev 16,3-4) evoke the turning of the River Nile into blood and the death of its fish (Ex 14-24); the 5<sup>th</sup> bowl plague speaks of darkness falling on the kingdom of the beast (16,10) and resembles the plague of darkness (Ex 10,21-29). Finally, after the 7<sup>th</sup> bowl there is a terrible plague of hail (Rev 16,21) that evokes the plague of hail and fire (Ex 9,13-35).

In these passages of Revelation, however, it is evident that the allusions to the 'plagues of Egypt', which made way for the Exodus of the Israelites, are not taken in any order, neither in their entirety. Similarly, not all aspects of the trumpet and bowl plagues allude to the plagues of Egypt (e.g., Rev 9,13-19; 16,8-9; 16,12-16). The allusions are neither comprehensive nor systematic. In fact, the plagues of the trumpets and bowls appear to differ from the plagues of Egypt in almost every way. Without doubt, the use of Exodus language to describe the trumpet and bowl plagues relates to the fact that the greatest number of allusions to the exodus theme is to be found between these two series of plagues (i.e., Rev 10-15). The use of this language to describe the judgment plagues therefore indicates how these intervening chapters should be understood: as an eschatological exodus recalling the ancient exodus pattern of biblical judgment and salvation—judgment on the worldly Egyptians and salvation for the faithful Israelites.

So moving on to these intervening chapters (Rev 10-15), we first encounter the exodus theme in the cloud, the column of smoke and in the 'voices' of the seven thunders described by the author in his meeting with the mighty angel (10,1-4). These phenomena all recall the 'signs and portents' that accompanied the theophany on Mt. Sinai (Ex 19,16-21). The corollary to this is that the little open scroll in the hand of the angel is analogous to the 'Word of God' given to Moses in the form of the Torah (cf. Acts 7,38), thus identifying John, the author, as a 'new Moses' and the scroll he received and recorded as a new Torah. Furthermore, just as the revelation on Mt. Sinai involved Moses in the construction and consecration of a dwelling for God (Ex 25,8), so also John is given a cane 'similar to a rod' and is entrusted with an

analogous task, that of measuring “the Sanctuary of God, the altar and those who are worshipping there” (Rev 11,1-2). With the prophetic ministry of Moses in the background, there is an obvious parallel between the ‘cane similar to a rod’ given to John and ‘the rod of God’ with which Moses performed his miracles (Ex 4,17.20). In this context, it is significant that many of the miracles performed by the two witnesses vividly recall those made by Moses (Rev 11,6).<sup>58</sup> Significant, also, is the fact that these two witnesses are put to death “*on the street of the great city which is spiritually called Sodom and Egypt, where indeed their Lord was crucified.*” (11,8). At this point, the city where their Lord was crucified, once spiritually called Zion, becomes spiritually identified with Sodom and Egypt, two cities which the people of God had to leave in a hurry. Implied is an eschatological exodus of God’s people from Jerusalem (cf. Mt 24,15-21; Mk 13,14-19).

The eschatological exodus of God’s people from Jerusalem and elsewhere appears to be one of the main subjects of the next section, though it is described in a somewhat mystical way, by means of three signs that, at a certain time, are seen in heaven. The first sign is of a glorious woman who is about to give birth to the messiah (Rev 12,1-2) and the second sign is of a dragon, who is waiting to devour her child (12,3-4). On giving birth, the woman flees to a place prepared for her in the desert, where she will be nourished for a certain period and protected from the dragon (12,6.14). The entire account of the flight of this woman to the desert is described in terms taken from the Exodus of the ancient Israelites: the dragon, which evokes Pharaoh or Egypt (cf. Isa 51,9; Ezek 29.3; 32,2), pursues the woman who was ‘given the two wings of the great eagle’ to fly to the desert, as were the ancient Israelites (Ex 19,4; Dt 32,11). She will also be nourished miraculously, as were the Israelites (manna, quails). The dragon’s pursuit of the woman evokes the pursuit of the Egyptian army (Ex 14), and her rescue ‘by the earth opening her mouth’ evokes their defeat (Ex 15,12). At this point, there is a link with the 144,000 men with the Lamb on Mt Zion, considered in the previous section as a messianic army, for “while their number leads us to consider them alongside the

<sup>58</sup> The fact that the two witnesses can perform the miracles Moses performed would suggest that they too have a rod for working miracles: the ‘cane similar to a rod’ given to John and interpreted as the prophecy he was given to prophesy again (10,11). This helps to confirm that they are the announcers of this prophecy.

people of Rev 7, their preservation in a geographical location evokes the flight of the woman whom God welcomes and protects in the wilderness (Rev 12:6,14)".<sup>59</sup>

The third sign represents the divine judgments that bring an end to history (15,1.5-8; cf. 11,19). At the same time, the author sees the victorious martyrs in heaven singing 'the song of Moses, the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb' (15,3-4)—a title that not only recalls the celebration of the Israelites after the defeat of Pharaoh's army (cf. Ex 15), but it also suggests a correspondence between 'the glassy sea mixed with fire', on which they stand, with the Red Sea through which the Israelites passed on their way to redemption. The words of the original 'song of Moses' (Ex 15,1-2) are also reflected in the praise of salvation proclaimed by the martyrs in an earlier vision (Rev 7,9-17; esp. 7,10), after they pass through the great tribulation, washing and bleaching their robes in the blood of the Lamb.

After the bowl plagues, the exodus theme disappears from the text, in order to give way to other themes (messianic war; justice and judgment), but it reappears at the end of Revelation, in the attainment of the holy city (Rev 21-22), with the author eyeing this promised reward from a great and high mountain, as Moses glimpsed the Promised Land from the peak of Mt. Nebo (Dt 34,1-3).

In summary, the exodus theme is employed extensively in Revelation to describe the events leading up to the eschatological salvation of the people of God. Its greatest use is found in chs. 8-16.

### The Justice and Judgment of God

The theme of God's justice and judgment is intimately linked with the theme of witness and appears to have been inspired by the prophecies of divine salvation and judgment in Deutero-Isaiah (Is 40-55). Parts of this prophecy represent a judicial contest between Israel's God and the gods of the nations (cf. Is 41,1.21-24; 43,9-13.21; 44,6-8). In this contest, the people of Israel are called God's servants and 'witnesses' (Isa 43,10.12; 44,8) and they are invited to bear witness to all the nations that their God is the true God. One of them, 'the Servant', is especially chosen by God to bring divine justice to the nations (Is 42,1-9; 49,1-7; 50,4-11) and to deliver his people from their

<sup>59</sup> Prigent, *The Apocalypse*, 430.

sins (Is 52,13-53,12). God's judgment will fall on Babylon, on those who continue to worship idols and on those who do not turn to God for salvation. The same basic elements can be found in the Book of Revelation, in a way summarized by Bauckham as follows: "the world is a kind of court-room in which the issue of who is the true God is being decided. In this judicial context, Jesus and his followers bear witness to the truth. At the conclusion of the contest, their witness is seen to be true and becomes evidence on which judgment is passed against those who have refused to accept its truth: the beast and his worshippers".<sup>60</sup>

So the theme of God's justice and judgment really begins with the theme of witness and witnessing. The Book of Revelation itself is "*the Word of God and the Witness of Jesus*" (Rev 1,1-2) witnessed by God's servant John. In order to receive this 'Word of God and Witness of Jesus', John was taken to the Isle of Patmos (1,9). The 'Witness of Jesus' is the spirit of prophecy (19,10). Holding the 'Witness of Jesus' brings one into fellowship with the angels (19,10), but also into persecution and martyrdom (6,9; 12,11.17; 20,4). The 'Witness of Jesus' is therefore the revelation, or spiritual insight, given first to Jesus, then to John and the churches (1,1), concerning present and the future realities (1,11.19) and God's central role in them (Rev 4-5). The most identifiable form of the 'Witness of Jesus' is the Book of Revelation itself.<sup>61</sup>

Being the source and origin of the 'Witness of Jesus', it is logical that Jesus Christ is then called 'the faithful (and true) witness' (1,5; 3,14), a title shared with the martyr Antipas, "my faithful witness" (2,13). The term for witness (μάρτυς) is not yet synonymous with 'martyr', but it is certainly moving in that direction, since those who are called 'witnesses' (1,5; 3,14; 2,13; 11,3-13; 17,16), or hold the 'Witness of Jesus' (6,9; 12,11.17; 20,4), are all killed (i.e., martyred) for giving their testimony. Acceptance of martyrdom is strongly encouraged (2,10; 13,10; 14,12-13). After their death, the souls of these 'witnesses' join the assembly of angels and elders before the throne in

<sup>60</sup> Bauckham, *Theology*, 73.

<sup>61</sup> 'The Witness of Jesus' is therefore to be understood grammatically as a subjective genitive (i.e. as a genitive of the noun Jesus considered as the subject, and not as the object). For the arguments in favour of the subjective genitive, see Allison A. Trites, *The New Testament Concept of Witness*, N.T.S. Monograph Series (31), Cambridge: CUP 1977, 156-8.



heaven (6,9-11; 7,9-17; 15,2-4), forming an innumerable host awaiting the final battle against the forces of evil (17,14; 19,14). The souls of the martyred 'witnesses' show a keen interest in the delivery of divine judgment: "*How much longer, Holy and True Master, until you judge and avenge our blood on the inhabitants of the earth?*" (Rev 6,10).

Indeed, divine judgment is a theme of great importance from the very start of Revelation, beginning with the divine edicts and warnings conveyed in the messages to five of the seven churches (Rev 2-3, all except 2,8-11; 3,7-13).

There follows a vision of central importance for the theme of God's judgment: "*And I saw on the right of the One seated on the throne a scroll with writing on the inside and on the back, sealed with seven seals*" (5,1). We have argued elsewhere<sup>62</sup> that this is the scroll of Life, from the foundation of the world, that will be read out at the final judgment (20,12.15), after its seals have been opened (6,1-17; 8,1) by the one who is worthy to receive it—the Lamb that was slain (5,5-6.9). Only those whose names remain inscribed in the scroll of Life will participate in the promised salvation (21,27), while those whose names have been erased will be eternally condemned (cf. 13,8; 17,8; 20,15). There is good reason to believe that the Lamb erases those names from the scroll of Life (3,5) in the interval between the opening of all its seals (8,1) and its recitation at the final judgment (20,12). The one who is worthy to receive the scroll and open its seals (5,9) is therefore the one who is worthy to make the final and eternal judgment recorded in the scroll of Life.

Before the judgment process can begin, the Lamb must first break all seven seals of the scroll of Life. The breaking of the first four seals results in the emergence of four horsemen from heaven (6,1-8) whose missions are emblematic of God's justice and judgment: the first horse represents the invincible force that leads to the establishment of God's justice amongst men (6,1-2), recalling the mission of the chosen and exalted servant in Deutero-Isaiah (esp. Is 49,2, with Ps 45,4-5). However, the second, third and fourth horsemen (6,3-8) are responsible for a series of divine judgments involving murder, oppression, war, famine and disease, in a way that recalls the fearsome judgments that would befall the Israelites if they broke God's law (cf.

<sup>62</sup> Mainly on the basis of Rev 13,8; 17,8 and 21,27; see our 'The Final Judgment in the Book of Revelation' at [www.newtorah.org](http://www.newtorah.org) (Academic Articles).

Lev 26,14-46; Dt 28,15-69; Jer 29,17-19; Ezek 5,1-17).<sup>63</sup> They culminate with a vision of the whole world groaning in expectation of the great day of divine anger and judgment (Rev 6,12).

What follows, however, is a plan that will allow for the salvation of countless numbers of God's people (7,1-17) during a gradual intensification of God's judgments represented by the seven trumpet and bowl plagues (8,2-11,14; 15,1-16,17). The judgments announced by the first four trumpet blasts result in damage to a third of the world's natural environment (land, sea, rivers, and sky), while those following the fifth and sixth trumpets harm people for a while, and then kill a third in an unsuccessful attempt to lead them to repentance (9,20). The seventh and last trumpet signals the final series of divine judgments "*the last, because with them the passion of God was finished*" (15,1). These take the form of plagues poured over the earth from a series of seven bowls, further afflicting mankind and elements of the natural world (the followers of the beast, sea, rivers, sun's intensity, throne of the beast, River Euphrates and air). This progressive intensification of divine judgment, from the trumpet plagues to that of the bowls, is supplemented by the dire warnings of the two witnesses (11,3-13) and of the three angels (14,6-11), and is punctuated with praise emanating from the heavenly assembly for the manifest justice of God's judgments (15,3-4; 16,5-7; 19,2). God avenges the blood of his servants (19,2; cf. 6,10) with the judgment and destruction of Babylon (14,8; 17,1-19,5) and the entire series of judgments culminates with divine intervention and victory in a final battle against the forces of evil at Harmagedon (16,12-16; 19,11-21).

What happens next, depends upon the interpretation of the one thousand-year reign of the Messiah with his saints and martyrs, with the simultaneous binding and imprisonment of Satan (20,1-6). We have argued elsewhere<sup>64</sup> that this interregnum is, in fact, a retrospective vision of Christ's universal Church, in which the saints and martyrs are given the power to rule and judge (20,4-6) in a way that expresses the extension of God's justice in the world in the present age of salvation. Viewed in this way, the subsequent battle of Gog and

<sup>63</sup> For a fuller exposition of the four horsemen, see our 'The Four Horsemen' at [www.newtorah.org](http://www.newtorah.org) (General Articles).

<sup>64</sup> On the basis of Ps 90,4, see our 'Revelation 20,1-6: the Millennium and the Mystery of Iniquity' available at [www.newtorah.org](http://www.newtorah.org) (Academic Articles).

Magog (20,7-10) is merely the last phase of the final battle that started at Harmagedon (19,11-21). Divine fire falls on the enemies of God's people and the devil is sent to eternal perdition. The resurrection of the dead and the final judgment follow (11,15-19; 20,11-15), when all those whose names have been erased from the scroll of Life will be eternally condemned (3,5; 20,15), along with the depraved and unrepentant (21,8; 22,15). Eternal condemnation will also be the destiny of Babylon (19,2-3), 'death and Hades' (20,14; 21,4), the devil (20,10), the beast, the false prophet (19,20) and all their followers (14,9-11).

The final expression of God's justice is seen in the realization of the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God and described as the dwelling of God among mankind (20,3-4) and the reward for his servants (11,18; 22,12; 22,3-4).

There is almost no chapter of the Book of Revelation that does not refer, in one form or another, to the theme of God's justice and judgment, and in many chapters it is the dominant theme. It is such a pervasive theme, that many readers come away with the impression that God's judgment is indeed the main subject of the book.

### The Cosmic Transformation and the New Creation

Cosmic imagery is an important characteristic of all apocalyptic writings, both canonical such as Daniel and non-canonical such as *1 Enoch*. It appears to have its origin in the post-exilic Hebrew prophets (e.g., Is 24-27; Hag 2,7; Is 56-66), who, in turn, had taken it from earlier oracles of destruction and judgment (Amos 5,18-20; Is 13,9-13). It is another of the symbolical themes that recurs throughout the Book of Revelation. At first, it seems the strangest and least credible aspect of the text. On closer inspection, however, the cosmic imagery can readily be understood as a way of symbolizing the profound transformation of 'the first heaven and the first earth' into 'the new heaven and the new earth', which is a biblical expression referring to the dwelling of God among men and the consummation of all God's promises (Is 51,6; 65,17-25; 66,22; Mk 13,31; 2Pet 3,13; Rev 21,1).

The cosmic landscape of John's visions is, in fact, not so different from our own. Above there is the sky, below the earth with four corners. It has rivers, springs of water, a desert, a holy city, a great city and a great and high mountain. The earth has inhabitants, belonging to many tribes and tongues and races and nations, and from these

inhabitants a people are being redeemed by Christ and made into a kingdom and priests for God. Also there is the sea and under the surface of the sea there is an abyss.

What may be confusing for the modern mind is that every component of this natural world has a supernatural counterpart: the word for sky also means 'heaven' and in this heaven is the throne of God to which all creation directs its praise. Around the throne is God's Sanctuary, which is populated with heavenly beings, angels and the souls of saints and martyrs. The stars in heaven are also angels, which have important roles in the unfolding of events in the Book of Revelation. They are also in charge of various physical elements on earth such as the winds, fire and waters. The sea is synonymous with the many waters and also with the abyss: the waters represent the unredeemed peoples of the world and the abyss is the place where Satan is bound up for a thousand years. This, then, is a sketch of 'the first heaven and the first earth', whose transformation can be followed in the text.

Following the introductory vision of the Risen Christ in the midst of seven lampstands (1,10-20), the author describes his ascent 'in the Spirit' to the throne of God, in order to be shown what will happen in the future (Rev 4-5). There he sees Christ, represented as a Lamb, taking a sealed scroll from God and proceeding to break its seals. After the breaking of each seal, the author sees and describes a vision of the consequences in heaven and on earth. After the Lamb broke the sixth seal of the scroll in heaven, the author describes the dissolution of 'the first heaven and the first earth' using the traditional apocalyptic images of the 'Day of the Lord': *"And I saw when he opened the sixth seal, and a great earthquake occurred and the sun became black as sackcloth made of hair, and the whole moon became like blood, and the stars of heaven fell to the earth as a fig-tree drops its unripe figs when shaken by a great wind, and the heaven departed like a scroll being rolled up, and every mountain and island was moved from its place"* (Rev 6,12-14). However, the dramatic events are delayed when the angels at the four corners of the earth are ordered to restrain the winds (7,1), in order to prepare those who will be saved from the Great Day of divine anger (6,17; 7,2-17).

The breaking of the seventh seal leads into a series of seven trumpet blasts, which announce a further set of judgments caused by falling heavenly bodies (Rev 8-9), a fact that suggests that this series represents, at least in part, the collapse of the 'first heaven'.

The sound of the last trumpet heralds the final series of judgments represented by the outpouring of a series of seven libation bowls. With the last bowl there is a tremendous earthquake (Rev 6,12; 11,19; 16,18), which initiates the disappearance of the 'first earth': "*And there were lightning flashes and noises and thunders and a great earthquake occurred, such as never had happened since man had been on earth, such an earthquake—so great...And every island fled and mountains were not found*" (Rev 16,18.20). The destructive hail in the next verse would seem to indicate the final precipitation of the 'first heaven': "*And a great hail, as a talent in weight, comes down from heaven on the people and the people blasphemed God from the plague of hail, because this plague is exceedingly great*" (Rev 16,21).

So when the time for the final Judgment arrives, 'the first heaven and the first earth' are ready to disappear completely: "*And I saw a great white Throne and the one seated on it, from whose face the earth and heaven fled, and no place was found for them*" (Rev 20,11). Finally, when "*the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea is no more*" (Rev 21,1), John saw and described a vision of 'the new heaven and the new earth' with the new Jerusalem at its centre.

Of all the visions in Revelation, the vision of 'the new heaven and the new earth' is perhaps the most difficult to comprehend. The greatest unknown is whether this new creation is *ex nihilo*, following the total destruction of this planet 'earth', or whether it refers instead to a radical transformation and renewal of life on this very same planet.<sup>65</sup> The dramatic imagery of cosmic collapse, which represents the divine judgments and leads to the dissolution of 'the first heaven and the first earth', may seem to favour the former of the two possibilities. But on a closer look, there are several indications that the text is speaking about the same planet, and about a total transformation of life within the original creation.

Firstly, in order to be shown the realization of the new Jerusalem, John was not taken away 'in the Spirit' to another part of the universe, to the site of the new creation. In this vision, he was taken to a great and high mountain on this planet, and from there he sees the new Jerusalem descending from above, on to the same planet he is

<sup>65</sup> Cf. Gale Z. Heide, 'What is New About the New Heaven and the New Earth? A Theology of Creation from Revelation 21 and 2 Peter 3', *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 40/1 (March 1997) 37-56.

standing upon (21,10). Secondly, there is no indication in the Bible, nor in the Book of Revelation, that the planet 'earth' will be less pleasing to God in the future, than it was when he created it (cf. Gen 1,9-10). Neither is there any explicit warning that God would want to destroy the planet, nor even allow it to be destroyed.<sup>66</sup> On the contrary, it is written that, at the time of judgment, those who are destroying the earth will, themselves, be destroyed (Rev 11,18).

Moreover, the eternal Covenant that God established with Noah and all the creatures, when he swore he would never again destroy every living creature as he had done (Gen 8,21; 9,11-17), is not ignored in the prophecy of Revelation; it is, in fact, recalled with the appearance of the rainbow in the vision of the angel that announces the imminent fulfilment of the mystery of God: "*And I saw another mighty angel coming down from heaven, clothed with a cloud and with the rainbow over his head*" (Rev 10,1).

Finally, many features of the present way of life are recognizable in the author's description of 'the new heaven and the new earth', confirming that the disappearance of 'the first heaven and the first earth' will not involve the destruction of this planet. John recounts how, after the final Judgment, there will be 'nations' that will need to receive healing from the leaves of the trees of Life (Rev 22,2), so that they may then be able to walk by the light of the holy city (21,24). There will also be 'rulers of the earth', who bring the glory and the honour of the nations into this city (21,24-26).

<sup>66</sup> The passage which probably comes closest to describing a total destruction of the planet is to be found in the 2Peter: "then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and the works that are upon it will be *burned up*" (2Pet 3,10 according to the RSV). Several details in this description, however, suggest that the transformation of the present world by means of fire does not involve the total destruction of the planet. In the first place, the word for '*burned up*' is not found in the most reliable Greek manuscripts (α, B, K, P, et al.); instead, these simply state that "the earth and everything that is done on it will be *disclosed*" (NRSV), a prediction that is entirely consistent with the fact that the final Judgment is taking place at the same time (2Pet 3,7). In the second place, the transformation of the present world is compared to the destruction of the preceding world by the Flood (2Pet 3,6-7). The Flood, however, did not destroy the planet, but transformed it into the present heaven and earth. It is implied, then, that the transforming fire is not destructive, but purificatory, and can therefore be identified with the fire of the Spirit (1Cor 3,10-17; 1Pet 4,12; Mt 3,11; Lk 12,49; Rev 8,5).

Conversely, as a result of the divine judgments, the following negative realities of the present age will no longer be around: Babylon (19,2-3); death and Hades (20,14; 21,4); the devil (20,10); the beast, the false prophet (19,20) and their followers (14,9-11); the unrepentant reprobates (21,8.27; 22,15); the hostile sea (21,1); sorrow, mourning, pain (21,4) and every curse (22,3).

The author's description of 'the new heaven and the new earth' does not indicate the destruction of this planet. Instead, it foresees the elimination of the former reality ('the first heaven and the first earth') from the life on this planet, especially its evil and threatening aspects. The vivid 'apocalyptic' imagery of falling heavenly bodies, giant hail, tremendous earthquakes, fleeing islands, disappearing mountains, and the absence of any place to hide from the judge's throne, is a way of linking the cosmic upheaval to the intensifying series of eschatological judgments and emphasizing the totality of the resulting transformation.

### The Heavenly Temple and Liturgy

In the Book of Revelation, temple and liturgical symbolism is plentiful and pervasive. Starting with the 'Lamb that was slain' as a sacrificial victim whose blood redeems a people from sin and from the world (Rev 1,5-6; 5,9-10; 7,14; 12,11; 14,4; 22,14), the temple symbolism extends throughout and beyond the heavenly setting surrounding the throne where the Lamb appears (5,6). In numerous parts of the text, this 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) or dwelling (σκηνή: 13,6). It includes many of the liturgical objects and furnishings that characterized the ancient temple cult: the seven-branched lampstand, or *menorah* (1,12.13.20; 2,1.5; 11,4), the divine throne guarded by the living creatures or *cherubim* (4,6-8), the altar of incense (6,9; 8,3.5; 9,13; 14,18; 16,7), the sea (4,6; 15,2), the altar (11,1; 16,7), the Ark of the Covenant (11,19), the 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 and reading of scrolls (6,1-17; 8,1; 20,12), the holding of palms (7,9), the offering of incense at the time of prayer (8,3-4), the blowing of

trumpets (Rev 8–11), the offering of the first fruits (14,4), the opening of the Sanctuary (11,19; 15,5), the filling of the Sanctuary with glory (15,8), the pouring of libation bowls (Rev 15–16), the 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).

Certain figures can also be identified with temple personnel: the 'One like a Son of Man' appears dressed in the clothes of the high priest on the Day of Atonement (1,13), the angels are dressed like priests (15,6) and perform priestly functions (8,2.3.6; 16,1; 7,11-12). The assembly of saints and martyrs fulfill the function of the order of Levites. The 24 elders correspond to the number of the heads of the courses of priests and Levites (1Chron 24–25), and they also perform both priestly and Levitical functions (Rev 5,8-9).

It should be noted that the temple symbolism is not restricted to the area around the throne in heaven. At a certain point, the author John is commanded to metaphorically "*measure the sanctuary and the altar and those worshipping there, and reject the court which is outside the sanctuary...*" (11,1-2) and the two witnesses that follow are "*the two lampstands and the two olive trees standing before the Lord of the earth*" (11,4; cf. Zech 4,1-6a.10b-14). In both these passages, the temple imagery points to the construction of a new temple on earth, whose sanctuary is the heavenly sanctuary and whose components are the faithful themselves: "*The one who overcomes—I will make him a pillar in the sanctuary of my God...*" (Rev 3,12).

Another crucial point is that the new temple now under construction, spanning heaven and earth, will not be present in the final consummation, the new Jerusalem, since the author reports: "*And I did not see a sanctuary in her, because the Lord God Almighty is her sanctuary, and the Lamb*" (Rev 21,22). In those days, there will no longer be a need for people to retire to a separate and sacred place to encounter God, for everyone in the new Jerusalem will be able to enjoy immediate and direct contact with his divine Presence. As an integral part of 'the first heaven and the first earth', the new temple will simply pass away with the realization of 'the new heaven and the new earth'.

Although the area around the throne in heaven is clearly described as a Sanctuary with a liturgy in progress, greater precision is needed to assess the extent and dominance of this activity. The liturgical dimension of Revelation has long been acknowledged and



studied by modern scholarship.<sup>67</sup> What, perhaps, 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. As noted by Yves Congar: "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".<sup>68</sup> In the post-exilic period, it was understood that the Mosaic tabernacle (Ex 25,8-9.40; 26,30; 27,8) and the ensuing first and second temples (Ezek 43,10-11; 1Chron 28,11-20) were built according to a plan of the heavenly sanctuary shown to Moses in a vision.<sup>69</sup> Subsequently, ascent to the archetypal heavenly Sanctuary became a feature of several apocalyptic writings<sup>70</sup> and is also reflected in some New Testament passages (e.g., Heb 10,19-20; 12,22-23), but nowhere did it reach the development it achieved in the Book of Revelation. As a result of this development there is a basic typological correspondence between the heavenly sanctuary described in the Book of Revelation, the tabernacle built by Moses, and

<sup>67</sup> Cf. Ugo Vanni: "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", *L'Apocalisse*, 101 (the relevant bibliography is given in the footnote to this passage). Useful summaries of this research are to be found in Ulfgard, *Feast and Future*, 21-27; Donaziano Mollat, 'La Liturgia Dell'Apocalisse' in *L'Apocalisse* (Associazione Biblica Italiana—Studi Biblici Pastoral), Brescia: Paideia 1967, 135-46; 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.

<sup>68</sup> Yves M-J. Congar, *The Mystery of the Temple*, London: Burns and Oates 1962, 209.

<sup>69</sup> Cf. R.H. Charles, *Studies in the Apocalypse*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed, Edinburgh: T.&T. Clark 1915, 166-67; George Buchanan Gray, *Sacrifice in the Old Testament: Its Theory and Practice*, Oxford: OUP 1925, 154-57.

<sup>70</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 (*1Enoch* chs. 1-36), the Testament of Levi, *2Enoch*, the Similitudes of Enoch (*1Enoch* chs. 37-71), the Apocalypse of Zephaniah, the Apocalypse of Abraham, the Ascension of Isaiah and *3Baruch*, Cf. Martha Himmelfarb, *Ascent to Heaven in Jewish and Christian Apocalypses*, New York, Oxford: OUP, 1993.

the former temple in Jerusalem that was modelled on this. 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 resemblance 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>71</sup>

<sup>71</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 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 pre-figurations) 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

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>72</sup>

The results of the comparison between the heavenly liturgy described in the Book of Revelation and the liturgical activities described in the Mishnaic tractates *Tamid* and *Yoma* can be summarized as follows:<sup>73</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 1,10-20; Rev 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

"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>72</sup> For those who are interested, the issue of the historicity of these tractates is discussed in our article 'Historicity of the Mishnaic Tractates *Tamid* and *Yoma*' at [www.newtorah.org](http://www.newtorah.org) (Academic Articles).

<sup>73</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 in an abbreviated version 'The Symbolism of the Lamb in the Book of Revelation' at [www.newtorah.org](http://www.newtorah.org) (Academic Articles).

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>74</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).

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>75</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

<sup>74</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).

<sup>75</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.

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>76</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; *1Enoch* 10:4-6,8).

<sup>76</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.

11. Following judgment and condemnation, a banquet is held to celebrate the return of the Redeemer and his marriage (Rev 19,7-9; 21,2,9; 22,17), which had been anticipated by the “opening of the Sanctuary in heaven”—an action marking the start of the great pilgrimage feasts (11,19; 15,4; BT *Yoma* 54b; Josephus *Antiquities* III,127-129). Similarly, at the end of the Day of Atonement in the second temple, the high priest gave a banquet to celebrate his safe return from the ‘Holy of Holies’ (*m.Yoma* 7:3-4).

12. Although in the Book of Revelation there are many visions of joyful celebration in heaven (Rev 7,9-17; 11,15-18; 19,1-9), only one short scene depicts the consumption of food (19,18-21). This scene evokes, and recasts, the ancient legend telling how the flesh of the two primeval beasts, Leviathan and Behemoth, will provide food for the eschatological banquet (1*Enoch* 60:7-11,24; 4*Ezra* 6:49-53; 2*Bar* 29:4; BT *Baba Batra* 74b,75a; *Lev Rab* 13:3; *Est Rab* 2:4).

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>77</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>78</sup> The Lamb therefore corresponds to the first sacrifice on

<sup>77</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>78</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

that day: the lamb chosen to be the continual whole offering (the *tamid*) for the morning service.<sup>79</sup> As a result, the heavenly liturgy described in the Book of Revelation corresponds closely to the morning service on the Day of Atonement, but also includes liturgical elements that recall the specific rite of expiation that was performed on that day. This composite liturgy not only represents a synthesis of the liturgies for the Day of Atonement in the former temple, but also spans the entire text and appears to control most of the narrated events on earth.

## Discussion

The identification of these five symbolical themes shows something of the depth and breadth of the symbolical dimension of the text. They also say something of the Book of Revelation's content, which can be summarized as a vision that foresees a lengthy messianic conflict ending in divine salvation, judgment and eschatological transformation, all in the setting of a heavenly liturgy centered on Jesus Christ

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 (AUSS)*, 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>79</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).

as redeemer and judge. With its main themes of holy war, exodus, divine justice and judgment, the new creation as the Promised Land and divine liturgical service, the content of Revelation reflects the major themes of the Pentateuch, or Torah, and provides yet another reason for considering this work as the Messiah's new Torah.<sup>80</sup>

However, the main purpose of this exposition of major symbolic themes is to determine whether there exists a symbolic framework which unites all the separate visions of Revelation into a single vision, and to identify it. The foregoing analysis has shown that all five of the themes are present extensively in the text, often combining or running in parallel with each other. However, it is difficult to maintain, as do some scholars, that the themes of messianic war, eschatological exodus and cosmic transformation have a structural role, or that they, in any way, give order to the vision sequence. Many parts of the text are not sufficiently controlled by these particular themes to allow them to be regarded as an organizing principle or framework: for example, large parts of the messages to the churches (Rev 2–3), the trumpet series (Rev 8–9) and the bowl series (Rev 15–16), have no relation to the ongoing messianic war. It has already been noted that the exodus theme disappears from the text after the bowl plagues (Rev 16), only to reappear at the end of the text, in the vision of the holy city as the Promised Land (Rev 21–22). The exodus theme is also absent from the messages to the churches (Rev 2–3). Similarly, the theme of cosmic transformation is absent from the early parts of the text and does not appear until the Lamb opens the sixth seal of the scroll (6,12–17). So none of these three themes can be said to be controlling or uniting all the various parts of the text.

The theme of justice and judgment differs since it appears in virtually every part of the text and in many chapters it seems to be the dominant theme (e.g., Rev 15–20). However, although the theme is both pervasive and comprehensive, it falls short of being the organizing principle of the entire text. For example, although the theme of justice and judgment is a feature of many of the messages to the churches (Rev 2–3), it is absent from the introductory vision of the 'One like a Son of Man' among the seven lampstands (1,10–20), which is the vision that gives meaning and structure to the subsequent messages to

<sup>80</sup> For the other reasons, see above, under 'The Eschatological Exodus' (6<sup>th</sup> paragraph).



the churches. In a similar way, although justice and judgment is clearly a major theme in the trumpet and bowl series (Rev 8–9; 15–16), it is not apparent why the author should have chosen trumpets and bowls as the structuring principle of these parts of the text. The activities which truly impose order upon, and unite, the various visions described in the text are those which have a liturgical character and take place around the throne in heaven. As noted above, it is not the theme of justice and judgment that lies behind these activities, but rather the theme of the heavenly temple and its liturgy. So we propose that the dominant and organizing theme of the text, the one which unites and structures all its various visions and themes into a single vision, is the temple and liturgical theme that we examined at the end of the last section.

There we saw how the text of the Book of Revelation represents the atoning sacrifice, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ as the starting point of a liturgy that is currently being celebrated in the heavenly sanctuary; 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>81</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 heaven, and of its consequences for the lives of the peoples on earth, believers and non-believers.

### Hermeneutical Implications

The search for the dominant symbolical theme also has a hermeneutical purpose, for “A basic premise of a literary approach is the

<sup>81</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).

understanding that the work is a unified whole. The parts cannot be understood without understanding the whole".<sup>82</sup> So in the final part of this essay we aim to explore some of the hermeneutical implications resulting from the identification of the dominant symbolical theme, but first it is important to look at the present 'state of the question'.

In spite of their sheer variety and multiplicity, most interpretations of the Book of Revelation 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>83</sup> A fifth group called *Mixed* is 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 (Rev 4,1–22,5) 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*.

Without entering the details of each interpretive approach, it is true to say that they are inspired by a particular aspect of the text and then, moving from the particular to the general, go 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 is therefore inadequate to some extent.

The modern, academic *Preterist* approach highlights the author's insistence on the imminence of Christ's second coming, referred

<sup>82</sup> Resseguie, *Revelation of John*, 17.

<sup>83</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*, NICNT Series, Rev ed, Grand Rapids/Cambridge UK, 1998, 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).

to as “soon” (1,1; 22,7.12.20) and “near” (1,3; 22.10) and then, guided by the classic use of the historical-critical method, 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>84</sup> This is contradicted by the fact that the early Church found it obscure and, on account of this, the Church in the East refused to accept it in their canon until at least the 7th century.<sup>85</sup> 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>86</sup> In these circumstances, the assumption that the Book of Revelation was addressed primarily to the situation contemporary with the author is untenable.<sup>87</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

<sup>84</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>85</sup> 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 (*The Apocalypse of St. John*, cxiii).

<sup>86</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>87</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.

limitation, we cannot and should not expect any of the 'Preterist' interpretations to give us the full significance of the Book of Revelation.<sup>88</sup>

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). It 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.

The *Futurist* approach, born in the early Church,<sup>89</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. 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

<sup>88</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. 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" (Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *The New Testament and its Modern Interpreters*, eds E. J. Epp, G.W. Macrae, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989; 416).

<sup>89</sup> With e.g., Justin Martyr, Irenæus, Hippolytus, Tertullian, and Cyprian.

be, it is still an assumption, because the text itself is not invoked to distinguish what is past from 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 "chiliast", or "pre-millennialist", interpretation.

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 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>90</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>91</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

<sup>90</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>91</sup> 'Fern-seed and Elephants', in *Christian Reflections*, ed. Walter Hooper, London: Fount, 1981; 206-7.

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>92</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 *Pre-terist* 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 those parts. It hardly needs to be said that the interpretation of the sacred text should not have to depend upon tenuous assumptions.

So what this analysis has shown, above all, is that the basic disagreement among interpreters and the irreconcilable variety of their interpretations are a direct result of uncertainty and confusion over the temporal organization of the text and the temporal relationship of its constituent visions. A new approach is clearly needed—an approach that clarifies the temporal organization of the visions and the timing of the events they refer to.

The generic approach seems the right place to start because the Book of Revelation is a model member of the ‘apocalyptic’ genre, whose formal definition indicates precisely what is missing from contemporary hermeneutical and exegetical considerations. The following definition of an ‘apocalypse’ is now the most widely accepted: “*a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial insofar as it involves*

<sup>92</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.

*another, supernatural world*".<sup>93</sup> This generic definition of apocalypse affirms that the Book of Revelation, like other apocalypses, is organized around a transcendent reality which has a 'supernatural spatial dimension' and a 'temporal dimension leading to eschatological salvation'. It only remains to discern these aspects of the text and extract from them the spatial and temporal organization that is required for its correct and complete interpretation.

At this point, after previously identifying the dominant symbolical theme in the Book of Revelation with its temple-liturgical imagery, there should be no difficulty in identifying the 'spatial dimension of the supernatural world' with the heavenly Sanctuary and the 'temporal dimension leading to eschatological salvation' with the progress of the liturgy that takes place within the heavenly Sanctuary and impacts upon the whole creation. Since our analysis has shown that it is the 'temporal dimension leading to eschatological salvation' that is most crucial for guiding the complete and correct interpretation of the text, the foregoing work on identifying and defining the corresponding heavenly liturgy is of fundamental hermeneutical significance. The clarification of the heavenly liturgy is indeed the much-needed hermeneutical key to the interpretation of the text as a whole.

It would be surprising if this insight did not have immediate ramifications for the general interpretation of the Book of Revelation. Three major implications can be mentioned straightaway: the first 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

<sup>93</sup> John J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination*, 2<sup>nd</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.

temporal order or sequence.<sup>94</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>95</sup> The precise sequence of the visions and their relation to each other can now be clarified by careful delineation of the structure and composition of the text.<sup>96</sup> The only question that remains to be answered by interpreters is “where are we now in the sequence?” This is a great improvement on the confusion that reigned before the identification of the temporal framework of the book.

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 to begin in the future. In addition to

<sup>94</sup> As noted by Jon Paulien, the liturgical development in Revelation suggests a “linear plot to the Apocalypse” (“The Role of the Hebrew Cultus”, *Andrews University Seminary Studies [AUSS]*, vol. 33, no. 2, 1995; 261).

<sup>95</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 article by Marko Jauhiainen ‘Recapitulation and Chronological Progression in John’s Apocalypse: Towards a New Perspective’, *New Testament Studies*, 49 (2003); 543-59.

<sup>96</sup> See chapter 5: ‘The Composition and Structure of the Book of Revelation’.



the arguments of various scholars against this futuristic position,<sup>97</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 “a thousand years in your sight (Lord) are as a day, a yesterday that is past...” (Ps 90,4; cf. 2Pet 3,8), the 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—the ‘day’—which is the present time.<sup>98</sup> If this cannot be accepted, for one reason or another, then it will be encountered finally as a “yesterday that is past”, i.e., 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 inference mentioned above, and the *Preterist* approach, beloved by many biblical scholars

<sup>97</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 Caelorum: Patterns of Millennial Thought in Early Christianity*, 2nd Edition, Grand Rapids/Cambridge UK: Eerdmans, 2001.

<sup>98</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).

and commentators, would be excluded on the basis of the first and the second.

### Conclusions

This study of the major symbolic themes in the Book of Revelation has demonstrated a certain level of organization in the variety of its imagery. These themes represent messianic redemption in ways reminiscent of the redemption of the Israelites from Egypt and shape the Book of Revelation as the new Torah of the Messiah.

However, the symbolism of the text is not just for establishing links with the Old Testament, or showing how the OT is fulfilled by Jesus Christ, but as indicated above it helps to provide the background, or setting, in which the literal sense of the text must be understood. The finding of a symbolic theme that embraces all the visions of the book is therefore of particular significance. The theme of the heavenly temple and its liturgy not only provides that dominant symbolic framework that gives order to, and maintains the unity of, the variety of visions related in the text, but it also qualifies as the hermeneutical lens through which the various parts of the text can be understood as a whole. This is the dominant theme or 'organizing principle' that interpreters require in order to understand the relation of the parts to the whole, and vice versa. The liturgical dimension of this dominant symbolical theme is also of particular value in establishing the temporal organization of the various visions in the book.

It is to be expected that this finding has certain implications, 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>99</sup> These three simple conditions define a general approach to the text, which, if followed, would promote a far greater

<sup>99</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).

consensus over the interpretation of the text and eliminate many of the unfruitful lines of interpretation currently proposed.

## CHAPTER 7

### Myth, History and End-Time Prophecy in Revelation 12–22

#### Introduction

A significant part of the Book of Revelation is a description of a liturgy taking place in the heavenly sanctuary. If we add up all those passages describing actions that are recognizably liturgical in character, seen in temple settings furnished with liturgical objects, and their ‘fallout’ on earth, the total is 204 verses, out of 405, exactly one half of the entire text (50%).<sup>1</sup> Furthermore 75% of this liturgical activity is described in chapters 1–9, and the remaining 25% is spread throughout the rest of the book. Typological comparison of these liturgical activities with those that were performed in the second temple in Jerusalem, according to the Mishnaic tractates *Yoma* and *Tamid*, helps to identify the liturgy in Revelation as a synthesis of the liturgical activity performed on the Day of Atonement, with the sacrifice of the Lamb corresponding to the first sacrifice of that day, the *tamid* offering of the daily morning service.<sup>2</sup> The liturgy begins with the sacrifice of the Lamb, ends with the final judgment and progresses through a well-defined sequence that forms a framework embracing and uniting the entire text. This structure not only stamps the entire text with the character of a liturgy for atonement, representing a day in heaven,<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Rev 1,12-20; chs. 2–9; 11,14-19; 14,2-3; chs. 15–16; 19,1-10; 20,11-15.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Chapter 6; also *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, Part 1, available at [www.newtorah.org](http://www.newtorah.org).

<sup>3</sup> This will have important repercussions on the interpretation of the 1,000-year reign of Christ and his saints described in Rev 20,4-6, according to the well-known formula in Ps. 90:4: “For a thousand years in your sight (O Lord) are as a day, a yesterday that is past...”, see point 8 below.

but also provides an essential temporal frame for interpreting the events described in the book.<sup>4</sup>

The 50% of the text that cannot be defined as liturgical, nor as the 'fallout' of the heavenly liturgy on earth, is mostly to be found in the second half of the text. Starting in chapter 10 and continuing to the end of the book (Rev 22), this material is split by the announcement of the last trumpet (11,14-19), with a small introductory part preceding (10,1-11,13) and the main part following the announcement, merging later with the final parts of the heavenly liturgy (Rev 15 and 16; 19,1-10; 20,11-15).

In the part of the narrative that precedes the 7<sup>th</sup> trumpet (10,1-11,13), a new start is described, when a mighty angel meets the author John to give him a little scroll to eat, and then commands him to 'prophesy again'. What follows is the prophecy he was given to 'prophesy again', which begins with an account of the mission of two prophets, in realistic prophetic language.<sup>5</sup> Assuming that this is not the main part of the prophecy given to John to 'prophesy again', but just describes the means by which it will be publicly announced at a certain time, it follows that the main body of this prophecy begins with chapter 12, the mid-point of the book and therefore, in biblical tradition, the central and most important part.<sup>6</sup> Confirming this observation is

<sup>4</sup> The liturgical time frame, composed primarily of the successive series of seven seals, trumpets and bowls, acts as an orderly progression (and a bridge) from the beginning to the end of the liturgy, with the main bulk of the text concentrated on the final stages (details to follow). It appears to fulfil the same function as the successive historical periods ("periodization of history") in other historical apocalypses.

<sup>5</sup> "The passage which follows (11:3-13) is also very distinctive, within the whole book, in that it is not a vision or even an interpretation of a vision (as in 17:7-18), but a narrative prophecy (...)" Richard Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy: Studies on the Book of Revelation*, Edinburgh: T&T Clark 1993, 267.

<sup>6</sup> For example the central part of the Pentateuch, Lev ch. 16, contains the description of the most important event in the ancient Hebrew calendar—the Day of Atonement. Other examples abound, in a way that is now recognized as an important feature of biblical literary tradition: "The third characteristic of Hebrew rhetoric is the specific manner in which it composes parallel dispositions and most of all concentric arrangements. Instead of developing its argumentation in a linear way, in the Graeco-Roman fashion, to a conclusion which is the point of resolution of the discourse, it is organized most of the time in an involutive manner around a centre which is the focal point, the keystone, through which the rest finds cohesion", Roland Meynet, *Rhetorical Analysis: An Introduction to Biblical*

the correspondence between the account of its transmission in chapter 10 and the first verse of the text: “The Revelation of Jesus Christ which God gave to him to show his servants what must happen soon, making it known by sending his angel to his servant John, who bears witness to the Word of God and the Witness of Jesus Christ, of all that he saw” (Rev 1,1-2). The account in chapter 10 actually describes the angel transmitting this divine message to John—the message earlier called “The Revelation of Jesus Christ”, and the “Word of God and the Witness of Jesus”. It would seem that the prophecy that begins at this central point of the text embodies the content and purpose of the entire book written by John “to show his servants what must happen soon” (1,1).

Beginning at chapter 12, this central message of the Book of Revelation can be summarized as follows: it begins with a vision of a royal woman giving birth to a male child, while being confronted by a fiery-red seven-headed dragon wanting to devour her child. As soon as he is born, the child is seized up to God’s throne in heaven and the woman escapes to a refuge prepared for her in the desert. There is a battle in heaven, in which the archangel Michael and his angels defeat the dragon and its angels by throwing them down from heaven, never to return. The irate dragon now pursues the woman on earth but fails to dislodge her from her desert refuge. So it delegates all its power to a scarlet sea-monster, a seven-headed beast from the sea, which lives in the waters of the abyss and supports a gaudily-dressed woman, who claims to be a queen, but is in fact a prostitute. The seven heads of the beast appear above the water as rulers who reign in succession until the seventh and final head, which receives a severe wounding that endangers the life of the entire beast. However, the wound heals and the sea-beast revives, enabling the entire beast to ascend out of the abyss, or sea, and rule as an eighth head, with power to rule over the whole earth. It shares its power with another beast, a beast from the land, which coerces people to worship the sea-beast and kills all who refuse. In this and other ways, the two beasts persecute the people of God and, in alliance with ten other rulers, they turn against and destroy the prostitute previously supported by the sea-beast. After their

*Rhetoric*, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998; 175. See also E. Schüssler Fiorenza, *The Book of Revelation: Justice and Judgement*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press 1985; 175-6.

global but very brief rule, the beast's throne is darkened and its reign is terminated by defeat at the battle of the great day of God the Almighty, when the male-child returns from heaven, appearing as a divine warrior-king on a white horse, leading his celestial cavalry. The two beasts are then thrown into a lake of fire and their armies are devoured by birds. The dragon is chained and imprisoned in the abyss for a thousand years, during which the warrior-king, who is God's anointed representative, Messiah or Christ, reigns with his holy followers in the first resurrection. When this 1,000-year reign is over, the dragon is released and immediately raises an army to fight against the encampment of God's people. The dragon and its army are consumed by fire from heaven and the dragon is thrown into the lake of fire, where the two beasts had previously been thrown. The first heaven and first earth disappear and the last judgment takes place before the throne of God; the dead are raised to be judged in a general resurrection, while Death, Hades and anyone not recorded in the Scroll of Life are condemned to the lake of fire. The narrative concludes with a vision of the New Jerusalem coming down out of heaven as a bride adorned for her husband, the victorious warrior-king, and a great wedding feast is celebrated by his followers. She is then described, at the centre of a new heaven and a new earth, as a vast garden-city, a huge park surrounded by walls, in the midst of which the throne of God and the Lamb is seen. This is the consummation of God's plan for mankind, and there "will be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, nor pain will there be anymore, because the former things have passed away" (Rev 21,3-5).

Opinions differ as to what, exactly, this narrative is about. There are at least three levels on which it can be read and understood: the mythological level, the historical level, and the end-time prophetic level, with each level representing a closer reading of the text and greater attention to its precise wording. For a comprehensive understanding of the text, each level must be examined in turn.

### The Mythological Level

A superficial reading of chapters 12–22 reveals a compelling narrative of divine combat against the devil, depicted as a serpent-like dragon, leading to its total defeat in several stages. It has the typical form of an ancient Near-Eastern combat myth, in which a new god

responds to an existential threat to his people by fighting and defeating a destructive dragon or monster, with divine help. The god's victory is then celebrated with a feast and his reign begins with the construction of a new residence, usually in the form of a temple. In some cases these myths are cosmogonic, which is to say that they happen 'outside of time' and explain the creation of the civilized world from darkness and chaos. In many cases they were associated with a priestly ritual for establishing or confirming the sovereignty of the appointed king, regarded as the victorious god's representative on earth. Regular performance of the ritual was seen as a way to ensure stability, fertility and prosperity in the religious and social order governed by the king.<sup>7</sup>

The same mythical images were then taken up by the earliest authors of the Old Testament and applied to the God of Israel, the Divine Warrior, YHWH Sebaoth, in passages originally used in the ritual celebration of major events in the history of ancient Israel (e.g., Exod 15; Pss. 93, 96, 114).<sup>8</sup> Later authors recalled these events when faced with impending calamity, petitioning the Lord to repeat his ancient victories (e.g., Pss. 74, 77, 89). In exilic and postexilic prophecy, the same mythical themes were transferred from the past to the present and future (e.g., Ezek 28; Isa 24-27, 40-66; Zech 9-14), before passing directly into the apocalypses of second temple times (e.g., Dan 7-12) and reaching a climax in the Book of Revelation at the end of the New Testament.<sup>9</sup> Although it is totally inappropriate to refer to chapters

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Richard J. Clifford 'The Roots of Apocalypticism in Near Eastern Myth', ch. 1 in *The Encyclopedia of Apocalypticism*, Vol. 1, Ed. John J. Collins, New York, London: Continuum, 2000; 3-38.

<sup>8</sup> "In both the structure of the great complex of tradition and in individual poetic units embedded therein, a familiar mythic pattern may be discerned. The Divine Warrior marched forth in wrath to win a crucial victory—at the sea, or in variant tradition by cleaving through the sea—and then led a triumphal procession to his mountain, where he appeared in glory, constructed his sanctuary, and established his kingdom. A similar if not identical pattern of themes is found in the mythic cycle of Ba'l in Late Bronze Age Canaan (Ugarit) and in the classic Akkadian cosmogony known as *Enūma eliš*", Frank Moore Cross, *From Epic to Canon: History and Literature in Ancient Israel*, Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 1998; 22.

<sup>9</sup> "When the prophets attempt to describe the final situation they have to fall back on the language of myth. The description of the conquest of the chaos-dragon by Marduk in the Babylonian epic of Creation supplies them with the imagery which they use to describe Yahweh's final victory over the forces of evil. Just as the



12–22 of the Book of Revelation as a “myth” in the popular sense of that word, as a fabricated story or fable,<sup>10</sup> it is impossible to deny that the mythical imagery and plotline of this part of the book impart to it a strong mythical character. Let us then outline the narrative plot of this book, in order to discuss its mythical character in more detail.

A basic plot can be recognized which is tightly organized, coherent and complete. Although unsaid, the background is that there has been a rebellion in Creation and the Creator is sending a messianic Redeemer to defeat it. With that in mind, the basic elements of the plot can be broken down as follows: the Redeemer’s birth is threatened by the arch rebel, an evil dragon; the Redeemer and his mother receive divine protection while divine forces fight and partially neutralize the dragon; the defeated adversary then delegates another evil agent, a sea-beast, who is aided secretly by a wealthy and glamorous female prostitute. At a certain point, the delegated sea-beast succeeds in receiving authority over the entire world, whereupon he rejects the female accomplice and replaces her with a male associate, a beast from the land. This partnership leads to intense persecution of the Redeemer’s family and followers; after a short while, the Redeemer returns as a warrior to defeat the evil beasts in a final battle; the original arch rebel, the evil dragon, is imprisoned and the Redeemer rules for a protracted period. At the end of this period the dragon is released, stirs up more rebellion and is immediately destroyed forever. All evil is eternally condemned through a general judgment as the old creation collapses and a new creation is realized and celebrated. In the new creation perfect harmony and peace is restored in the presence of the Creator and the Redeemer.

divine act of creation lies outside the horizon of history and can only be described in the language of myth, so the divine act bringing history to a close can only be described in the same terms. The eschatological use of myth was carried over from Judaism into Christianity and appears in its fullest display in the Apocalypse of St. John”, S.H. Hooke, *Middle Eastern Mythology*, Harmondsworth: Penguin 1963, 16. Also see Adela Yarbro Collins, *The Combat Myth in the Book of Revelation*, Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2001.

<sup>10</sup> This very negative sense of the term ‘myth’ seems to be the result of its use in some of the Pastoral Letters of the New Testament (1Tim 1,4; 4,7; 2Tim 4,4; Tit 1,14; 2Pet 1,16). The discovery of the actual texts of some ancient Near Eastern myths has helped to rehabilitate the term as a distinct literary genre of its own—one that has had an important role in the establishment of virtually every ancient religion.

From this brief outline, it becomes clear that the mythical language of this part of the Book of Revelation represents the complete history of divine redemption from its inception at the messianic Redeemer's birth to its ending in the final judgment and the new creation. It symbolically envisions actual entities, actions and realities in this world and in the next, showing how the created world was, is and will be saved and renewed by God and his Messiah.<sup>11</sup> Its mythical character not only functions as an extension of its symbolism, but also gives the narrative a pan-historical, temporally-indeterminate appearance.<sup>12</sup>

In stating this, the superficial nature of the book's mythical character is exposed and also its divergence from authentic myth. Whereas ancient myth looked backwards to the *Urzeit*—an imaginary primaeval time in the remote past—for endorsement and regeneration of the present, the text in Revelation looks forwards to the *Endzeit*, or end-time, to endorse, encourage and justify present actions.<sup>13</sup> While ancient myth is a description of past origins that has a role in determining the present and future, the same role is fulfilled in the Book of Revelation by the prophetic vision of future consummation. There is indeed a superficial resemblance with myth, but in Revelation the perspective is reversed and the objective is qualitatively different: it is

<sup>11</sup> In the New Testament "the function of myth is to express in symbolical terms, by means of images, what cannot be otherwise put into human speech. Here myth has become an expansion of symbolism", S.H. Hooke, *Middle Eastern Mythology*; 16. Cf. John J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to Jewish Apocalyptic Literature*, 2nd ed, Grand Rapids MI/ Cambridge UK: Eerdmans, 1998; 18-19.

<sup>12</sup> This book is undoubtedly the most sustained and unashamedly 'mythical' piece of writing in the New Testament, and possibly in the whole Bible, a fact that has complicated its interpretation and earned it scorn and opprobrium from the undiscerning. It is no exaggeration to say "The book of Revelation is one of the most sustained examples of symbolic reality in existence", Introduction to Revelation, *ESV: Study Bible English Standard Version*, Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2008; 2546.

<sup>13</sup> This indication of the functional role of the Book of Revelation closely corresponds to the one proposed as an addition to the definition of Apocalypse (SBL Genres Project, *Semeia* 14, 1979) by a later committee headed by Adela Yarbro Collins: apocalypses were "intended to interpret present, earthly circumstances in light of the supernatural world and of the future, and to influence both the understanding and the behaviour of the audience by means of divine authority", 'Introduction: Early Christian Apocalypticism', *Semeia* 36 (1989): 7.

not the past but the future that is determinative, and the *Urzeit* does not become the *Endzeit*, because the *Endzeit* is a new creation.<sup>14</sup> This part of the Book of Revelation should not therefore be identified as 'myth', because it is essentially prophecy that has been 'mythologized'—a process that characterizes the apocalyptic genre and had its roots in the late exilic and early post-exilic prophecy of Israel.<sup>15</sup>

Furthermore, as one might expect in a prophecy, the narrative plot in the Book of Revelation is more complex and sophisticated than any extant examples of combat myth. This can be seen in the multiplication of villains (i.e., the dragon, the two beasts, the prostitute, and the inhabitants of the earth) cooperating with each other in various ways to oppose God and his agents. It is especially from the intra-textual interpretations, provided by the interpreting angel and identifying these villains with historical entities, that the reader perceives this part of the Book of Revelation has much more to say about history than a timeless myth whose main function was to explain, establish and maintain a particular religious or social system in the ancient world. Realizing this, the reader is ready to proceed to the next level of reading the text.

<sup>14</sup> It was the German scholar Hermann Gunkel who asserted in his *Schöpfung und Chaos* (1895) that '*Urzeit wird Endzeit*', meaning 'the time of the Beginning becomes the End-time'. Commenting on this simplistic formula, Paul D. Hanson writes: "While recognizing the profound influence that mythic elements had upon eschatology, whether these elements were borrowed directly or through the mediation of earlier Israelite institutions, we must never overlook the thorough transformation to which these elements were subjected in being drawn into Yahwism, even in late post-exilic times. This can be illustrated especially in connection with the phrase commonly used to describe the relation of Jewish apocalyptic to ancient Near Eastern myth: *Urzeit wird Endzeit*, for to translate *wird* in terms of total identification is very misleading. In borrowing mythic forms such as the Divine Warrior Hymn, the prophets and apocalyptic seers never departed completely from the temporal framework of the classical period of prophetic thought. For while the *Urzeit* of myth was recurrent and bound up with the cycles of nature, the *Endzeit* of late prophecy and apocalyptic was construed as occurring once-and-for-all and as a culmination of the long history of Yahweh's relationship to his people", *The Dawn of Apocalyptic: The Historical and Sociological Roots of Jewish Apocalyptic Eschatology*, Rev. ed., Philadelphia, Fortress, 1979; note 84, 131-2.

<sup>15</sup> For the most complete account of this process, see Paul D. Hanson's *Dawn of Apocalyptic*, 1-31, and also John J. Collins, 'From Prophecy to Apocalypticism: The Expectation of the End', ch. 4 in *Encyclopedia of Apocalypticism*, Vol. 1, 129-161.

### The Historical Level

The historical level is reached when aspects of the narrative are identified with historical events in the past. This would confirm that the text is not a mythical story from outside of historical time, for there are real points of contact with human history. For example, the divine Redeemer, who is the male child born to a very special woman (Rev 12, 5), is asking to be identified with Jesus Christ, called the Lamb elsewhere in the text, whose life, death and resurrection are real historical events recorded by reliable witnesses in the New Testament and other ancient documents.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, in chapter 12, the downfall of the dragon is ascribed to the “blood of the Lamb and because of the word of their witness, and they loved not their life up to death” (12,11), which refer to the historical acts of martyrdom of Christ and Christians. Oddly enough, though, there is little else in chapters 12–22 that can definitely be linked to known historical events.

There are, nevertheless, some allusions to circumstances known to historians of the Roman Empire, as for example the similarity between the cult worship of the image of the first beast instituted by the second beast (13,12) and the offering of incense to Caesar’s image in the imperial cult, instituted by the priests of provincial temples dedicated to the Roman Emperor, and sometimes employed as a test of loyalty.<sup>17</sup> However, many other details of the personality cult in the Book of Revelation have never been verified at any time in history, such as conditioning commercial transactions to the possession of a mark on the hand or forehead (13,16-17), or the worship of an image that actually speaks (13,15), or the signs performed to deceive (13,13-14). Furthermore, the second beast is not called a priest, but a false prophet (cf. 19,20).

There are other important features of the text which evoke aspects of Roman Imperial history. On information disclosed by the interpreting angel, the author writes of the sea-beast with seven heads: “The seven heads are seven hills on which the woman sits, and are seven rulers: five have fallen, one is, the other has not yet come, and whenever he comes he must remain for just a short time. And the

<sup>16</sup> It should be noted, though, that this birth takes place in heaven, as a heavenly birth, and differs in important ways from the historical accounts of Christ’s birth, see point 9 in next section below.

<sup>17</sup> See chapter 4.

beast which was and is not, even he is an eighth, is also of the seven, and goes to destruction" (17,9-11). This is the same beast that comes out of the sea (13,1-8), and out of the abyss (17,3.8; also 11,7), to rule the world for a brief time on behalf of the evil dragon. Here the 'seven hills on which the woman sits' (17,9) and the name given to the woman, Babylon, (17,3-5) are both references to the historical city of Rome in common usage at the time of the author.<sup>18</sup> The sea-beast that supports this city is therefore presumed to be a metaphor for the Roman Empire, and the seven heads of the beast, identified as rulers in the text (17,9), are said to be Roman Emperors.<sup>19</sup>

The decoding of this complex set of images therefore points squarely to an original setting within the historical Roman Empire. It should be said, however, that no indication is given of the identity of the first, or of any, of the seven emperors of which "five have fallen, one is now, and one is to come..." and all attempts to identify them from historical sources have been unconvincing.<sup>20</sup> As seven is a symbolic number representing the totality, it is likely that no particular emperors are intended. Furthermore, the actual identity of the fallen emperors is of no concern to the author, since he focuses only the last two of the series: the seventh and especially the one that comes after, an 'eighth', who is also one of the seven and is still very much in the future from the textual point of view.<sup>21</sup> The conclusion is therefore

<sup>18</sup> Regarding the name of Babylon for Rome, cf. 1Pet 5,13; 2Baruch 11,1; 33,2; 67,7; 79,1; 4Ezra 3,2.31; *Sibylline Oracles* 5,143.434; *Midr. Rab. Lev* 6.6. The origin and use of this name relate to the events of 70CE, when Rome repeated what Babylon had done in 586 BC by destroying the Jerusalem temple and exiling the Jewish people. Rome also resembled the ancient city of Babylon by becoming the political and religious capital of a vast empire. Regarding the city on seven hills, see David E. Aune, *Revelation 17-22*, Word Biblical Commentary, Vol. 52c, Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998; 944-45.

<sup>19</sup> The identification of the sea-beast with the ancient Roman Empire and its heads as Emperors is based on the assumption that Babylon represents ancient Rome. In point 6 of the next section below, this assumption is challenged on the grounds that Babylon (Rome) still exists, in which case the Empire and the rulers that support her must also exist: they are international empires that exist up until the end of history.

<sup>20</sup> There have been scores of attempts at identifying the emperors, with the aim of estimating the date of authorship; cf. Aune, *Revelation 17-22*, 946-49.

<sup>21</sup> The head to which the eighth head corresponds is left as an enigma, although it is reasonable to conclude that it is the seventh, since the entire beast would have

clear: although the vision of Babylon and the sea-beast is set against the background of the historical Roman Empire, the main characters are not yet seen as present realities according to the temporal orientation of the author in this vision, but will only become historical realities in the future. To interpret these realities as already past involves the assumption that, at some point future to the author, but in the past relative to our own time, all that is described concerning the prostitute and the sea-beast has actually happened, including the eternal destruction of the prostitute by the sea-beast (17,16-17).<sup>22</sup> This is contradicted by the fact that there is no historical record of a Roman Emperor turning against his own capital city and destroying it forever (cf. 19,3), and neither has any other ruler done this, for Rome still exists and so witnesses to the continuing validity of the author's words. The author's emphasis on the future is therefore still up to date and brings us to the third and final level for reading and understanding the visions in this part of the Book of Revelation (Rev 12–22).

### End-Time Prophetic Level

On the mythological level, chapters 12–22 contain a unified and seamless narrative about the war between God and his people and the devil and its people, ending with a vision of final judgment followed by eternal salvation and peace. On the historical level there are a few traces of recorded historical events and circumstances, referring mainly to the times of Jesus, the persecution of Christians, Rome and her ancient Empire. However, this historical material is no more than a background to this section of the book, which is mainly focused on events and situations that are future to the author's time (cf. 1,1; 4,1; 22,6). Furthermore, helped by the temporal structure defined by the heavenly liturgy, the precise chronology of this prophesied future can be inferred from a close inspection of the text and the context.

Starting with the context, a connection between chapters 12–22, and chapters 10–11 has already been mentioned. Chapter 10 represents a new start at the end of the narrative of the heavenly liturgy, which results in the delivery of a new prophecy to the author, who

died if the wound on the seventh head had not been cured (Rev 13,3.14), i.e. the wounded head was the seventh and last head of the beast.

<sup>22</sup> This is the main assumption of the 'Preterist' approach to interpretation.

first describes, in chapter 11, the way it will be prophesied publicly by two prophets. It is written that the two prophets will prophesy for 1,260 days before being killed by the sea-beast ascending from the abyss (11,3,7-8). Not by accident this time span of 1,260 days is repeated in chapter 12, regarding the 'exodus' of the celestial woman to her place of refuge in the desert (12,6), indicating a temporal overlap between the two passages. This overlap is seen again with the repetition of another period, 42 months in this instance, which represents the time of trampling the holy city in the first part (11,2) and the brief but brutal reign of the sea-beast in the second (13,5).<sup>23</sup> Regardless of the way they are interpreted,<sup>24</sup> these two periods of time, the 1,260 days and the 42 months, confirm a synchronicity between events described in chapter 11 and events at the start of the chapters we are considering (Rev 12-14), and identify the latter as an expansion of the former.<sup>25</sup> This simple temporal parallel therefore verifies the assumption, mentioned in the introduction above, that chapter 12 opens the main part of the prophecy that John was instructed to 'prophesy again' after ingesting the little scroll (10,11). Since this prophecy refers back to chapter 11, where the mission of two prophets is described, it follows that this is indeed the prophecy they announce. Furthermore, since this mission immediately precedes the seventh and last trumpet, signaling the end of history (10,6-7), it also follows that the prophecy concerns events leading up to the end-time. It is an eschatological, or end-time, prophecy that blends seamlessly into the prophecy of the

<sup>23</sup> The brief reign of the beast for 42 months (Rev 13,5) recalls the reign of the tyrannical 'little horn' of Daniel, for a 'time, two times and half a time' (Dan 7,23-25), and identifies this reign with the second mention of the period of the refuge of the woman at her place in the desert (Rev 12,14).

<sup>24</sup> Most scholars and commentators interpret these two periods (1,260 days and 42 months) non-literally, as different expressions for the same final period of unspecified length. As set out in point 2 below, a literal interpretation is probable and more compelling than the non-literal.

<sup>25</sup> Indeed, from a literary critical point of view, Rev 12,1-15,4 is an '*inclusio*' (an 'inclusion', 'intercalation' or 'interpolation') enclosed by a 'doublet' (a pair of similar expressions) at 11,19 and 15,5, about 'the opening of the sanctuary in heaven'. The doublet identifies the inclusion and functions as a parenthesis, marking the included passage as an explanation or expansion of what preceded.

final judgments and consummation announced by the seventh trumpet (11,15-19).<sup>26</sup>

If there is any doubt about this conclusion, the textual content of these chapters (Rev 12–22) can be cited as evidence in support, for they describe events that Christian tradition has always identified with the end-time, especially the eschatological harvest (14,14-20), the return of Christ (19,11-21), the general resurrection and the final judgment (20,11-15).

The conclusion that chapters 12–22 contain a prophecy for the end-time, forces us to revisit those features of the text that may seem to be contradictory, confusing or just difficult to reconcile with this view.

### *1. The imminence of the End*

If the events recounted in this prophecy all refer to the end-time, and have not yet been fulfilled in our own time, it is either irrational or mistaken for the author, writing about 19 centuries ago, to claim that they would happen very soon (1,1; 4,1; 22,6) and that between himself and the final manifestation of the historical sea-beast, there was only one short reign: “five have fallen, one is now, and one is to come, and whenever he comes he must remain for just a short time” (17,9). The author clearly writes as if he is only a short time away from the events he prophesies. Scholars have noted a similar perspective in other parts of the text: “The Apocalypse’s overall understanding of time is that the consummation of history is ‘only a little while’ away, whether this is viewed from the vantage point of Christians (1:1-2; 22:6-7,10,20), of exalted heavenly saints (6,11) or of Satan... (12:12)”.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>26</sup> The conjunction of the seventh trumpet with the end of history barely needs any confirmation after the angelic oath in Rev 10,6-7. But if confirmation is needed it is here in the list of divine interventions following the seventh trumpet blast, and for which God is praised by the 24 elders (11,15-19).

<sup>27</sup> G.K.Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1999; 993, following E. Schüssler Fiorenza, *Justice and Judgment*, 46. So prominent is the theme of eschatological salvation and judgment, that Schüssler Fiorenza presents a compelling case for eschatology, and not history, as the proper horizon for the understanding of Revelation. She argues that the whole composition of the text is organized by three main themes: the Christian community as the already established kingdom of God and Christ in heaven and on earth, the imminent expectation of the eschatological fulfilment of this kingdom from



The imminence of the prophesied end-time events makes good sense, however, if the author is actually placing himself in the eschatological future, as represented in chapter 10 by his encounter with the mighty angel, his ingestion of the little scroll and the instruction to 'prophesy again' (10,1-11), all of which are described after the sixth and a short time before the seventh and last trumpet blast (11,14-19). This appears to be the standpoint for the renewal of his prophetic vocation and explains his otherwise inexplicable proximity to the end-time events he prophesies.

## 2. *The relationship between the two time periods*

If the two time-periods, 1,260 days (11,3; 12,6) and 42 months (11,2; 13,5), refer to the same period of time, as most scholars assert, then it is legitimate to ask why the author has chosen two different temporal expressions when one would suffice. Firstly, whichever calendar was used, 1,260 days is not exactly the same as 42 months, and the author must have been aware of this.<sup>28</sup> Secondly, according to the text, the mission of the two prophets during the 1,260 days cannot take place during the 42-month reign of the sea-beast, as they are adversaries of each other, and both the prophets and the sea-beast have

the point of view of being only a short time before (cf. Rev 6,9-11); and the ultimate fulfilment of the kingdom of God and Christ through their judgment on this world (*Justice and Judgment*, 46-56). In her words: "This means that in Rev. 'history' is completely subordinated to eschatology and receives its significance from the future" (op. cit. 46); "The goal and high point of the composition of the whole book, as of the individual 'little apocalypses', is the final judgment and the eschatological salvation" (op. cit. 47); "The whole book, and especially the cycles of visions within its apocalyptic section, reaches a climax in the description of judgment and of eschatological salvation. The reader thereby is constantly confronted with the end" (op. cit. 55).

<sup>28</sup> At the author's time, two calendars were known: the Hebrew luni-solar calendar in which 42 months lasted 1,239 days (21 days less than 1,260) and the sectarian (Essene) 364-day solar calendar in which 42 months lasted 1,274 days (14 days more than 1,260). The expression "time, two times and half-a-time", cited at Rev 12,14 and meaning 'three and a half years', informs us exactly which calendar the author had in mind. By evoking the time of persecution under the tyrannical "little horn" of Daniel (Dan 7,23-25; 12,7), this expression corresponds to the 42-month reign of the beast, which therefore lasts three and a half years. Under the Hebrew luni-solar calendar, three and a half years contained at least 43 months, due to the 'intercalated' month added every 2-3 years. The author was therefore guided by the sectarian 364-day solar calendar in which 42 months were equal to 3½ years and 1,274 days.

the power to destroy their enemies (11,5 and 13,7). If the mission of the two prophets and the reign of the beast were concurrent, they would quickly degenerate into mortal combat, but instead the text notes: "whenever they finish their witnessing, the beast that is coming up out of the abyss will make war against them and overcome them and kill them" (11,7), which is to say that the mission of the two prophets for 1,260 days comes first and is then followed by the reign of the beast for 42 months. These two temporal expressions refer to two different but consecutive time periods of more or less the same duration, which together add up to seven years and provide a clear temporal structure to this end-time prophecy. Moreover, the 42-month reign of the beast is terminated at the final battle and the second coming of Christ (16,12-16; 19,11-21), so the seven-year period is indeed a final 'week of years', or septennium (cf. Dan 9,24-27).

3. *To whom does the title 'great city' refer?*

There is considerable confusion about the identity of the 'great city'. In the text, this title is attributed mainly to Babylon the prostitute city (Rev 17,18; 18,16.18.19.21), except on two occasions. In the first it refers to the holy city at the end of the mission of the two prophets (11,8), which coincides with the start of the trampling of that city (11,2) and of the reign of the sea-beast for 42 months (11,7; 13,5). The holy city in this context is clearly historical Jerusalem, for it is also called the place where the Lord was crucified (11,7). The second application of this title to historical Jerusalem is in the description of the effects of a great earthquake that follows the out-pouring of the final bowl judgment: "And the great city came to be in three parts and the cities of the nations fell. And Babylon the great was remembered before God, to give her the cup with the wine of the passion of his anger" (16,19). The link is more subtle here and lies in the contrast between the fate of the great city, which was 'split into three parts' (cf. Zech 14,4-5), and that of the cities of the nations, including Babylon, which just 'fell' (cf. Rev 14,8; 18,2). In a biblical context, Jerusalem, the holy city, is often contrasted with 'the cities of the nations', of which Babylon is among the most prominent.<sup>29</sup> It therefore appears that at a certain point, more specifically at the start of the 42-month period when

<sup>29</sup> For the full defence of this view, see J.-P. Ruiz, *Ezekiel in the Apocalypse: The Transformation of Prophetic Language in Revelation 16,17-19,10*, Frankfurt am Main: P. Lang, 1989; 281-89).

the holy city is 'trampled' and the sea-beast rules over the world, the title 'great city' is transferred from Babylon to the historical Jerusalem. As to the question why Babylon is called 'great city', it would be reasonable to attribute this to her close relationship with the sea-beast (17,3.7), since it is this 'favoured status' that makes her great. Using the same argument, it can be inferred that the transfer of the title 'great city' to historical Jerusalem signifies the transfer of the beast's favour and power-base to this city.

*4. The 'trampling' of the holy city and its consequences*

The transfer of the beast's power-base, or throne (16,10-11), to Jerusalem and the trampling (i.e. profanation) of the holy city during his 42-month reign is not without consequences. As seen above, Jerusalem is no longer called the holy city, but the great city. It is also "spiritually called Sodom and Egypt" (11,8). The former spiritual name of Jerusalem was Zion, after the name of the part of the city, Mount Zion, where the dwelling of God once stood. The change from Zion to 'Sodom and Egypt' is very significant: Sodom and Egypt not only represent immorality and oppression respectively, but they are also places from which the people of God departed in a hurry. In other words, the people of God, or Zion, have left Jerusalem completely by this stage, and are seen later, on a new Mount Zion, as a private army of 144,000 saintly males in the presence of Christ (14,1-5). Mount Zion has always been a movable mountain, relocated during the Crusader era from the south east corner of Jerusalem, to the south west corner. In this prophecy the move is clearly further afield and its possible future location will be discussed later. For now, though, it is important to note that this new Mount Zion is a real place, because its inhabitants, the 144,000 males, are described in physical terms as real, though exceptionally pure, people on this earth (cf. 14,1-5).<sup>30</sup> Identifying Zion with 'the beloved city' of biblical tradition (Ps 78,68; 87,2), and therefore with the 'camp of the saints' (Rev 20,9), confirms it has a physical location, since it is later surrounded by the armies of Gog

<sup>30</sup> They are real people because they are described in comparison to other people: unlike other people, they can learn the new song being sung by the heavenly choirs; unlike others, they have not fallen into temptation with women and remain virgins; unlike others, they have never resorted to lies. They are described in very human terms, in their avoidance of very human weaknesses. Disembodied souls would not be described in this way.

and Magog after traversing the land, and only a physical location can thus be described as surrounded by armies on earth.

*5. The identification of the two beasts and their cult*

In the context of end-time prophecy, it is clearly no longer possible to assert the identity of the sea-beast as an emperor from ancient Rome. There is nevertheless enough information to grasp that this is a man (13,18) who will wield more power than anyone the world has ever seen. His brief 42-month rule over all the earth, immediately prior to Christ's second coming (13,5-7, cf. 17,14) presumes the establishment of a one-world government.<sup>31</sup> During his reign, he acts decisively against Christ and his followers: he kills the two prophets (11,7), persecutes the saints (12,17;13,7; 15,2) and goes off to make war against the Lamb (17,14). However, many aspects of his rule emulate the redemptive actions of Christ, especially his passion, resurrection, ascension and worship in heaven: one of the heads of the beast is fatally wounded (13,3), but his recovery (13,12.14) leads to the ascension of the beast from the abyss (11,7; 13,1), the full manifestation of its power in the world (13,2-8) and the worship of his person (13,4.8.12.15). This combination of terminal hostility to Christ and his followers, together with imitation of the true Redeemer, leads to the conclusion that the beast is a false redeemer, a false messiah, the last and most powerful manifestation of the antichristian spirit, known in Christian tradition as the Antichrist.

The identification of the sea-beast as a false-messiah is clinched by the fact he is promoted by another beast, called a 'false-prophet' (cf. 13,11-17; 16,13; 19,20; 20,10), who deceives people with his 'signs', especially by bringing 'fire down from heaven to earth in the sight of men' (13,13). This sign is packed with significance for

<sup>31</sup> "The traditional doctrine of the Antichrist does not include any possibility of knowing the date of the end of time; nor does it state that there can be no world domination save that of the Antichrist! The establishment of a World State, which is today well within the bounds of historical possibility, may quite possibly be looked upon as a legitimate goal of political endeavor. What this doctrine does state is that once this step has been taken, mankind will find itself in a condition in which the Dominion of the Antichrist has become more acutely possible than ever before: a 'world organization might become the most deadly and impregnable of tyrannies, the final establishment of the reign of the anti-Christ'", Josef Pieper, *The End of Time: A Meditation on the Philosophy of History*, trans. Michael Bullcock, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1999; 129 (German original 1950).

identifying the nature of the cult promoted by the false-prophet. Firstly it suggests that he wishes to identify himself with the ancient Israelite prophet Elijah (cf. 2Kgs 1,9-14; 1Kgs 18,30-40), who is expected to return and prepare for the messianic age (Mal 3,1-24),<sup>32</sup> and secondly it recalls the divine consecration of a new altar (Lev 9,24; 1Chr 21,26; 2Chr 7,1; 2Macc 1,18-36). The imitation of this sign by the false prophet therefore implies his participation in the dedication of a new altar connected to the ancient Israelite cult. In view of the central importance of the temple in Jerusalem for the performance of this cult, the dedication of a new altar by the false prophet, in this impressive but inauthentic way, presumes the reconstruction of the temple in Jerusalem. Furthermore it is clear from the text that the renewed cult is not directed to the worship of God, but rather to the false messiah and his patron, the devil, even though it is based on the site of the ancient temple in Jerusalem (cf. 2Thess 2,4; Mt 24,15; Mk 13,14).

#### 6. *The identification of Babylon the great prostitute*

Similarly, it can no longer be maintained that Babylon is the ancient city of Rome. Indeed the difficulty in identifying Babylon constitutes an essential part of the mystery of her corruption (Rev 17,5) and of her close relationship with the beast (17,7)—an implied ‘mystery of iniquity’, since it forms an evil counterpart to the ‘mystery of God’ (10,7). There is, however, an abundance of detail about this female figure, in the text, that enables the reader to have an accurate impression (14,8; 16,19; 17,1–19,6).<sup>33</sup> Already mentioned are the two specific features that identify Babylon with Rome, but not necessarily ancient Rome, for right up until her eternal destruction she continues to have “a kingdom over the rulers of the earth” (17,18). This international authority is also described as a drunken prostitute that forms immoral alliances with the world’s rulers and spreads her corrupt practices among all the world’s inhabitants. The language and imagery of this

<sup>32</sup> For Christ and Christians (i.e. ‘those who are willing to accept it’ in Mt 11,14) the prophecy of Elijah’s return (Mal 3,1.22-24) has been fulfilled by John the Baptist (Mk 9,12; Mt 11,7-15; 17,11-13), even though Elijah did not return in the flesh, but in the spirit and power granted to John the Baptist (Lk 1, 13-17; cf. Mk 1,2-8; Mt 3,4). The Jews, however, never accepted the fulfilment of this prophecy of Elijah’s return by John the Baptist and still await his coming.

<sup>33</sup> 50 out of 405 verses, or an eighth (12%), of the whole text is dedicated to this theme.

portrait of Babylon (Rev 17) are very closely related to certain passages in the Hebrew prophets, especially Ezekiel 16 and 23, where the metaphor of prostitution refers to idolatry causing infidelity to the Covenant with God. Babylon must therefore be a religious community that knows God and his Laws.<sup>34</sup>

In the next chapter (Rev 18), in which the sudden destruction of Babylon and its economic fallout are described, there is no doubt that her idolatry is directed to Mammon, and is expressed as an inordinate attachment to wealth, riches and luxury (18,3.7.14; cf. Mt 6,24; Lk 16,13; 1Tim 6,10; Heb 13,5). It is with her love of wealth and luxury that she has corrupted the entire world and seduced its rulers.

The final clue to the identity of this city is in the author's conjunction of the metaphors of prostitution and drunkenness: Babylon's lust for luxury and wealth are somehow facilitated by her state of intoxication "with the blood of the saints and the martyrs of Jesus" (Rev 17,6).<sup>35</sup> It appears that Babylon's intoxication with the blood of the saints and martyrs of Jesus refers to her appropriation of their merit and glory to herself. This leads to a state of self-exaltation (spiritual pride), that causes her to act in an irresponsible and disordered way like someone who is drunk. This explanation of her 'drunkenness' then fits neatly with her prostitution: considering the merits of the saints and martyrs as her own (being drunk with their blood), Babylon succeeds in satisfying her lust for riches and luxury (her passion for fornication). In a few words, Babylon "glorifies herself and lives luxuriously" (18,7) by exploiting the merits of the saints and martyrs of Jesus. Allying herself in this way with the saints and martyrs of Jesus, the religious community that is called Babylon cannot be anything

<sup>34</sup> And certainly not a pagan power that is ignorant of the God of Israel and unbound by a Covenant.

<sup>35</sup> Most interpreters explain Babylon's drunkenness as related in some way to her killing of the saints and martyrs of Jesus. However, this is contradicted by the fact that, in contrast to the martyrs, saints are not killed, but die a natural death. Secondly, nowhere else in the text is Babylon described as a killer or persecutor of the followers of Jesus; this is a function of the beast and his false prophet (cf. Rev 13). Thirdly, even if it were true that Babylon "gets high" on killing the faithful followers of Jesus, there is no apparent connection between this and Babylon's lust for wealth and luxury. How can Babylon get rich by killing the poor of Christ? Furthermore, from a purely literary point of view, a murderer is unlikely to succeed as a prostitute. In brief, if the metaphor of drunkenness implies murder, it becomes totally incongruent with the metaphor of prostitution.

else but Christian.<sup>36</sup> Defined as a Christian community with international authority and based in the city of Rome, it is impossible to escape the identification of Babylon with the historical and administrative centre of the Catholic Church in Rome. This shocking interpretation of Babylon goes a long way to explain the words of the author when he first beheld the vision: "And seeing her I wondered with a great wonder" (Rev 17,6b). But after reflecting on the long and sometimes scandalous history of the Roman Church, perhaps we should not be so stunned.<sup>37</sup>

#### 7. Other place names

The geographical specificity of the holy city as Jerusalem and Babylon as Rome, or at least the Church of Rome, suggests that a closer look at the other place names in the text may, in the eschatological context, turn out to be real places on the map. This is certainly true of the seven churches in the first part of the Book of the Revelation. The twice-mentioned River Euphrates (9,14; 16,12), for example, is a specific geographical feature of the Middle East and, having no particular symbolical value different from any other river, is asking to be understood literally.

Although Armageddon (16,16), meaning Mount Megiddon (Har Megiddon), is a name coined by the author, it also has a specific geographical location in the Middle East. The only place where Megiddon, with final 'n', is mentioned in the Scriptures is in an eschatological prophecy of Zechariah, which compares the mourning of Jews and Jerusalem over 'the person they pierced' to "the mourning for Hadad-

<sup>36</sup> Needless to say, there is a close correspondence between 'exploiting the merits of the saints and martyrs of Jesus' and the 'cult of the saints and martyrs' around which, it must be admitted, many and various abuses, excesses and defects have occurred in the history of the Catholic Church, and have proved to be difficult to eradicate (cf. 'Lumen Gentium', 51, *Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, Vol. 1, ed. Austin Flannery, New York: Costello, 1987).

<sup>37</sup> Especially in view of the following statement by Pope John Paul II: "Whilst the second millennium of Christianity is coming to a close, it is right that the Church assumes responsibility for the sins of her children with greater awareness, remembering all those circumstances in which, during the course of history, they have distanced themselves from the Spirit of Christ and from his Gospel, offering to the world - instead of the testimony of a life inspired by the values of the Faith - the spectacle of ways of thinking and acting which were really forms of anti-testimony and of scandal" (1994 Apostolic Letter *'Tertio Millennio Adveniente'* 33).

rimmon (Baal) in the plain of Megiddon" (Zech 12,11). This plain is elsewhere called Jezreel, or Esdraelon, and is an appropriate place for the last battle, as it has been the scene of countless battles over the last 3,500 years, some of which are documented in the Hebrew Scriptures (Jdg 5,19; 2Kgs 9,27; 2Kgs 23,29-30; 2Chr 35,22). The Mount closest to and overlooking this plain is in fact Mount Carmel, which was also strongly linked to the Baal cult (cf. 1Kgs 18,20-48), and is therefore the best location for Armageddon (Har Megiddon).<sup>38</sup> The author's use of this name, rather than Mount Carmel, may be intended to evoke Zechariah's prophecy, here, to indicate the fulfilment of the universalized version quoted earlier, about the return of Jesus Christ: "Behold, he comes with the clouds and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all the peoples of the earth will mourn over him" (Rev 1,7). Mount Carmel then, represents the place where the false messiah (the beast) will seek to demonstrate his military strength as his reign is failing (16,10-16), but is opposed by Mount Zion (14,1) from which 'the Lord will send out the rod of his strength' (Ps 110,2; Ps 2,6-9).

#### *8. The problematic millennial reign of Christ with his saints*

The eschatological prophecy for the final seven years of history, as delineated above, also embraces an interval of 1,000 years between the second coming and the final judgment. The impossibility of resolving this temporal incongruity has led to the various forms of millennialism, or chiliasm, whose latest and most potent incarnation is an important aspect of Christian Zionism.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>38</sup> Others have proposed Tel Megiddo, on which the ancient city of Megiddo once stood until it was abandoned in 332 BCE. However, this 'tel' rises only 30 metres above the plain and cannot be called a mountain as in the 'Mount Megiddon' (Armageddon) mentioned here. For Mt. Carmel as the site of the Baal cult, see Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions*, Trans. John McHugh, London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1961; 280. In 'The Origin of Armageddon: Revelation 16:16 as an Interpretation of Zechariah 12:11', John Day carefully argues the case presented here, explaining the origin of the term but failing to make the final link between Mt. Megiddon and Mt. Carmel, or with any other place (*Crossing the Boundaries: Essays in Biblical Interpretation in Honour of Michael D. Goulder*, Eds Porter, Joyce and Orton, Leiden: E. Brill, 1994; 315-26).

<sup>39</sup> This aspect is called Dispensationalism, which is a 20<sup>th</sup> century Protestant interpretation that sees the millennium and indeed most of the Book of Revelation as a literal prophecy of future events. According to this view, Jesus Christ will return and rule for 1,000 years from the temple in Jerusalem, rebuilt by the Jews of



Nevertheless, there is a way of explaining and reframing the problem, by distinguishing between the narrative or mythological continuity of the text (level 1 above) and the full significance of the passage in its local and distant contexts (levels 2+3 above).<sup>40</sup> It is the difference between Myth and Fact,<sup>41</sup> or between Schema and Reality.<sup>42</sup> More precisely, it is the difference between an ideal kingdom 'of this world' to be won by force of arms (the myth or schema) and the heavenly kingdom of Christ won by service and self-sacrifice (the fact or reality). The author appears to be engaging in a subtle rewriting of

Israel who will then come to believe that Jesus is their Messiah. Dispensationalism forms an important element of Christian support for the State of Israel in 'modern Christian Zionism', although recently this element has been revised and even erased from the 'new Christian Zionism'; cf. *The New Christian Zionism: Fresh Perspectives on Israel and the Land*, ed. Gerald R. McDermott, Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2016; 13-15.

<sup>40</sup> Biblical scholar, J.W. Mealy, aptly explains the need for thorough contextual appraisal: "The exegetical method to be employed here has as its most salient characteristic the attempt to make fuller use of the highly self-referential and contextual character of Revelation than has been done in previous studies. In the past, commentators have most often tended to approach the idea of 'context' in a textually localized way, in spite of the fact that attention has been drawn to the extensive network of cross-references and allusions that affects the interpretation of virtually every passage in Revelation. That is, context in Revelation consists of a system of references that progressively build up hermeneutical precedents in the text, precedents that precondition the meaning of each new passage in highly significant ways. It is thus only by placing passages and their elements correctly in the network of such precedents that they can be effectively interpreted", from *After the Thousand Years: Resurrection and Judgment in Revelation 20*, J. Webb Mealy, Sheffield: JSOT, Sheffield Academic Press, 1992; 13.

<sup>41</sup> "It is not an accidental resemblance that what, from the point of view of being, is stated in the form "God became Man," should involve, from the point of view of human knowledge, the statement "Myth became Fact". The essential meaning of all things came down from the "heaven" of myth to the "earth" of history", C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory*, New York: Harper Collins, 2001; 129-30.

<sup>42</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, Trans. Michael Waldstein, revised by Aidan Nichols OP, Washington DC: Catholic University of America, 1988; 41-47. "The decisive point is surely that the New Testament writings leave open the nature of the difference between literary schema and reality in this connection. Even when seen from the side of the author, the literary expression is schematic. After all, it can hardly tell the story of the future as it might with something past. Schema and reality are differently related by different authors, but none of them makes the bald claim to an identity between the two" (op. cit. 41).

the ancient mythic pattern in the light of Christ's first Advent, Ascension and current spiritual rule on earth.<sup>43</sup>

Regarding the mythological continuity, then, the author's narrative follows the standard storyline of ancient myth, which expects the start of the new god's reign after the victory in battle and the celebratory feast (see above). A similar pattern of reign following victory is encountered in the biblical book of Daniel (Dan 7,23-27), which may have influenced the author's narrative and was itself influenced by ancient Canaanite myth.<sup>44</sup> The 'cosmic week' myth, which sees the creation of the world in seven days as the paradigm for world history, with each day lasting a thousand years (after Ps 90,4) and the final day representing the Sabbath rest under the rule of the Messiah, may also have influenced the author's narrative presentation. Finally, and perhaps most influential of all, however, was the contemporary late-second-temple expectation for a warrior messiah who fights God's battles, gains victory over his enemies, then reigns in an era of peace that ends in the resurrection, judgment and new creation.<sup>45</sup> It is in the Book of Revelation that "the fullest implementation of the traditional messianic prophecies is found",<sup>46</sup> even though the "traditional Davidic messianism is qualified here, as it is in the roughly contemporary 4 *Ezra* 13. The warrior messiah comes from heaven. But he is a warrior messiah".<sup>47</sup> Here, then, the narrative, as it stands, expresses the

<sup>43</sup> The ancient mythic pattern, which foresees the ideal kingdom of this world, is also the prevailing expectation of the non-Christian Jews. Its non-fulfilment by Jesus Christ at his first coming was the main reason they did not accept him as their messiah. By re-presenting the pattern here, the author is saying that the Jewish hope for this kingdom is going to be fulfilled by Christ's second coming at the end of history, but in reality, there is no need to wait until then for his kingdom, because he has already established his heavenly kingdom on earth and people from every tribe and nation and race and language are taking part (see below).

<sup>44</sup> Cf. John Day, *God's conflict with the dragon and the sea: Echoes of a Canaanite myth in the Old Testament*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1985; 158-78; John J. Collins, *The Scepter and the Star: Messianism in the Light of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, Grand Rapids, MI/Cambridge UK: Eerdmans, 2010; 44-46.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. Collins, *The Scepter and the Star*, 77-78.

<sup>46</sup> Collins, *The Scepter and the Star*, 234-5.

<sup>47</sup> Collins, *The Scepter and the Star*, 235. It may be objected that the warrior role is totally contradictory to the preaching of Christ in the Gospels. However, numerous passages of the Gospels, and of the other writings in the NT, have prepared the faithful for a sudden, divine, dramatic and even violent judgment at the end of

popular messianic paradigm that formed the common core of Jewish messianism in late second-temple times, showing above all that the second coming of Jesus Christ will fulfil the traditional Jewish messianic expectation in the correct order and in every detail. That is on the mythological level.

However, on the end-time prophetic level, with close attention to text and context, the reality is slightly different: while the Messiah's appearance and victory is vivid and complete (Rev 19,11-21), his reign is very tersely described as the 'first resurrection' and its main participants are called 'priests of God and Christ'; they sit on thrones, in the presence of the souls of Christ's martyrs (20,4-6). The identity of those who are seen sitting on the many thrones is left frustratingly vague and there is no mention of the throne of the Messiah in a restored Jerusalem as the popular version of the tradition expects. Earlier in the text it is affirmed that the priests of God are the people whom Christ has redeemed, with his blood, from 'every tribe and tongue and race and nation' and they will reign on earth (5,9-10). What is clear is that, ever since Christ's first coming, these 'priests' have been present in increasing numbers on earth in the community that is called the 'Church'. It is the first indication among many that the millennial kingdom of Christ is actually a current and historical reality. At the time of writing, the author refers to these priests as a 'kingdom, priests to Christ's God and Father' (1,6) and then presents himself to his hearers as "a companion in the hardship and kingdom and endurance in Jesus (1,9). Described as "the highest of the kings of the earth" (1,5), Christ is clearly the ruler of a kingdom that has already begun.

Another important indication that the kingdom has already begun is the list of events that will occur together at the end-time, after the sounding of the seventh trumpet (11,15-19; cf. 10,7), in which there is no suggestion of a thousand-year interval between the arrival of God's anger (11,18a; ch.16) and the judgment of the dead (11,18a; 20,11-15). Another is the declaration that the bowl plagues bring God's anger to an end (15,1). Another is the thematic continuity between the wedding announcement, saying the time has come and the

history (E.g., Mt 21,33-46; 22,1-14; 24,45-51; 25,14-46; Lk 19,11-27, Rom 12,19; 2Thess 1,5-10; 2,8; Jude 1,5-16) and the return of Christ as warrior-king in this passage is one aspect of that same final judgment.

bride is ready (19,7-9), the entry of the bridegroom and warrior king (19,11-21) and the entry of the bride after the battles have been won (21,22), without any indication of a delay of a thousand years in between (20,1-15). In addition, many features of the 'first resurrection', especially the presence of the souls of saints and martyrs in heaven after their death, are already evident in the liturgical background to the end-time prophecy (Rev 4-5; 7,9-17).<sup>48</sup> Finally, the identification of the liturgical activities in heaven as a representation of a Day of Atonement confirm, on the grounds that a thousand years on earth are like a day in heaven (Ps 90,4; 2Pet 3,8), that the thousand-year reign of Christ on earth runs concurrently with the liturgy for atonement in heaven and both are in progress now.<sup>49</sup>

Taking all this into consideration, there can be little doubt that the millennial rule of Christ refers to the current, historical condition of the Church, in this 'era of salvation'.<sup>50</sup> This chimes with the true character of Christ's reign, which is a product of faith in Christ and is remarkable, not for its ostentation or worldly splendour, but for its humility, service and self-sacrifice (Mk 10,42-45; Lk 22-25-30; cf. also Mk 10,14-15; Mt 18,3-5). Its historical presence in this age is easily obscured by the persistence of evil in the world (Jn 18,36). For those who do not believe that Christ is already reigning through the obedience and service of his people in the Church, the thousand-year reign will indeed be projected into the future, as it is narrated in the Book of Revelation. But with the destruction of evil at 'the war of the great day of God the Almighty' (Rev 16,14), this reign will become apparent

<sup>48</sup> The heavenly post-mortem state ('afterlife') is the main feature of the 'first resurrection', which is the term that characterizes Christ's millennial reign (20,5-6). In the eschatology of the early Church, the converse has also been shown to hold, that when the heavenly post-mortem state was denied, in favour of a post-mortem abode for all in the underworld (Sheol/Hades), Christ's millennial reign was said to be delayed until after his second coming. As this was the consistent view of the millennialists, or chiliasts, in the early Church, the emphasis on the heavenly afterlife in the Book of Revelation shows it does not therefore represent the millennialist worldview; cf. *Regnum Caelorum: Patterns of Millennial Thought in Early Christianity*, by Charles Hill, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, Grand Rapids MI/ Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 2001.

<sup>49</sup> See Introduction above, and footnote 3.

<sup>50</sup> The thrones are the 'cathedrae' of bishops, the presence of the martyrs refers to the 'communion of saints' and the authority to rule and judge, given to the bishops, is explained in previous passages (e.g., Rev 2,17; 2,26-29; 3,21).

to those who were unable to see it before, as a 'day' that is already over, "For a thousand years in your sight (Lord) are as a day, a yesterday that is past..." (Ps 90,4).<sup>51</sup>

9. *The dragon, devil, or ancient serpent: in heaven and in the abyss?*

The final issue that seems to militate against the interpretation of Rev 12–22 as an end-time prophecy concerns the dragon, devil, or ancient serpent. According to the interpretation presented above, the millennial reign of Christ is an established historical reality, so the dragon has been imprisoned in the abyss for a long time already, and remains there (Rev 9,11; 20,1-3). But if the dragon is indeed, even now, imprisoned in the underworld of the abyss, it is incongruous for the dragon to appear in heaven, at the very start of the same prophecy (12,1-5). The dragon cannot be present in both these places at the same time.<sup>52</sup> This is an objection that goes to the heart of the 'mystery of iniquity' and of Christian demonology. The short answer is that it is not the dragon itself that appears in heaven, but a 'sign' of the dragon that is seen by certain people (12,3). The most familiar 'sign' of the evil dragon is 'Sin' and the presence of this sign in heaven, in this opening vision, is explained by a passage reporting that Babylon's sins "have piled up to heaven" (18,5) and then calling for Babylon's immediate and eternal destruction (18,6-7).<sup>53</sup> Through her piles of sin, Babylon

<sup>51</sup> Interpreted through the hermeneutic lens of Ps 90,4, the vision of the millennial reign of Christ with his saints is a retrospective vision, the vision of an era that is already ending, and consequently the battles before (Rev 19,11-21) and after (20,7-10) are two successive stages of the same war. The text concurs by alluding, in both stages of this final combat, to the same prophecy of war in Ezekiel 38–39. The entire passage (Rev 20,1-10) could be described as an expansion on 'the great day of God the Almighty'.

<sup>52</sup> This point is indeed raised by Dave Matthewson in 'A Re-examination of the Millennium in Rev 20:1-6: Consummation and Recapitulation': "In my mind, it is still difficult to reconcile the binding of Satan in 20:1-3 so that he is no longer able to deceive (...) the nations with his activity in 12:9 as the one who deceives (...) the entire inhabited world" *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 44/2 [June 2001], 244.

<sup>53</sup> It may seem perverse to ask if there is any indication in the text about the nature of the sin that completes the huge pile, filling up the measure that calls out for Babylon's destruction, but there is a clue: "And one strong angel picked up a stone like a great millstone and threw it into the sea saying: Like this, with fury, Babylon the great city shall be thrown, and never again be found" (Rev 18,21). If it is no coincidence that this verse strongly evokes Christ's warning for those who cause offense to little children (Mk 9,42 et par.), then the sin that calls for destruction is

is able to raise the sign of the devil to heaven, despite the devil's imprisonment in the abyss.

This iniquitous achievement is facilitated by two important associations. The first is the clandestine liaison between Babylon and the sea-beast immersed in the waters of the abyss, submerged under the surface of the sea, before he reveals himself fully (11,7; 13,1; 17,8). Decoding this image further, the interpreting angel tells us that the waters upon which Babylon sits (17,1), and in which the sea-beast is immersed (17,3), "are races and crowds and nations and tongues" (17,15), an expression which the author uses, in parallel with the 'inhabitants of the earth', to refer to the unredeemed people of the world (5,9; 7,9; 13,7.8.12.14; 17,2.8). The waters, which are synonymous with the sea and abyss, therefore represent unredeemed humanity living on earth—people who have not, for one reason or another, opened themselves to God's offer of redemption in Christ.<sup>54</sup>

The second important association links the sea-beast, which is the leader of this unredeemed mass of people, and the dragon. Not only does the sea-beast inherit the dragon's power, kingdom and great authority (13,2), as well as a similar form and colour (12,3; 13,1), but it is submerged in the abyss, where the dragon is said to be imprisoned (20,1-3). From these observations, and from the beast's diabolical attempt to take the place of God in the lives of his subjects (Rev 13), it can be inferred that the sea-beast is nothing less than the historical embodiment of the dragon. In other words, the beast is that unit of the abyss, or unredeemed multitude of people, in which the dragon is presently confined.<sup>55</sup> The dragon is locked up and chained

indeed the child sex abuse scandal that has rocked the Roman Catholic Church during the last 20-30 years.

<sup>54</sup> That the abyss, sea, or waters, refer to the multitude of unredeemed people on earth is strongly reminiscent of St. Augustine, for whom the abyss symbolizes "the innumerable multitude of the impious, in whose hearts there is a great depth of malignity against the Church of God" *City of God*, London: Penguin Classics, 2003; 20:7; "These are men who hate the Christians, and in the darks depths of their hearts the Devil is shut up every day, as in an abyss" (op. cit. 20:8).

<sup>55</sup> The incarceration of the devil in the abyss therefore refers to the removal of his purely spiritual status and his physical confinement within the unredeemed human population metaphorically called the 'abyss' or 'sea'. This severely restricts his level of operation to activities dependent on human agency—an interpretation that is entirely consistent with the fact that, in this state, he cannot "deceive the nations any more until the thousand years are finished" (Rev 20,3). This

within the sea-beast, and through the beast, Babylon is corrupted until her sins reach to heaven. In this way, through the sin of Babylon, the dragon continues to have an influence in heaven, in spite of his imprisonment in the abyss.<sup>56</sup>

There are two important corollaries to this clarification of the network of evil associations. The first concerns the dependence of the dragon's imprisonment on the existence of the beast, and suggests that the condemnation of the beast (19,20) is the point at which the dragon is released from his imprisonment after the thousand years are finished (20,7).<sup>57</sup> After a short final outburst, the dragon is also condemned and the final judgment follows (20,7-10).

The second important corollary concerns the event with which the end-time prophecy opens (12,1-5)—the crucial event that sets in motion the series of actions prophesied for final period of seven years

restriction evidently does not imply that evil ceases to exist in the millennial age, but indicates, rather, that evil is restrained from perverting the truth of God embodied by Christ and his Gospel. This facilitates the propagation of the Gospel and creates the necessary conditions for every living soul to choose freely whether to accept or reject it.

<sup>56</sup> Pre-Christian reflection on the origin of evil led to two rival 'theories': an external, supernatural origin brought about by a rebellion in heaven and the downfall of the rebel angels, and the internal, natural origin of evil traceable to an innate human inclination to sin. The first was fundamental for Enochic Judaism, while the second was the view adopted by the scribes, Pharisees and Rabbis of normative Judaism. In these visions in Revelation, the two views are brought together and shown to be two aspects of the same reality: the external evil that has been thrown out of heaven and is now chained in the abyss, and the internal evil that is due to human sin and corruption.

<sup>57</sup> This solves the problem encountered by St. Augustine about the precise ending of the 1,000 years: "On the other hand, it is a matter of some question whether during those last three years and six months, when the Devil is unloosed and will be raging with all his strength, anyone will join the faith who has not previously been of the faith" (*City of God*, 20:8). The interpretation presented here, that the devil is not released until the beast and false prophet are captured and sent to their eternal death (19,20), shows that St. Augustine's premise about the timing of the devil's unloosening is inaccurate, and that there is therefore no reason to worry about its consequences during the final 42-month period. The devil is not, in fact, liberated until after the second coming, when "The kingdom of the world has become our Lord's and his Christ's and he shall reign for ever and ever" (Rev 11,15). This means that precisely when the 1,000 year reign ends, with the unloosening of the devil (20,7), the eternal reign of God and his Christ has already begun, confirming the article of Christian faith that declares that the present reign of Christ will never end (Nicene Creed).

(Rev 12–22). This event is the vision of two opposing signs in heaven: one of a heavenly woman about to give birth and the other of the dragon, waiting to devour the baby as soon as it is born.<sup>58</sup> The baby is the Messiah (12,5; cf. Ps 2,9) which identifies his mother as the community called Zion by the Hebrew prophets.<sup>59</sup> Although there are many parallels with the birth narrative of Jesus in the Gospels, this birth report is certainly in a class of its own: firstly it starts with “a great sign was seen in heaven” (Rev 12,1), then there is the ‘heavenly birth’, and finally the male child is taken immediately up to the highest heaven, without setting foot on earth.<sup>60</sup>

Although this sequence strongly evokes the historical birth and earthly mission of Jesus Christ, it actually describes a spiritual, or mystical, experience (ecstasy/rapture) in those who see the signs: the heavenly birth of Christ takes place from within their own soul, causing a spiritual identification with Zion, the woman giving birth.<sup>61</sup> Like the woman in the vision, the souls transformed by this experience then make an ‘exodus’ to the desert refuge shown to them and stay there for 1,260 days (9,4; 12,6; 11,3), followed by a ‘time, two times and half a time’ (12,14; 11,2; 13,5-7; cf. Dan 7,23-25; 12,7).

Through their complete identification with Zion, the community formed by these people can also be called Zion. In fact, it is the name of Zion that links this community to the assembly of 144,000 virginal

<sup>58</sup> Only here (Rev 11,19; 12,1,3), when speaking about the signs in heaven, is the impersonal past passive (‘was seen’) of the verb ‘to see’ employed, contrasting with the use of the first person past indicative tense (‘I saw’) for the visions elsewhere described in the text. This raises questions not only about the meaning of the signs, but also about the meaning of the seeing of the signs: questions like “who else saw these signs?”, “when did they see them”, “what impact did this have on them?”, and “what happened after they saw them?”.

<sup>59</sup> A sign always represents something other than what it appears to be. As a sign, therefore, this woman does not represent a particular woman. Furthermore, she must be a community, and not an individual, because “the rest of her seed (are) those who keep the Commandments of God and have the Witness of Jesus” (Rev 12,17). She is Jesus’ mother Mary only in so far as Mary is emblematic of that community.

<sup>60</sup> For a thorough and original treatment of the uniquely unhistorical aspects of this ‘heavenly birth’, see Hermann Gunkel, *Creation and Chaos*, 115-127; summarized in ‘Towards the mystical interpretation of Revelation 12’, J. Ben-Daniel, *Revue Biblique*, Vol. 114-4 (2007), 597-599.

<sup>61</sup> For a fuller treatment, see ‘Towards the mystical interpretation of Revelation 12’, J. Ben-Daniel, *Revue Biblique*, Vol. 114-4 (2007), 594-614.



males, seen later on Mount Zion (14,1-5), and reveals, through numerous other allusions in the text, that their vocation is followed attentively:<sup>62</sup> after appearing on Mount Zion (14,1-5), they can be identified with 'the camp of the saints and the beloved city'(20,9), since Zion is also God's 'beloved city' (cf. Ps 78,68; 87,2); then, since Mount Zion is the 'great and high mountain'(cf. Ezek 40,2; Is 2,2-3; Mic 4,1-2), it is from this Mount that the author sees the New Jerusalem descending from heaven on to the earth, now transformed and renewed (Rev 21,10). Finally, since the 144,000 are those with the name of the Lamb and his Father written on their foreheads (14,1), this community are seen in the New Jerusalem itself, serving God and the Lamb, since "his name will be on their foreheads" (22,3-4). The desert refuge to which the woman made her 'exodus' in the opening vision (12,6.14), in terms that recall the exodus of the Israelites to Mount Sinai in the desert, turns out to be the great and high mountain from which the New Jerusalem can be seen as she materializes in the new creation, administered by the 144,000 servants of God and the Lamb.

Running throughout Rev 12–22, the golden connecting thread is the army of 144,000 celibate males who spiritually identify with Zion and whose divine vocation is the most exalted aspect of this end-time prophecy: they are the pivotal human agents, on earth, securing the fulfilment of the Church's mission at the end of days and their task is the physical establishment and maintenance of the New Jerusalem in the new, post-judgment, creation.<sup>63</sup> The text presents this community as a unique element of continuity between the dissolution of the first heaven and earth (20,11; 21,1) and the materialization of the new heaven and earth (21,2.10), confirming other hints (21,24.26; 22,2)

<sup>62</sup> It should also be noted that the vision of the sealing of the 144,000 with the seal of the living God (7,1-8) shows how this group of Christ's followers had previously been chosen and prepared through another formative mystical experience.

<sup>63</sup> Since the 'exodus' of the 144,000 to a mountain in the desert represented the departure of Zion from historical Jerusalem, just before it was 'profaned' by the nations (11,2; see point 4 above), then the place where the New Jerusalem descends and takes shape is elsewhere. Also, the New Jerusalem is not to be confused geographically with historical Jerusalem, because "nothing profane will enter into her" (21,27).

that the new creation is not *ex nihilo*, but is renewed by the elimination of evil and the transforming presence of the Creator and Redeemer.<sup>64</sup>

### Summary

After clearing the way for an eschatological reading of the prophecy in Rev 12–22, it is fitting to summarize the findings so far with an outline of the narrative of this part of the text in everyday discursive language:

Beginning at chapter 12, this prophecy in the Book of Revelation can be summarized as follows: the final seven years of history begins when a preselected group of Christ's closest and most saintly male followers (7,1-8) mystically experience his spiritual birth from within their own souls and, as a result, identify themselves with Zion, the mother community of all the Christian faithful (12,1-5.17). They are taken out of their monasteries and occupations in the world and sheltered in a ready-prepared refuge on a mountain in the desert. The 'exodus' of this selected group continues for 1,260 days until the entire community have been assembled at this place (12,6), which is the new Mount Zion (14,1-5).<sup>65</sup> Meantime the two prophets, as witnesses of Christ, carry out their 1,260-day prophetic mission in Jerusalem (11,3-13) by announcing the prophecy contained in these chapters (Rev 12–22). This widely-publicized mission edifies the Christian faithful and prepares them for martyrdom, while also bringing about the apostasy and rejection of the uncommitted (11,1-2). The exodus of the chosen group of 144,000 males is accompanied by a judgment

<sup>64</sup> Cf. Gale Z. Heide, 'What is New About the New Heaven and the New Earth? A Theology of Creation from Revelation 21 and 2 Peter 3', *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 40/1 (March 1997) 37-56.

<sup>65</sup> Although the location of this mountain is not openly stated in the text, two points are clear: (a) it is not in the historical city of Jerusalem (see point 3 above); (b) it is a mountain in a desert that corresponds to the one through which God led the Israelites after their exodus from Egypt (Rev 12,6.14). Only two mountains are held to be 'holy' according to the Hebrew Scriptures: Mt. Zion, which is the place of the Sanctuary of God, and Mt. Sinai (Horeb), which is the place of the Revelation of God (de Vaux, *Ancient Israel*, 281). In the Book of Revelation, Mt. Zion is the mountain which integrates both these locations, since it is the site of the Revelation of the Sanctuary of God (11,19; 14,1-5; 15,1-8). The return of Mt. Zion to Mt Sinai would explain how, in days to come, Mt. Zion would be raised still higher (Is 2,2-3; Mic 4,1-2), and how both Ezekiel and John were taken to a very high mountain (Ezek 40,2; Rev 21,10) to see the Holy City being realized.

within the Church, represented by the expulsion of the forces of evil from the highest places (12,7-12). This rouses multitudes of unworthy people to follow the chosen army of 144,000 to its desert refuge, but they fail to dislodge it and meet their death in the desert (12,13-16). The evil spirit then turns against all the other faithful followers of Christ (12,17-18), by means of a one-world government headed by an authoritarian ruler. This ruler starts his brief but global reign by killing the two prophets and establishing his throne in Jerusalem, which is then defiled by the ungodly, so that it is no longer called the 'holy city' ('*Al Quds*'), but the 'great city'; no longer 'Zion', but 'Sodom and Egypt' (11,2.7-8). He rules over the entire world for 42 months, during which time his military and security forces are invincible (13,1-10). Promoted by a false prophet, the powerful ruler claims the messianic office and becomes the focus of an idolatrous personality cult at the rebuilt temple in Jerusalem. Only those people who show their loyalty to him by worshipping him and by receiving his mark on their bodies are allowed to participate in the economic life of the society. The rest are excluded or killed, causing a great tribulation in which countless Christian faithful are martyred (13,11-17; 7,9-17). While all this is going on in the centres of population, Christ's chosen army of 144,000 are being protected in their desert refuge for the entire duration (12,14;14,1-5). At the height of his power, the false-messianic ruler allies himself with several nations and performs God's will by totally and permanently destroying the historical centre of the Catholic Church in Rome (17,1-18), causing shock at the loss of treasures (18,9-24), but not for the loss of human life (18,4).<sup>66</sup> Towards the end of this tyrannical reign, the earth is struck by a series of severe environmental disasters, representing the righteous anger and wrathful judgments of God (15,5-16,21) and causing terrible suffering to those who are alive at this time. At the same time, preparations are set in motion for the gathering of armies from the East for the final battle against the alliance of ruling powers at Mount Carmel (Armageddon) in northern Israel (16,10-16; 17,14), and when Christ returns, the

<sup>66</sup> The lamentations for the fall of Babylon in Rev 18 are conspicuous for the lack of any mourning for loss of human life. It is implied, therefore, that just before her sudden destruction, all those inside Babylon obeyed the divine command to leave: "Come out of her my people..." (18,4). This confirms that those inside Babylon are all God's people.

armies destroy each other (19,11-21). Those who survive are inspired by the devil, now released from his millennial imprisonment, to regroup and cross the land of Israel in order to surround the camp of the 144,000 saints, and are destroyed there by divine fire (20,7-10). The general resurrection for the last judgment takes place and every evil and negative aspect of life is eradicated. All unrepentant sinners (21,8) and all whose names have been removed by Christ from his Scroll of Life<sup>67</sup> (3,5; 5,7; 13,8; 14,9-11; 17,8) will be eternally condemned (20,11-15). The rest are judged by their deeds and will receive their reward in the soon to be renewed and transformed creation. At a place within sight of the desert mountain camp of the 144,000 males, the New Jerusalem is established as a huge walled park (20,10-22,5); at its centre 'God will dwell with mankind' and there "will be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, nor pain will there be anymore, because the former things have passed away" (Rev 21,3-5).

### Conclusions

What emerges from this examination of Rev 12-22 is the outline of a consistent and coherent description of the world and its terminal convulsions in the final seven year period of her history—the period leading up to the second coming, final judgment and renewal of creation. On a superficial level, this eschatological prophecy looks like a myth, creating an entire symbolical universe and employing profoundly mythological language, but on a deeper level it is packed with information relating to the final period of history, using terms and images that recall some very negative aspects of the ancient Roman Empire.

It is well known that the apocalypses employed mythological language and motifs, but this author can think of nothing before or after has prepared us for a work of such sustained 'mythologization'. At first this mythical world seems impenetrable, but elucidation of the

<sup>67</sup> The Scroll of Life has a vital role at the final judgment: those whose names are inscribed in it will live eternally and the rest will be condemned to eternal perdition (Rev 20,12.15; 21,27). The act of final judgment therefore entails erasing names from this scroll, which the Lamb has authority to do (3,5). He can begin this process after he has received the scroll from God (5,7), broken all its seals and opened it (8,1).

narrative shows similarities with many other foundational myths in the ancient Middle-East. However, the mythological reading of this part of Revelation is only a partial and superficial reading, as it is based on the storyline alone and ignores important information given in the text itself.<sup>68</sup> Its specific purpose may be to respond, at a time of rising Jewish nationalism, to the expectation for an ideal messianic kingdom 'of this world', by indicating that this is fulfilled by the first and second comings of Christ.<sup>69</sup> More generally, it gives the narrative a timeless appeal and a pan-historical relevance. It has and does inspire the faithful of every century facing persecution and oppression. It gives the grand plan of Christian mission in its fullness, tracing its progress from the small beginnings (the birth of an infant), through victories and defeats, joys and sufferings, right up until 'mission accomplished' on a universal scale, in the new creation. That the new creation is the end and purpose of the mission of Christ and his followers is often lost from sight in the everyday of Christian life. The prophecy in this part of the Book of Revelation ensures the faithful are always reminded of the ultimate and universal purpose of the Christian mission and witness.

However, since the mythological reading of these chapters is not the whole story, but only a partial view, it would be mistaken to leave

<sup>68</sup> It ignores, in particular, the information provided at many points in the text by the interpreting angel, as this often gives the primary temporal or geographical meaning of the symbols in the narrative. In the same way, some interpreters evidently prefer to remain on the mythological level: Hans Urs von Balthazar, for example, rejects an important section of angelic interpretation (17,9-17) precisely because it gives a geographical interpretation of Babylon: "I versetti 17,9-17 non fanno parte del testo. Chi ha compilato questi versetti ha identificato la Babilonia con la città di Roma come potere mondano... Tutta l'interpretazione contingente di questa parte dell'Apocalisse contraddice la struttura portante del libro, che è atemporale e attiene alla storia universale, e questo viene ignorato, a grande danno della costante attualità del libro, da tutti coloro che, partendo da questi oscuri versetti, considerano tutta l'opera come un «libro di consolazione» scritto per i cristiani di allora nella persecuzione politica", *Il libro dell'Agnello: Sulla rivelazione di Giovanni*, a cura di Elio Guerriero, Milano: Jaca Book, 2016; 100-101.

<sup>69</sup> This not only suggests that the primary background of the Book of Revelation was the resurgence of Jewish messianic nationalism from 70-132 CE, which was drawing Christian Jews away from the Church and back to the Synagogue, but also indicates the Book's relevance for these days, with the revival of Jewish religious and national aspirations in the State of Israel; cf. chapter 4: 'The Historical Background to the Book of Revelation'.

it at that level. This Scripture is neither timeless myth, nor religious poetry,<sup>70</sup> as it is packed with temporal and geographical detail relating especially to the Middle East and to the final seven years of history. Despite the veneer of timelessness, chapters 12–22 are, in reality, anchored in an end-historical future, as yet unrealized, and are best described as an eschatological prophecy. At first this is not evident, and is somewhat hidden. Further readings are required to see the connections and identify the details. As a result, the process of understanding proceeds through familiarity and contemplation, rather than by textual exegesis and verbal analysis. To the trusting and patient reader, the significance of the text reveals itself little by little, as by a gradual ‘revelation’.<sup>71</sup> The aim of the foregoing presentation is to clear away some of the main obstacles to a synchronic approach of this kind, by tackling some of the more important impediments.

It must be admitted that there are significant differences between the mythological and the prophetic levels of understanding, creating a space in which a variety of interpretations can flourish. Perhaps the most significant of these differences concerns the nature of Christ’s reign or kingdom.<sup>72</sup> Precisely because it was established by his service and suffering, Christ’s reign has the same humble character as its founder, with the result that it is unobtrusive and unimpressive by worldly standards. It is therefore recognized principally by faith and, even though it grows continually throughout history, it is often

<sup>70</sup> E.g., Adela Yarbro Collins speaks for many scholars when she writes: “For the historically minded critical reader, the book of Revelation is not a cryptic summary of the history of the church or the world. It is not primarily a prediction of the timing of the end of the world. Rather it is a work of religious poetry, inspired by the prophets of Israel and by the cosmic and political myths of the author’s time”, from ‘The Book of Revelation’, ch. 11 in *Encyclopedia of Apocalypticism*, 412.

<sup>71</sup> Interesting in this respect: “the peculiar idiom of apocalypses... is to thinly conceal what it purports to reveal so that the audience may themselves have the experience of decoding or deciphering the message” David E. Aune “The Apocalypse of John and the Problem of Genre”, *Semeia* 36 (1986) 89, quoted by Christopher R. Smith in his “The Structure of the Book of Revelation in Light of Apocalyptic Literary Conventions”, *Novum Testamentum*, XXXVI, 4(1994), 382.

<sup>72</sup> Needless to say, this bears upon the character of his Messianic sovereignty and also the nature of the Redemption he brings; these three related aspects of Christ’s reign define the most fundamental difference between Christianity and Judaism, “the ‘quantum leap’ apparent in the Christian claim of a new Israel and, ultimately, a New Testament”, Jon D. Levenson, *Sinai and Zion: An Entry into the Jewish Bible*, New York: Harper Collins, 1985; 4.

obscured by evil and corruption. Its reality cannot therefore be confidently asserted until its future consummation, after the second coming of Christ and the defeat of evil. By alluding to Psalm 90, the text indicates that Christ's thousand-year reign will then be revealed as "a day, a yesterday that is past, a watch in the night" (Ps 90,4).

In conclusion, the mythological language of this part of the Book of Revelation (Rev 12–22) represents a complete 'mythologization' of the Christian history of Salvation, from the birth of the Redeemer to the fulfilment of the plan of God in the new creation. Such is the outward form. On a closer look, however, this text reveals an eschatological prophecy for the final seven years of history and beyond, which is replete with temporal and geographical detail that has not yet been fulfilled. The events of this final period of history 'recapitulate', and bring to a conclusion, the entire history of Salvation expressed in these chapters as a mythologized prophecy, or rather, in its own words, as a divine mystery—"the mystery of God as he announced to his servants the prophets" (Rev 10.7).

## APPENDIX

### Summary of the Life of the John the Apostle

#### Galilean Period (12-33 CE, age 0-21):

12 CE: John was born in Bethsaida, youngest son of Salome and Zebedee, younger brother of James. Zebedee was a successful fisherman, who owned boats and had a fishing license from the government of Herod Philip. His partners were Simon Peter and Andrew from Bethsaida and he also had employees. Philip was a Greek-speaking friend and neighbour. As an employer and boat-owner, Zebedee probably had a significant role in the community: he could have been an elder on the local synagogue council. The task of marketing the fish from his boats would have brought him, and his sons, into frequent contact with people at the regional fish-processing centre at Magdala (Tarichaea in Greek) and with the wider world of Jerusalem and even Damascus.

29 CE: John, Philip, Simon Peter and Andrew became followers of John the Baptist.

30 CE: Jesus of Nazareth called John to be one of his twelve apostles, and included him in an inner circle of three intimate companions, along with Simon Peter and James, John's elder brother. They accompanied Jesus in his ministry from beginning to end (around 3 years).

33 CE: Passion, death and Resurrection of Jesus.

#### Jerusalem Period (33-63 CE, age 21-51):

33 CE: John moved to Jerusalem, where he established a home for his mother and brother James, and also for the mother of Jesus, and probably for Jesus' brothers too. This would have become the first house-church in Jerusalem, where some of the post-Resurrection



appearances of Jesus took place and also the first Pentecost. It is thought to have been located adjacent to the Essene Quarter on what is today called Mt Zion.

33-42 CE: Following Pentecost, John accompanied Simon Peter on evangelizing missions in Jerusalem, Samaria, and in the coastal cities. He was one of the ruling council of 'apostles and elders' in the Jerusalem church, mentioned in Acts. It was during this time that he may have received a comprehensive scribal education from an Essene scribe who had joined the Christian community.

42 CE: John's brother James was martyred by King Herod Agrippa "to please the Jews" and a new persecution broke out against the believers, including Simon Peter. James, the brother of the Lord, became the official leader of the Mother Church in Jerusalem.

47 CE: Bringing famine relief from the diaspora, Paul visits Jerusalem, where he finds Peter, James and John and refers to them as 'the pillars'. The famine relief was handed over to the 'elders'.

49 CE: John was surely present among the 'elders and apostles' when Paul and Barnabas came to seek a decision about the Gentile converts at the Jerusalem Council. Later, John implicitly relies on the recommendations of this Council in his letters to the seven churches in Asia.

57 CE: John was probably present with 'James and all the elders' when Paul and Luke visited Jerusalem with more gifts from the churches in the diaspora.

62 CE: James, the official head of the Church, was martyred on the orders of the high priest, Annas II. Josephus also reports the start of the extraordinary mission a simple prophet called Jeshua son of Ananias, who, over a seven-year period until his death, unrelentingly prophesied the destruction of Jerusalem and her temple.

Ephesus Period (63-98 CE, age 51-86):

63 CE: John migrated to Asia Minor, via Caesarea Maritima, perhaps at the same time as Justus Barsabbas, Aristion, Philip and his daughters. He settled in Ephesus, where he became the leader of the church established there by Paul about 12 years before. He regularly visited the many other churches in Asia Minor, exhorting and correcting the

communities, instructing and appointing leaders. Due to his age and dignity, his previous role in the ruling council of elders, and due to Paul's identification as "the Apostle", John was known as "the Elder".

70 CE: Following the destruction of Jerusalem and her temple, many Jewish refugees from Judaea settled in Asia Minor, some of whom would have become Jewish Christians owing to John's preaching.

81 CE: Emperor Domitian came to power and acted to strengthen the pagan character of his reign by asserting his own divinity, reviving attendance at pagan rituals and building new temples. He financed this by applying Vespasian's temple tax on the Jews 'with utmost rigour', including children, women and old men, even hunting down those who had not paid before, such as non-observant Jews and gentile proselytes who lived secretly as Jews. These measures would include Christians of Jewish and gentile origin, whom the Romans did not yet distinguish from Jews. Payment of this tax allowed Christians to practice their religion legally as a branch of Judaism, exempt from any obligation to participate in pagan rituals. Towards the end of the decade, John established a scribal centre in Ephesus for copying manuscripts, in order to provide Gospel and Pauline texts for the rapid expansion of the Christian churches in Asia Minor at this time. This is the renowned "Johannine school".

90-95 CE: (1) Jews started to strengthen their identity under Rabbi Gamaliel II, head of the ruling council in Jamnia, denying that Jesus is their messiah. The Jewish Scriptures were defined, sectarian books were prohibited, new Greek and Aramaic translations were commissioned, and the *Birkat haMinim* petition of the thrice daily prayer (the *Amidah*) was pronounced in the synagogues. This initiated a crisis of loyalty among Jewish Christians: they now had to choose between the Synagogue and the Church. Many abandoned the Church and returned to the Synagogue (Pliny the Younger later refers to an exodus of Christians 20 years before the year 110). They were also drawn back by a revival of hope in national restoration, including the rebuilding of Jerusalem and her temple. It marked the beginning of the 'parting of the ways'.

90-95 CE: (2) The clarification of the boundaries of the Jewish community (probably involving registration of members) also caused trouble for Christians of Gentile origin, who could not now claim to be

a branch of Judaism and therefore lost their protection as a 'legal religion' under Roman Law. This gave the Jews a new power over the Christians: they could report them to the Roman administration for 'claiming to be Jews but they are not'. The Christians would then be charged as members of an 'illegal association' and be compelled either to participate in pagan rituals (especially the so-called 'imperial cult') or face the death penalty. As a result, various kinds of accommodation between Christians and pagans arose, claiming to be 'apostolic' teachings, that allowed participation in pagan rituals, no doubt based on a development of Paul's teaching of 'freedom from the law' (e.g. the 'false-apostles of the Nicolaitan sect). In this period, John wrote his second and third Letters (2John and 3John), showing his concern for right doctrine and for missionary activity in the face of strong challenges. Judging from the size and format of these two letters, it is highly likely they were written in ink on small sheets of papyrus, paving the way for the development of the papyrus codex, by the "Johannine school", around the years 95-96 CE.

95 CE: Outbreak of severe local persecution against those who were not observing pagan customs and rituals (unless they were registered as Jews and paying the temple tax) by an increasingly tyrannical Emperor Domitian, who even banished his niece Domitilla and killed her husband Clemens (his cousin and a Roman Consul), their children (his heirs) and several senators for abandoning pagan customs and 'falling into Jewish ways', by which he likely meant sympathy with the Jews and/or Christian conversion. This same year, John was reported to the Roman authorities on an unknown charge, but most probably motivated by his success in bringing pagans to Christ. As a circumcised Jew, he was obliged to pay the temple tax to the Romans, but could not be forced to observe pagan rituals or be charged with membership of an 'illegal association'. The only charge they could have brought against him was 'causing a disturbance of the peace by his preaching'. The Provincial Governor was told that he was the 'high priest' of their branch of Judaism and it was accepted. Because of his high status, he avoided the death penalty and with written authorization from the Emperor he was punished with exile on the Isle of Patmos. A century later, he was remembered as the 'one who wore the *petalon*' (an engraved gold insignia worn on the high priest's head-dress).

95-96 CE: John saw and wrote the Revelation while in exile on Patmos. The letters to the seven churches in Asia exactly describe the triple hardship endured by the early Christian communities in Asia at this time: the death penalty from the Romans for refusal to participate in pagan rituals ('atheism' or 'impiety' to the Romans), the strong temptation to compromise with the pagans and the imperial cult and the insulting provocation from the Jews who would report Christians to the Roman authorities and see them punished as members of an 'illegal association'.

Autumn 96 CE: The Emperor Domitian was assassinated in Rome. The elderly Senator Nerva became Emperor and immediately cancelled Domitian's decrees and 'abolished the abuses of the temple tax', most probably in response to Gamaliel II's visit to Rome in 95 CE. John was released from his exile on Patmos and returned to Ephesus, where he resumed leadership of the Church. He was presented with a copy of the three Gospels and 'welcomed' it, arguably because it had been produced in the newly invented papyrus codex format. He also testified to the truth of the three Gospels, but when he complained that they were not complete, he was promptly exhorted to write his own Gospel.

97-98 CE: The Book of Revelation was copied at the scribal centre in Ephesus, bound in a small papyrus codex format and then circulated to the seven churches. John's Gospel was drafted and nearly completed.

98 CE: John died, aged 86, soon after the start of Trajan's reign (98 CE) and was buried in Ephesus. His Gospel was completed and distributed by his assistants at the scribal centre. Within a short time, it appeared as the Fourth Gospel in a papyrus codex with the other three Gospels or, alternatively, with John's three Letters and the Book of Revelation, in a separate Johannine corpus of writings. The Johannine writings were rapidly acknowledged and accepted as the work of the apostle John. The earliest papyrus fragment of the Fourth Gospel (p<sup>52</sup>) was discovered in Egypt and has been dated to around 125 CE, only 25 years after the first copies.

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