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THE CHARACTERIZATION OF GOD AND JESUS IN THE APOCALYPSE:  
A NARRATIVE CRITICAL APPROACH

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The Characterization of God and Jesus in the Apocalypse:  
A Narrative Critical Approach

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis is an attempt to discover something of the theology and christology of the author of the Apocalypse through a study of his characterizations of God and Jesus. The methodology of Narrative Criticism is used, particularly with respect to the literary techniques of characterization. Once established these are applied to carefully selected pericopes throughout the text.

The titles he ascribes to them are the first topic for analysis, for, clearly, they convey a great deal about their perceived characters and statuses. The author describes their respective appearances in his visions--not in a matter-of-fact way, but using symbols drawn mostly from the Hebrew Bible, which would have been familiar and full of meaning for his readers/listeners.

The question must be asked, is it appropriate to apply narrative criticism to something as ethereal as a series of 'visions', which may be either genuine and historical, or literary fictions such as are typical of many Jewish apocalypses? Whether or not the visions are 'genuine' is largely immaterial, since the seer of Patmos embedded them in a narrative framework, which legitimates the use of this methodology.

Other writers on this topic may have chosen different pericopes as being more illustrative of the characters of God and Jesus, but those which I have selected, I believe, together create

the clearest portraits of the two divine Dramatis Personae in 'John's' Revelation. It has been my concern that the author's own conceptions of the characters of God and Christ should emerge from this study--and they have done so--cast, apparently, in the mold of the powerful Shepherd/Kings who, for almost three millennia, terrorized the peoples of the Ancient Near Eastern world.

Biblical quotations are from the NSRV except where otherwise specified.

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## M.A. THESIS

TOPIC: THE CHARACTERIZATION OF GOD AND JESUS IN THE APOCALYPSE  
A NARRATIVE CRITICAL APPROACH

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## M.A. THESIS

### TOPIC: THE CHARACTERIZATION OF GOD AND JESUS IN THE APOCALYPSE: A NARRATIVE CRITICAL ANALYSIS

#### Introduction

The theology in the Apocalypse has been a controversial issue for the Church from the beginning. In the Introduction to his commentary Caird presents the problem well.

From the time of the millenarian Papias to the present day [Revelation] has been the paradise of fanatics and sectarians, each using it to justify his own peculiar doctrine and so adding to the misgivings of the orthodox. And in modern times scores of commentaries have been written on it so diverse as to make the reader wonder whether they are discussing the same book.<sup>1</sup>

While Jerome esteemed it as "beyond all praise",<sup>2</sup> Martin Luther,<sup>3</sup> C.H.Dodd<sup>4</sup> and Sarah Edwards are representative of those scholars who through the years have criticized the Apocalypse on the ground

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<sup>1</sup> G. B. Caird, The Revelation of St. John the Divine. (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1987) 2.

<sup>2</sup> Ep. l.iii.9. Quoted in Caird, Revelation. 2.

<sup>3</sup> Luther's 1522 Preface. Quoted in Caird, Revelation. 2.

<sup>4</sup> C. H. Dodd, The Apostolic Preaching and its Development. Third edition. (London: 1963), 49.

that its christology "is far removed from the Christ" of the Gospels,<sup>5</sup> and that the presentation of God is equally hard to accept. The picture of an omnipotent deity unleashing horrific 'plagues' and cosmic disasters upon a rebellious humanity to bring about unconditional submission appears harsh in the extreme. There are many such passages, including, for example, those dealing with the destruction of the beast and false prophet (19:20), the devil (20:10), Death and Hades (20:14), and Gog and Magog (20:9). While it may be argued that all of these are symbols rather than sentient beings, the scenarios are cruel and vengeful, and are described with an unseemly relish.

The purpose of this thesis is to examine the portrayals of God and Jesus in the book of Revelation using techniques of narrative criticism, especially those dealing with characterization. Alan Culpepper offers a brief but comprehensive summary of how characterization is achieved. "The writer's basic means of characterization are few but highly supple. Characters are fashioned by what the narrator says about them, particularly when introducing them, what they say, what they do, and how other characters react to them." <sup>6</sup>

### Narrative Criticism

Narrative critics approach an ancient text with a very

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<sup>5</sup> S.A. Edwards, Christological Perspectives 282, n13, (p142). Quoted in Donald Guthrie, The Relevance of John's Apocalypse, (Exeter: Eerdmans/Paternoster, 1987), 44 n8.

<sup>6</sup> R. Alan Culpepper, Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Literary Design. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 106.



different point of view from that used by historical critics. Whereas the latter use such techniques as source, form and redaction criticism to discover the meaning of the text--approaches which often have the effect of fragmenting it--narrative critics are careful to respect the integrity of the whole. These two approaches should not be seen as mutually exclusive, but as complementary, for each yields its own distinctive contribution. As Powell says, "This is Culpepper's central point [Culpepper, Story and History, pp 470-474]: By respecting the narrative character of biblical writings, narrative criticism adds a dimension to biblical studies that should be one essential component of the total theological enterprise" (my emphasis).<sup>7</sup>

The question must be raised as to whether it is appropriate to apply narrative critical analysis to something as distinctive as a series of spiritual 'visions'. Whether or not these are "genuine" or historical experiences, the author of the Apocalypse has elected to embed them within a narrative framework, believing that to be a suitable vehicle for his message to fellow Christians.

Narrative Critical theory is based on a communication model (the most basic diagram of which I have reproduced below), which concentrates on the horizontal dimension of communication, and implies a vital interaction between the Author and the Reader within the mind of the reader through the world of the Text.

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<sup>7</sup> Mark Alan Powell, What is Narrative Criticism? (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 91.

Author----->Text----->Reader <sup>8</sup>

As its name implies, narrative criticism deals with all the elements that feature in the telling of any story. But the fact that it has been adapted for use in the area of Biblical Studies <sup>9</sup> means that it is also concerned with discovering the meaning of the text for present-day communities of faith.

In The Nature of Narrative, Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg assert that "Meaning, in a work of narrative art, is a function of the relationship between two worlds: the fictional world created by the author, and the 'real' world, the apprehendable universe."<sup>10</sup> So narrative criticism investigates plot and setting, for example, to see how they contribute to the meaning of the story. It also analyzes techniques of characterization to pick up the clues the author has incorporated in the text, which inform the reader concerning the characteristics, and even the motives, of his dramatis personae, and often show how a character can develop throughout a narrative.

Narrative critical theory posits an "Implied Reader" whom Kingsbury describes as "the imaginary person in whom the intention of the text is to be thought of as always reaching its

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 19.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Scholes, Robert, and Robert Kellogg, The Nature of the Narrative, (New York and London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1966), 82. Quoted in Culpepper, Anatomy, 4.

fulfillment." <sup>11</sup> The Implied Reader is sufficiently aware of the "Implied Author's" world, in terms of its social and cultural aspects and its contemporary symbols, to be able to understand the norms of the story world and the significance of the symbolism used. As Powell says, "Without some knowledge of [relevant social institutions] the story cannot be understood, at least, not in the manner expected of the implied reader."<sup>12</sup> And again,

Attention must be paid to what Iser calls 'the reader's repertoire'.<sup>13</sup> In a basic sense, this comprises practical information that is common knowledge in the world of the story: how much a denarius is worth, [e.g., Rev 6:6], what a centurion does, and so forth. It may include recognition of social and political realities that lie behind the story. It may involve understanding social customs and recognizing the meaning of culturally determined symbols or metaphors. Narrative criticism must rely upon historical investigation to provide the reader with this sort of insight. <sup>14</sup>

For this reason one of the tasks of the thesis will be to examine both the sources of the imagery, and the titles used in the

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<sup>11</sup> J. D. Kingsbury, Matthew as Story. Second edition (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), 38.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 75.

<sup>13</sup> Iser, The Implied Reader. Quoted in Powell, What is Narrative Criticism? 97.

<sup>14</sup> Powell, What is Narrative Criticism? 97.

Apocalypse for both God and Jesus. Revelation abounds with imagery and symbols: it is by means of these that much of 'John's' characterization is accomplished.

There are multiple sources for the imagery that has been used in Revelation for the characterizations of God and Jesus, including the Old Testament, Ancient Near Eastern mythological figures and motifs, and the contemporary widespread astral cult, as well as historical figures from antiquity hinted at in some of the divine titles. Some dominant features of the first century Mediterranean cultural milieu also have significantly shaped the 'personalities' of God and Jesus; these will be identified and their influence on the divine characterizations described and assessed.

#### Characterization in the Apocalypse

My original intention was to focus on the characterization of God only, but it has become necessary to subject the character of Jesus to the same kind of scrutiny. There are two main reasons for this. The first is that the usual criteria for the assessment of a character in a narrative are difficult to apply to the presentation of God in the Book of Revelation. God's speeches are only two--and decidedly brief at that. His (it would never have occurred to the author to think of God in feminine terms) actions are never seen--they can only be inferred. He is seen to interact with no one except Jesus--once only--and that interaction is purely passive, and without verbal exchange. Jesus, on the other hand, is presented as what the Church has traditionally held him to be, the visible and audible expression, that is, 'Word', of God (19:3).

The second, and more important, reason for including Jesus in the research is that it soon becomes apparent that God and Jesus have many characteristics in common, which, again, is reflected in another of the Church's titles for Jesus, 'Son of God' (2:18).

There is considerably more available material for the disclosure of the character of Jesus than there is for God. For example, Rev 1:4-7 contains the author's summary of what the early Christians believe about Jesus. The initial vision in 1:12-16 is rich in impressionistic as well as specific symbolism. Here the Figure depicted is so awe-inspiring that the visionary falls at his feet "as though dead" (1:17). There are further clues in Jesus' self-identification at the beginning of each of the seven letters, to Ephesus (2:1), to Smyrna (2:8), to Pergamum (2:12), to Thyatira (2:18), to Sardis (3:1), to Philadelphia (3:7), and to Laodicea (3:14). Furthermore, there is his appearance in heaven as "the Lamb", and all that is implied in his being 'worthy' to break the seven seals of the scroll in the hand of Almighty God (5:6ff). Other portraits and scenarios of both God and Jesus which contribute to the two final divine characterizations in the Apocalypse are to be found in the following passages: 5:1-14; 6:1-17; 14:14-20; 19:11-21; 22:6-16; (Portraits of Jesus): 4:1-11; 8:1-9:20; 10:1-3a,5-7;11:15-19; 15:1,5-8,16:1-20; 17:1-19:6; 20:7-21:7; (Portraits of God).

Techniques of characterization which an author has used to create the 'personalities' of his Dramatis personae can be recognized by the narrative critic, who knows what types of clues

to look for, and where to find them. In the Apocalypse, much may be gleaned about the characters of God and of Jesus by analyzing the titles and adjectives used of them by the author, and by the other characters in the story. Some of these are applied to both God and Jesus, revealing characteristics common to both--others are used uniquely of each. An analysis of these titles and adjectives can be grouped under three headings: a) Those which are applied to God only, b) Those which are applied to Jesus only, and c) Those which are applied to both. For example, 'John' calls God "[He] who is and who was and who is to come" (1:4), "the Lord God" and "the Almighty" (1:8). Jesus he calls "Jesus Christ", "the faithful witness", "the first-born of the dead", and "the ruler of kings on earth"(1:5). The four living creatures call God "the Lord God Almighty" (4:8), and the twenty-four elders address him as "Our Lord and God" (4:11). Both God (1:8) and Jesus (22:12) claim the title "the Alpha and the Omega".

The ways in which other characters react in their presence also implies a great deal. The prone posture and the worshipful songs of the living creatures and the twenty-four elders in the presence of both God (4:10) and "the Lamb" (5:8-9) imply the greatness of these latter figures. Jesus' ("the Lamb's") action in taking the scroll from the hand of God is a claim to status and worth (5:7,9), and the fact that God releases the scroll into his outstretched hand implies a willing recognition of that claim. There are no other direct actions recorded of God in the Apocalypse, but the narrative sequences make it clear that the

punishments unquestioningly visited on the inhabitants of the earth by God's angels are instigated at God's command (8:2,6-12 etc.). Descriptions of the appearance of God (4:2-6) and of Christ (1:12-16) reveal much about their respective statuses and roles.

Narrative criticism takes seriously the evaluative point of view of the implied author. Is (s)he to be trusted? Is (s)he deliberately misleading her/his readers? or could (s)he be mistaken? or biased? These are important questions, for it is the implied author who establishes the norms, values and general world view in the story world. In Revelation, as in other New Testament texts, what God thinks is, by definition, true and right;<sup>15</sup> as Powell notes, "The reader...is expected to accept...also...that God's point of view can be expressed reliably through angels, prophets, miracles, dreams and Scripture."<sup>16</sup> In works where use is made of a narrator--and this includes the Apocalypse since 'John' narrates his visions first-hand--narrative criticism asks, Is he omniscient? --is he able to read people's thoughts? Is he, like the implied author, trustworthy? and is he conspicuous in the narrative? As far as Revelation is concerned, the author/narrator, God and Jesus are all deemed to be trustworthy. The text itself makes this clear, because the narrator, in 1:1-2 tells his readers that he is passing on to them what was revealed to him by an angel, and in doing so is bearing witness "to the word of God and to the

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<sup>15</sup> J. D. Kingsbury, "The Figure of Jesus in Matthew's Story: A Literary-Critical Probe." JSNT 21 (1984), 3-36.

<sup>16</sup> Powell, What is Narrative Criticism? 24.

testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw." He also tells them that Jesus Christ is the faithful witness (1:5) who is called "Faithful and True" (19:11); therefore he expects them to accept that Christ's words, like those of God himself, are totally trustworthy.

Until I began to read this text through narrative critical eyes, I had always thought of both God and Jesus in the Apocalypse as divine, as perfect, and consequently unable to develop in either positive or negative directions. After narrative critical investigation, this initial impression has not been confirmed with respect to either God or Jesus. Rather, the characters of both, as portrayed in the Apocalyptic Drama, appear too ruthless to be classified as 'perfect'.

### The Structure of the Thesis

#### The Introduction

The remainder of this introductory section will deal with such basic matters as the place of origin, date of writing and the historical setting of the book, as well as the question of genre, and the problem in the Christian churches which the author was trying to address. It will conclude with a survey of the multiple sources upon which 'John' drew for the rich symbolism and imagery he has used throughout the Apocalypse.

Chapter One will summarize the narrative critical conventions used in any story to create and reveal the 'characters' of an author's Dramatis Personae. This will be followed by analyses both of the titles and adjectives used of God and of Jesus, and of the



beings in the Apocalypse who selectively apply them. Following this, the author's three-fold initial presentation of Jesus will be analysed; i.e., a) in the summary of what early Christians believe about him, b) as he appears in the first recorded vision, and c) as Jesus describes himself in his self-identifications at the beginning of each of the letters to the seven churches.

Chapter Two will consider sequentially the pericopes in the Apocalyptic Drama which deal specifically with the characterization of Jesus.

Chapter Three will handle in the same way those passages which disclose the character of God, beginning with the seer's first glimpse of God in chapter four, which creates the setting for the entire Apocalyptic Drama.

The Conclusion will summarize what has emerged from this narrative critical study concerning 'John's' characterizations of God and Jesus and their relationship the one to the other.

The Appendix is a brief study of the pre-Revelation history of the Shepherd/King.

### Introductory Issues

#### 1. Date of the Apocalypse

There are two basic positions taken concerning the date when the Apocalypse was written. Chris Rowland and John Robinson are two of the scholars who believe that the date was around 68, or at least before 70 CE. Robinson's reasoning is that Rev 11:1-2 seems to imply that the Temple in Jerusalem was still standing when

Revelation was written.<sup>17</sup> Rowland's argument is that "the historical circumstances presented by the Jewish War and the apparent breakup of the empire seem to offer the most appropriate time of writing."<sup>18</sup>

The present scholarly consensus supports Irenaeus' claim that the visions recorded in the Apocalypse were seen at the end of Domitian's reign (Ad.Haer.V.30.3) around 95 or 96 CE., though they may have been recorded later. Most scholars support this position for the following reasons: a) The author's use of the Nero redivivus legend means that the Apocalypse could not have been written in its present form before the death of Nero in 68 CE.<sup>19</sup> b) A.Y. Collins points out that in Revelation chapters 13 and 17 the author opposes Nero to the Lamb as a parody, as a dying and rising destroyer rather than a savior. This parallel between Nero and Jesus also requires a date after Nero's death. c) The use of Babylon as a symbolic name for Rome, the second destroyer of Jerusalem and its temple, without doubt implies a post-70 CE. date. d) There was a persecution of Christians under Domitian towards the end of his reign, when even members of the imperial family were

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<sup>17</sup> John A. T. Robinson, "Redating the New Testament", (Ph 1, 1976, 238-242). Quoted in A. Y. Collins, "The Apocalypse (Revelation)", The New Jerome Biblical Commentary, R. E. Brown, J. A. Fitzmyer, and R. E. Murphy, eds. (Englewood Cliffs NJ: Prentice Hall, 1990, pp996-1016), 998.

<sup>18</sup> Christopher Rowland, The Open Heaven. (London: SPCK, 1982), 405-06.

<sup>19</sup> L. L. Thompson, The Book of Revelation: Apocalypse and Empire. (New York and Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1990), 13-14.

executed, but it was not on the scale that 'John's' Apocalypse seems to suggest.<sup>20</sup> No one so far has produced evidence which shows that the date given by Irenaeus is untenable.<sup>21</sup>

## 2. The Author

The earliest person known to have attempted to identify the author of Revelation was Justin, who stated that it was written by "John, one of the apostles of Christ" (Dial.81). Irenaeus was the first writer to claim that the Apocalypse and the fourth gospel were both written by "John, the disciple of the Lord" (cf. Haer, 3.11.1 with 4.20.11). Origen and Hippolytus also believed that the Revelation and the gospel of John were from the same author. To Hippolytus he was "blessed John, apostle and disciple of the Lord" (Antichr.36), while Origen called him, John, the son of Zebedee (Jo.1:14),<sup>22</sup>.

In the text itself, 'John' does not identify himself beyond saying that he was God's servant (1:1), and that he "was on the island called Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus" (1:9). He does not claim to be a prophet, but hints as much both when he refers to his writing as 'prophecy' (1:3; 22:10,18), and when he depicts the angeles interpretes as saying to

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<sup>20</sup> Sean P. Kealey, CSSp. The Apocalypse of John. (Wilmington: Glazier, 1987), 57-59.

<sup>21</sup> A. Y. Collins, Crisis and Catharsis: The Power of the Apocalypse. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984), 59.

<sup>22</sup> A.Y. Collins, Crisis and Catharsis: The Power of the Apocalypse. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984), 59.

him, "I am a fellow servant with you and your comrades the prophets" (22:9).

In his commentary R.H. Mounce concludes that "the wisest course of action is either to leave the question [of authorship] open or to accept in a tentative way that the Apocalypse was written by John the apostle, son of Zebedee and disciple of Jesus."<sup>23</sup> But Feuillet is not prepared to accept, even tentatively, that John, son of Zebedee was the author. He argues, "If such were the case, the almost complete absence of allusions to the Christ of history would be virtually incomprehensible....And while the Apocalypse is oriented to the external judgment of the end of time, to the eyes of the evangelist the judgment is happening now, and is completely internal."<sup>24</sup> I find his argument quite convincing.

A.Y. Collins seems to speak for contemporary scholarship when she states that the author was probably not a known historical person. The evidence, especially in the letters, suggests that he was an itinerant prophet who was familiar with all seven of the churches in Asia to whom the letters were written, because he had visited and worked with each of them. His familiarity with the Jewish scriptures, and the obvious similarities between Revelation and other Jewish apocalypses, in terms of form, symbolism etc.,

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<sup>23</sup> R. H. Mounce, The Book of Revelation. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 31.

<sup>24</sup> A. Feuillet, L'Apocalypse: l'Etat de la Question. (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1963), 84-85. My translation.

suggest that he was probably Jewish by birth.<sup>25</sup> I believe that her conclusions best fit the textual and historical evidence.

### 3. Place of Writing

Some writers of commentaries on Revelation show no interest in where it was written, presumably because it would have little effect on their interpretation of the text. Although very little is known about this topic, A. Y. Collins has summarised informed opinions on the matter. The scholarly consensus is that Revelation was written "somewhere in the general region of the West coast of Asia Minor." Some assume that it was written soon after 'John' first saw his visions, therefore, on Patmos. Others think it was more likely to have been written later, at Ephesus, which at this time was the most important commercial and cultural centre in Asia Minor, with a population of about 150,000.<sup>26</sup> All of the Christian congregations for whom the visions were recounted were in cities which belonged to the Roman province of Asia in the first century CE.<sup>27</sup> To date, however, the question of where the Apocalypse was written remains unresolved.

### 4. Genre

'John' refers to Revelation as "prophecy", which may be

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<sup>25</sup> A. Y. Collins, Crisis and Catharsis, 34.

<sup>26</sup> Kealey, Apocalypse, 80.

<sup>27</sup> This summary from A. Y. Collins, "Book of Revelation", ABD, Vol.5, 701-02.

defined as the proclamation of a divinely inspired message. Such a message may include special knowledge of the past, prediction of the future, or special insight into another person's innermost thoughts, or 'heart'. In sum, "the biblical prophet... is essentially a proclaimer of the word...."<sup>28</sup> However, the larger cosmic framework in which 'John's' message is contained is undoubtedly apocalyptic in nature, which typically provides the basis for exhortation or consolation. The hortatory character of Revelation is evident from the epistolary formula, "John, to the seven churches in Asia: Grace to you and peace..." in (1:4).<sup>29</sup> As in Jewish apocalypses, there is an eschatological emphasis--the Day of the Lord is coming (6:17), when evil-doers, especially the persecutors of God's people, will be judged (20:11-15), the arrogant oppressors themselves will be brought low (16:18-21), and the community of God's people will be given dominion over the wicked (20:4-6). In the words of Wilder, true apocalyptic contains "the phase of miraculous renovation, and that world affirmation which has gone through the experience of world negation".<sup>30</sup>

The seer records his visions in the form of a narrative, a fact which legitimates the narrative critical approach I have used

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<sup>28</sup> G. Friedrich, "Prophets and Prophecies in the NT." TDNT (Abridged). 960-965. G. Kittel and G. Friedrich (eds). (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 960.

<sup>29</sup> John J. Collins, The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to the Jewish Matrix of Christianity. (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 211.

<sup>30</sup> Amos Wilder, Jesus' Parables and the War of Myths. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982), 166.

in this thesis. The whole work is 'framed', however, by a prologue (1:1-8), and an epilogue (22:6-21) in an epistolary form. When the beginning of the first letter of Peter is compared with the fourth verse of the Apocalypse, the customary epistolary greetings become very clear.

#### 1 Peter 1:1-2

"Peter,...

To the exiles of the Dispersion...

May grace and peace be yours...."

#### Revelation 1:4

"John

To the seven churches...

Grace to you and peace...."

The same may be seen when the conclusions of both letters are compared.

#### 1 Peter 5:14

"Peace to all of you who are in Christ."

#### Revelation 22:21

"The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all the saints."

So the author has made use of several literary forms, a), prophecy, b), narrative and c), formal epistle, but by far the greatest part of the text is apocalyptic in style. By that I mean that it reflects a longing, if not a conviction, that God will intervene in history to overturn the present political status quo, to destroy the oppressive regime, to free the oppressed from their helplessness and hopelessness, and to make them politically

dominant in their world.

## 5. Social Setting

Perhaps, in part, because of the author's obvious, implacable hatred of Rome (17:1; 18:5; 19:3), earlier scholars were of the opinion that Christians were subjected to intense persecution under Domitian. It is likely that they were also persuaded by such of the author's contemporaries as Pliny the younger, Tacitus, Dio Chrysostom and Suetonius who wrote during Trajan's reign (98-117 CE.), and Dio Cassio (a century later), all of whom cast Domitian as an absolute demon-emperor. But today's scholars are aware that these descriptions of Domitian amount to nothing more than a "studied caricature", whose purpose was to make the new emperor, Trajan, appear to be superior by contrasting him with the 'monster', Domitian.<sup>31</sup> However, Thompson contends that "what they (i.e., Pliny, Tacitus et al.) say about Domitian's reign does not square with epigraphic, numismatic, and prosopographical evidence from the Domitianic period. Furthermore, their assertions about Domitian are disconfirmed in the writings from Domitian's rule."<sup>32</sup>

The consensus now is that political, economic and social relations were stable both within the cities, and between the cities and the empire. Whence, then, come the crises and conflicts

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<sup>31</sup> Wilfred J. Harrington, O.P., Revelation, (Collegeville MN: Liturgical Press, 1993), 9-10. cf. L. L. Thompson, Apocalypse and Empire, 109; and A. Y. Collins, Crisis and Catharsis, 70.

<sup>32</sup> L. L. Thompson, Apocalypse and Empire, 109.



between loyalty to Christ and the claims of imperial Rome which are to be found throughout Revelation? It is possible that they were more perceived than real. Thompson believes that they are due to the author's perspective on Roman society, and that he actually encouraged his audience to see themselves in conflict with Rome. Such conflict was appropriate since church and world belonged to antithetical forces.<sup>33</sup> For Christians not to be in conflict with Rome, for 'John', was tantamount to disloyalty to, and betrayal of, Jesus, their crucified Lord.

The obvious intensity of 'John's' hatred of Rome is probably due to his having lived through the Neronian persecution of Christians in the mid-60s, and the emotional trauma of the destruction of Jerusalem with its temple in 70 CE. What Rome had done once, she might see fit to do again. The current, more subtle pressure of the Imperial cult made non-complying Christians a very vulnerable minority, and the seer's exile to Patmos had cut him off from the sustaining fellowship of other Christians.<sup>34</sup>

The power of Rome was growing visibly, and represented to 'John' a usurpation of God's authority, so he preached that Christians should practise a completely uncompromising exclusivism towards their Gentile neighbours, and should resist the social pressures to conform, particularly with respect to the growing Imperial cult. L.L. Thompson sees Revelation as presenting a

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 174-75.

<sup>34</sup> A. Y. Collins, Crisis and Catharsis, 99-104.

'minority report' on how Christians related to the larger Roman society.<sup>35</sup> The current scholarly consensus is that most Christians in the cities of Asia lived in harmony with their Gentile neighbours under the predominantly benign rule of Rome--a concept which I accept.

#### 6. The Problem Addressed in the Apocalypse

For Caird, "...John's coming crisis was simply the persecution of the church [by the Roman Empire]",<sup>36</sup> but there is little in the text to support this view. The author names only one martyr, Antipas (2:13), and fears that "some" of the Christians in the church in Smyrna may be "imprisoned", "tested" and "afflicted" (2:10). The 'conquerors', which is 'John's' way of designating the Christian martyrs, are already in heaven (6:9; 14:4), though he does challenge the threatened members at Smyrna to be "faithful until death" (2:10).

J.J. Collins sees the problem addressed by Revelation as "the present sovereignty of Rome".<sup>37</sup> A.Y. Collins is more specific. She suggests that the author could see trouble ahead in the form of a social-theological crisis. One aspect of the crisis was conflict with the Jews of the synagogues in the province of Asia. Twice in the letters, 'John' refers to the Jews as "a synagogue of Satan"

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<sup>35</sup> L. L. Thompson, Apocalypse and Empire, 16.

<sup>36</sup> Caird, Revelation, 12; cf 87.

<sup>37</sup> J. J. Collins, Apocalyptic Imagination, 213.

(2:9;3:9). The contexts, she says, imply that the hostility between Jews and local Christians was so intense that Jews had accused Christians before the authorities, with the result that arrests and interrogations were expected to ensue (2:10). Rome disapproved of new religions, but not the Jewish way of life; thus Jewish hostility towards Christians brought legal insecurity for them.

Relations between Christians and Gentiles were not always amicable either, because 'socializing', which for Christians often meant the eating of food previously offered to the Greco-Roman gods, was officially interpreted by the Church as idol-worship--spiritual adultery--and as a turning away from God and Christ. In Acts 15 the Christian leaders had enjoined newly converted Gentiles, among other things, to "abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols..." (15:29). This amounted to a ban on all forms of Christian-Gentile socializing, which included the joining of any non-Christian voluntary associations such as trade guilds, and it strained relations between Christians and any non-Christian relatives and neighbors. <sup>38</sup>

In the letters to Pergamum and Thyatira 'John' pictures Jesus as condemning those Christians who ate food offered to pagan idols (2:14, and 2:19). Christ demands their repentance for such disloyal behavior (vv.16, 22), and threatens them with dire

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<sup>38</sup> The above information from A.Y. Collins, "Revelation", ABD vol.5, 705-06. See also A.Y. Collins, "Apocalypse" (Revelation), NJBC, 1002.

consequences if they continue their sinful practices (vv.16, 22). Clearly, for 'John', such socializing with non-Christians was a betrayal of the crucified and resurrected Jesus. For the author of the Apocalypse Rome represented the epitome of evil in the world, and in 18:4 he depicts an angel as saying to the Christians in the city, "Come out of her, my people, so that you do not take part in her sins..." To 'John's' dismay, even some Christian leaders were advocating Christian participation in civic life to counter local antipathy.<sup>39</sup> It is clear from these details that assimilation into the Roman culture was the social-theological crisis which 'John' anticipated, and which precipitated the writing of the Apocalypse.

#### 7. The Multiple Sources of 'John's' Imagery.

Readers of Revelation cannot but be impressed with its vast pool of diverse imagery. From whence did it all come? It is Bruce Malina's opinion that "All too many authors concerned with the presumed sources used by the seer rely exclusively on Israelite sources..."<sup>40</sup> Paul Hanson agrees, specifying "Ancient Canaanite myth, neo-Babylonian astronomy, Greek myth, Hellenistic historiography, Jewish and Egyptian wisdom, Persian religion, alongside copious references and commentary upon biblical

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<sup>39</sup> A. Y. Collins, Crisis and Catharsis, 98. cf. Titus 3:1; 1 Pet 2:13; and Rom 13:7; where the respective writers urge compliance and subjection to Roman rule.

<sup>40</sup> Malina, Star Visions, (Transcript), 2.

writings"<sup>41</sup> as sources used by ancient apocalyptic writers. This position is substantiated by Russell, Porter, Fiorenza et al.<sup>42</sup> To that list I would add Old Babylonian and even ancient Sumerian and Akkadian sources which have influenced the imagery in 'John's' Apocalypse.

For example, David Aune, writing on the influence of Roman Imperial Court Ceremonial on Revelation says, "After Alexander had taken his seat on the Persian throne under the 'golden heavenly canopy'...the Hellenistic kings incorporated cosmic and astral imagery as visible symbols of their divine rule."<sup>43</sup> However, the 'golden heavenly canopy' at that time had already had a long and fascinating history. It featured in the New Year's ceremony celebrated in ancient Sumeria,<sup>44</sup> as long ago as 2850-2360 BCE. <sup>45</sup> The canopy lined the ceiling of the temple in which "the festival of

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<sup>41</sup> Paul D. Hanson, The Dawn of Apocalyptic. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), 433.

<sup>42</sup> David S. Russell, The Method and Message of Jewish Apocalyptic. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1964), 185-86.  
 F. C. Porter, The Message of the Apocalyptic Writers, (London: 1905), 59. Quoted in Russell, Method and Message, 186.  
 E. Schussler Fiorenza, The Book of Revelation: Justice and Judgment. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 17-18.

<sup>43</sup> David E. Aune, "The Influence of Roman Imperial Court Ceremonial on the Apocalypse of John". Papers of the Chicago Society of Biblical Research, 28 ('83), 5-26. 11.

<sup>44</sup> Mircea Eliade, The Myth of the Eternal Return. (Princeton NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1974), 55.

<sup>45</sup> John Bright, A History of Israel. Third edition. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981), 466 (Time Chart).

the fates" was held,<sup>46</sup> when the Destinies for the forthcoming year were decreed.<sup>47</sup> This was a reenactment of what had taken place among the gods in the starry heavens after Marduk had created the world out of the severed body of Tiamat, the monster of chaos. He immediately assumed responsibility for the 'Tablets of Fate', by "fastening them on his breast".<sup>48</sup> This showed that the destinies of mortals were henceforth in the hands of the Creator-God--a concept 'John' still espoused three thousand years later! (cf. Rev 5:1).

A close reading of Deutero-Isaiah suggests that the exiles in Babylon saw the New Year ceremonies frequently, and that Second Isaiah, to refute the seductive claims for Marduk's supremacy, counterclaimed that it was Yahweh, and not Marduk, who had slain the dragon of chaos (Is.51:10), who created the heavens and the earth (45:18), and who had control over the destiny of the peoples of the world (44:24-28). All of these motifs are to be found in the Apocalypse.

I formed these conclusions in 1990 during a study of the religious developments and experiences of the exiles in Babylon, and have recently discovered that Richard Bauckham is of the same

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<sup>46</sup> A. Sachs, Translator, "Temple Program for the New Year's Festivals at Babylon", ANET. J. B. Pritchard, ed. (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1955), 333.

<sup>47</sup> Georges Roux, Ancient Iraq. (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1964), 334.

<sup>48</sup> E. A. Speiser, Translator, "Enuma Elish: The Creation Epic", ANET. J. B. Pritchard, ed. 67.

opinion. In 1993 he wrote:

[T]he designation ['the first and the last', in Deutero-Isaiah 44:6; 48:12; cf. 41:4] encapsulates the understanding of the God of Israel as the sole Creator of all things and sovereign Lord of history, which Deutero-Isaiah so magnificently expounds and asserts polemically against the idols of Babylon.<sup>49</sup>

Much of the imagery in the Apocalypse, however, such as the Exodus tradition, may be traced directly to the Hebrew Bible. The plagues of Egypt reappear in the Revelation in the two series of the trumpets (Rev 8) and bowls (Rev 16). Imagery from Daniel is very apparent (Rev 1:13-15; 14:14), and also from Zechariah (Rev 6:2-5; 11:4). But, according to Boismard, "The prophet Ezechiel especially is the one who supplies most items of the imagery....But it would take too much space to draw up a list of all the biblical texts borrowed by the Apocalypse." Each prophetic book, he says, has contributed to the symbolism and imagery of Revelation.<sup>50</sup>

'John' also uses symbolism from earlier apocalyptic writings--e.g., a horned ram--a typical apocalyptic image for powerful military leaders, and for a warrior-messiah in the Dream Visions of Enoch (I Enoch 85-90)<sup>51</sup>--effectively supersedes the slain and

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<sup>49</sup> Richard Bauckham, The Theology of the Book of Revelation. (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1993), 27.

<sup>50</sup> M. E. Boismard, "The Apocalypse", Introduction to the New Testament. A. Robert and A. Feuillet, eds., 691-722. Translators, P. W. Skehan et al.. (New York: Desclee, 1965), 699.

<sup>51</sup> A. Y. Collins, "Book of Revelation", ABD V.5. 705.

resurrected Lamb immediately after its introduction into the narrative in Rev 5:6.

This introduction has suggested that Narrative Criticism's techniques of Characterization provide invaluable tools with which to analyze 'John's' two most prominent 'personalities' in the Apocalypse--God and Jesus. For their presentation he has drawn from an eclectic reservoir of imagery and symbolism, using specifically Jewish sources, both from within and outside the canon of Hebrew scripture, and even sources from other Ancient Near Eastern cultures. This thesis will explore what techniques of characterization the author has used, and consider the various aspects of the two divine 'personalities' which emerge from his use of the narrative medium.



## Chapter 1

### The Portrayals of God and Jesus to the Christians in Asia Minor

In the first section of this chapter the narrative critical techniques of character portrayal will be presented. In the second section the Divine Titles will be analyzed in two separate ways--the first with reference to all those throughout Revelation who ascribe these titles, including 'John'--the second with reference to those to whom they are ascribed: God, Jesus or both God and Jesus.

In the second section we will examine how 'John' has presented Jesus 1) in a summary of what the Christian church already believed about him (1:5-7), 2) as the seer encountered him in his first vision (1:10-20), and 3) in further information about him which may be gleaned from the messages (letters) which the risen Christ instructed the seer to send to the seven churches in Asia (chs. 2-3). The third section will summarize what has been revealed of both God and Jesus in the first three chapters of this Apocalypse--those addressed directly to the believers in Asia--and in the Epilogue.

#### I. Narrative Critical Techniques of Character Portrayal.

Henry James' well-known questions, "What is character but the determination of incident? What is incident but the illustration of character?"<sup>1</sup> makes a good introduction to a discussion of characterization. There are many possible ways to classify the types, roles, qualities and functions of different characters. Culpepper notes that characters may be seen primarily a) as autonomous beings with traits, and even personalities, or b) as plot functionaries having representational value, with certain commissions or tasks to fulfil.<sup>2</sup> While Chatman follows the first approach, treating literary characters as 'real people', formalists and structuralists adhere to the second schema, treating them more as symbolic objects which can be manipulated to 'carry' a pre-designed plot.

These two points of view need not be seen as mutually exclusive. There is a sense, surely, in which all characters should function to further the plot, and bring it to its intended conclusion. But that does not mean that those which function in this way cannot also be 'autonomous beings with traits'. To consider these two interpretations of character strictly as alternatives may be to create a false dichotomy.

If it were necessary to choose between these two interpretations in the present analysis of the characters of God

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<sup>1</sup> Henry James, "The Art of Fiction", in Partial Portraits, (London: MacMillan, 1888). Quoted in M.A. Powell, What is Narrative Criticism? 51 n.2.

<sup>2</sup> R.Alan Culpepper, Anatomy, 102.

and Jesus, which would be the 'right' one?--and which the 'wrong'? In the NT world view, spiritual beings were thought of rather like 'real people' without bodies. Demons could hear, speak, and recognise people (Mark 1:23-24, 34), could enter into human bodies, and be evicted from them (Matt 8:28-32). Some angels were responsible to God for the well-being of children (Matt 18:10), others ministered to Jesus in the wilderness after the devil had tempted him (Matt 4:11). For the author of the Apocalypse there were no more 'real' beings than God, Jesus, the Devil, angels and demons. When he wrote about them in Revelation it would not, I am sure, have occurred to him that he was not writing about "autonomous beings with traits, even personalities". This, therefore, will be my own approach throughout this study.

Characters may also be classified in terms of their relative significance to the plot.

a) Protagonists are the main characters; in Revelation these would include God and Jesus, Satan, the Beast and the False Prophet.

b) Ficelles are of intermediate significance<sup>3</sup> and "exist to serve specific plot functions, often revealing the protagonist, and may carry a great deal of representative or symbolic value."<sup>4</sup> The four Living Creatures, the twenty-four Elders, the 'mighty' angels, and other angels who act individually in the Apocalypse would fall

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 104-105.

<sup>4</sup> W.J. Harvey, Character and the Novel (London: Chatto and Windus, 1965), 58, 67. Quoted in Culpepper, Anatomy, 104.

into this category.

c) Background Characters may be individuals or groups; and sometimes such a group will function as a single character,<sup>5</sup> performing en masse, like the 'angelic hosts' in the Apocalypse. "Protagonists", says Culpepper, "are the central characters, the characters whose 'motivations and history is most fully established'.<sup>6</sup> They are also

the vehicles by which all the most interesting questions are raised; they evoke our beliefs, sympathies, revulsions; they incarnate the moral vision of the world inherent in the total [narrative]. In a sense they are what the [narrative] exists for; it exists to reveal them.<sup>7</sup>

Complex characters which possess a variety of potentially conflicting traits are labelled 'round'; less complicated characters (like the individual angels in the Apocalypse) whose traits are consistent and predictable are termed 'flat',<sup>8</sup> while 'stock' characters (such as 'the inhabitants of the earth', 6:9; 11:10; 13:8; etc.) have only a single trait (these are idolaters)

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<sup>5</sup> Powell, What is Narrative Criticism? 51.

<sup>6</sup> Culpepper, Anatomy, 103.

<sup>7</sup> Harvey, Character and the Novel, 56. Quoted in Culpepper, Anatomy, 104. In this quotation I have substituted the word "narrative" for "novel".

<sup>8</sup> E.M. Forster, Aspects of the Novel. (London: Edward Arnold, 1927), 65-75.

and perform purely perfunctory roles in the story. '9

Another possible distinction may be made between 'static' characters (like God) who are unchanging, and characters which develop throughout the course of the narrative,<sup>10</sup> as do, for example, such OT characters as Moses, Joseph and David.

In his comments on characterization in biblical narrative Alter writes, "The purposeful selectivity of means, the repeatedly contrastive or comparative technical strategies used in the rendering of biblical characters, are, in a sense, dictated by the biblical view of man."<sup>12</sup> He goes on to show how, in any narrative, the characters of the Dramatis Personae may be conveyed to the reader in a variety of ways. For example, a) a character may speak on his/her own behalf--though one must always remember that it is the author who creates the speeches. b) The narrator may describe the character, and the reader must decide whether the description is complete and valid as it stands. Is the narrator in this instance omniscient? is he able to read the innermost thoughts of his characters?--or is he merely an observer? c) Other characters in the narrative may comment about the hero, the villain, or one another. Here again, the secondary characters need

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<sup>9</sup> Powell, What is Narrative Criticism? 55.

<sup>10</sup> Culpepper, Anatomy, 103, n.11, quoting Scholes and Kellogg, The Nature of Narrative, 123.

<sup>12</sup> Robert Alter, The Art of Biblical Narrative (New York: Basic Books, 1981). All of the quotations in this section are drawn from chapter 6, "Characterization and the Art of Reticence", 114-130.

to be assessed for trustworthiness. d) A character may reveal his personality by the nature of his own actions, gestures, and posture. e) The narrator's descriptions of the appearance and clothing of a character will give many clues concerning, in particular, his/her social rank, unless, of course, that character is known to be in disguise. f) The ways in which a particular character relates to those around him/her, and, conversely, g) their reactions to his/her behaviour also reveal specific aspects of the personality being presented. h) The narrator may recount a character's inward speech; he may also, by means of either flat assertions or motivated explanations, make statements about a character's attitudes and/or intentions.

Alter has devised a schema for assessing the degree of certainty that may be attached to these various character-revealing techniques. It is an ascending 'scale', as follows (beginning at the lower end):

1. The narrator's descriptions of the character's appearance, gestures and posture, and recorded comments about, or reactions to him/her, on the part of other characters.
2. The recorded direct speech of the character.
3. The inward speech of the character, recorded in summary or spoken aloud as interior monologue.
4. Statements made by the reliable narrator about the character's attitudes or intentions.

The techniques used in 1 leave the reader substantially in the

realm of inference, which is the area of least certainty.<sup>13</sup>

2 and 3 lead the reader from inference to the weighing of claims. For example, the direct speech of a character concerning himself, or that of others about her/him, may reflect the occasion more than the speaker, thus obscuring rather than revealing the character's true self. This is an area of relative certainty about her/his conscious intentions, but not about the motivations behind them.

The reliable narrator's statements about the character's attitudes and intentions mentioned in point 4 above, constitutes the realm of highest certainty for the reader.

There are few revelations of inward speech or intentionality in the Apocalypse, because 'John' is not an omniscient narrator--he does not know the thoughts of any of the characters in the story (7:14) except his own (e.g., 1:17; 5:4).<sup>14</sup> However, the narrator is deemed to be trustworthy, since he claims to recount faithfully all that he sees and hears (1:2; 22:8). When we come to analyse the characterizations of God and Jesus in the Apocalyptic Drama we will find that, since he records very few speeches, most of 'John's' techniques are confined to the two areas of least dependability, those of inference and the weighing of claims; of

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<sup>13</sup> Chatman extends the scope of Inference and Implication to include the interpretation of plot, theme, and other narrative elements besides character and setting.

Seymour Chatman, Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film. (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1986), 117.

<sup>14</sup> But see (9:20-21; and 16:9 as possible examples of God's intentionality.

these the former is prevalent.

Alter also demonstrates that, where there are several possible considerations which might explain a character's words or actions, the biblical writers often refuse to choose among them, and that "precisely by not specifying [emphasis mine], the narrator allows each its claim". Again he speaks of "the narrative technique of studied reticences [that is, deliberately leaving some definitive things unsaid--emphasis mine] which generate an interplay of significantly patterned ambiguities..." These techniques reveal, he says, "an abiding mystery in character, as the biblical writers conceive it, which they embody in their typical methods of presentation." No one will want to deny the presence of non-specificity, ambiguity and mystery in 'John's' characterizations in the Apocalypse.

For the purposes of this paper I have divided the Apocalypse as follows:

- a), 1:1-3, John claims to be an authentic prophet.
- b), 1:4, The Epistolary Greeting.
- c), 1:5-8, The Prologue.
- d), 1:9-20, The seer's first vision of Christ, on Patmos.
- e), 2:1-3:22, The Letters, especially their Epistolary Greetings.
- f), 4:1-11, 'John' sets the scene for the Apocalyptic Drama.
- g), 5:1-22:5, The Narration of the Apocalyptic Drama.
- h), 22:6-20, The Epilogue.
- i), 22:21, The Epistolary Farewell.



In the Prologue, Vision of Jesus, the Letters and the Epilogue, the author portrays Jesus as he relates to the churches in Asia--which are representative of the Church universal--and to their heavenly counterparts and/or 'guardians', the angelic 'stars' (cf. Dan 10:13f., 20f.).<sup>14</sup> In chapter four he describes his first vision of God in the Holy of Holies in the Heavenly Temple, which is part of, and provides the 'setting' for, the major Apocalyptic Drama.<sup>15</sup> In chapters 5 through 22:5 he portrays Jesus in his developing relationship to God and to the inhabitants of heaven as well as those on earth, from the time when he is first exalted to heaven as the slain and risen Lamb (i.e., a man, 5:6), until he claims for himself the titles "The Alpha and the Omega", and "The beginning and the end" (22:13) in the Epilogue--titles which have hitherto been ascribed, within the Apocalyptic Drama, only to Almighty God (1:8; 21:6).

## II. Analyses of Divine Titles

I have made two separate analyses of the Divine Titles. The first is made with reference to the different characters who ascribe them, the second is made with reference to those to whom they are ascribed.

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<sup>14</sup> See G. R. Beasley-Murray, Revelation: The New Century Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 69. Cf. G. B. Caird, Revelation, 24-25.

<sup>15</sup> Powell, Narrative Criticism. 69. "Settings represent that aspect of narrative that provides context for the actions of the characters...[they] are the adverbs of literary structure: they designate when, where, and how the action occurs."

1. With reference to those who ascribe them.
  - a) The Titles God uses of Himself.
    - The Alpha and the Omega. (1:8; 21:6).
    - The beginning and the end. (21:6).
  - b) The Titles Others use of God.
    - i) 'John', as narrator, calls God:
      - God of Jesus Christ (1:6).
      - Father of Jesus Christ (1:6; "of the Lamb", 14:1).
      - Lord God (1:8; 21:22; 22:5).
      - [He] who is and who was and who is to come (1:8).
      - Almighty ((1:8; 16:14; 19:15; 21:22).
      - Living God (7:2).
      - Lord of the earth (11:4).
      - God of Heaven (11:13; 16:11).
    - ii) Jesus refers to God as:
      - My God (3:2; 3:12,12,12,12).
      - My Father (2:27; 3:5; 3:21).
    - iii). The Heavenly Hosts--in which term I include the four living creatures, the twenty-four elders, and the angels, individually or collectively--worship God as:
      - Almighty (4:8; 11:17; 19:6).
      - Lord God (4:8; 11:17; 18:8).
      - Our Lord (4:11; 11:15).
      - Our God (4:11; 5:10; 7:3,12; 12:10,10; 19:5,6,).
      - Holy One (16:5).
    - iv) The Slain Martyrs (under the heavenly altar of sacrifice)

address God as:

- Sovereign Lord (6:10).
- Holy and True (6:10).
- v) The Company Redeemed by the Lamb claim God as:
  - Our God (7:10).
- vi) The Company of Conquerors praise God as:
  - Lord God (15:3).
  - Almighty (15:3).
  - King of the nations (15:3).
  - Lord (15:4).
- vii) The Altar of Sacrifice addresses God as:
  - Lord God (16:7).
  - Almighty (16:7).

## 2. With Reference to those to whom they are ascribed.

### i). Titles for God.

- God of Jesus Christ (1:6; [Jesus, "My God"] 3:2; 3:12).
- Father of Jesus Christ (1:6; ["of the Lamb" 14:1];  
[Jesus, "My Father"] 2:27; 3:5,21).
- The Alpha and the Omega (1:8; 21:6).
- The beginning and the end (21:6).
- Lord God (1:8; 4:8; 11:17; 15:3; 16:7; 18:8; 21:22;  
22:5).
- [He] who is and who was and who is to come (1:8; 4:8).
- Almighty (1:8; 4:8; 11:17; 15:3; 16:7,14; 19:6,15;

21:22).

--Living God (7:2).

--Lord of the earth (11:4).

--God of Heaven (11:13; 16:11).

--God (4:11; 5:10; 7:3,10,12; 12:10,10; 19:5,6).

--Sovereign Lord (6:10).

--King of the nations (15:3).

ii). Titles for Jesus.

--The first and the last (1:17; 22:13).

--The living one (1:18).

--Son of God (2:18).

--The Amen (3:14).

--Faithful and True witness (3;14;

["faithful witness"] 1:5).

--Origin of God's creation (3:14).

--Jesus (1:9a,b; 12:17; 17:6; 19:10; 20:4; 22:16).

--Root of David (5:5; 22:16).

--Descendant of David (22:16).

--Lion of the tribe of Judah (5:5).

--The Morning Star (2:28; 22:16).

--Jesus Christ (1:1,2,5).

--Firstborn of the dead (1:5).

--Ruler of the kings of the earth (1:5).

--Messiah/Christ (11:15; 12:5\*, 10; 19:15\*; 20:4,6).

--(\* "the one who is to rule with a rod of iron").

--One like the Son of Man (1:13; 14:14).  
 --King of kings (17:14; 19:16).  
 --Lord of lords (17:14; 19:16).  
 --Faithful and True (19:11).  
 --The Word of God (19:13).  
 --Lord Jesus (22:20,21).  
 --The Lamb (5:6,8,12,13; 6:1,16; 7:9,10,13,17; 8:1;  
 --12:11; 13:8; 14:1,4,10; 15:3; 17:14a,b; 19:7,9;  
 --21:9,14,22,23,27; 22:1,3).

iii). Titles and adjectives used for both God and Jesus.

--The Alpha and the Omega (God, 1:8; 21:6).  
 (Jesus, 22:13).  
 --The beginning and the end (God, 21:6).  
 (Jesus, 22:13).  
 --Lord (God, 4:11; 11:15; 15:4).  
 (Jesus, 11:8).  
 --Holy (God, 6:10; 16:5).  
 (Jesus, 3:7).  
 --True (God, 6:10).  
 (Jesus, 3:7).

At this point we will note that there are 10 titles and adjectives applied to God only, the most frequently used being Almighty (x9), God (x9), and Lord God (x8). There are 21 titles and adjectives applied to Jesus only, the most frequently used being The Lamb (x28), and Jesus (x7). If we take time to see in

which segment of the Apocalypse any of these titles appear--by which I mean the segments addressed to the believers on earth (1:4-3:22 and 22:6-21), or in what I have chosen to call the "Apocalyptic Drama" (4:1-22:5), one--to me--surprising fact emerges. The title 'the Lamb' is never used in any of the segments addressed specifically to the Christians on earth! Considering the fact that 'the Lamb' is the title most frequently used of Jesus in the Apocalypse, why is it so conspicuously absent from the Prologue, the Letters and the Epilogue? If part, at least, of the symbolism of the term is the humanity of Jesus, since in apocalyptic literature animals generally represent people,<sup>16</sup> then the author seems deliberately to have omitted this title in favour of those titles which will convey to the believers on earth the deity, eternality, power, majesty and lordship of Jesus. I can only assume that this is in the interests of eliciting from them greater loyalty and obedience. It is, I believe, a matter of emphasis. To the Christians on earth Jesus is portrayed as the Son of God (2:18) and the Risen Christ (1:12-20), while God is described as the Father of Jesus Christ (1:6). Within the Apocalyptic Drama, however, God is simply the Father of the Lamb, that is, of the human Jesus (14:1). In the heavenly realm, it seems, 'John' is at pains to maintain a significant distance between the person, status and roles of the Almighty, and those of Jesus, the slain and resurrected Lamb.

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<sup>16</sup> David S. Russell, Method and Message, 127.

If the disparity between the numbers of titles used (10 for God, 21 for Jesus) is meant to be significant, it appears that, for the author of the Apocalypse, the character and roles of Jesus are of greater concern than those of God, and therefore receive more narrative emphasis. I suggest the reason might be that 'John' was attempting to answer such questions as "How and where does Jesus, the risen Lord, fit into the company of heaven, and God's future plans?"--or, as Malina phrases the question, "[Since Jesus was] no longer in their midst, where could he be found, what was he doing, how does he fit into the scheme of reality created and governed by God the creator of all?"<sup>17</sup> Such questions must have been very urgent for the early Church (cf. 1 Cor 15:20-57). Further comments on the data resulting from these two analyses will be made in the summaries in part IV of this chapter.

### III. 'John's' Initial Presentation of Jesus.

#### 1. In the Summary in Rev 1:5-7.

After he has declared his prophetic authority for his fellow Christians in Rev 1:4, the author summarizes what the first century Church has come to believe about the now-risen Jesus, as follows:

What Jesus has revealed about God in his life, teachings and death is 'faithful' and trustworthy. As "Jesus Christ" (Messiah) he ranks above earthly kings (v.5), and is also "the firstborn of

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17 Bruce J. Malina, Star Visions and Sky Journeys, 100.

the dead".<sup>18</sup> He has shown his love to his followers in freeing them from sin by his atoning and sacrificial death, and has elevated them to the service of His God and Father as a kingdom of priests. He is therefore eternally worthy to receive glory and dominion, that is, to rule (v.6). He will soon return from heaven to earth in the clouds, in full view of all the world, to judge, not only those who crucified him, but "all the tribes of the earth" as well (v.7).

## 2. In 'John's' first Vision of Jesus.

Having established for his readers the basis of their mutual faith in Jesus, the author tries to expand their understanding by recounting his first vision of the risen Christ. D.S. Russell's observation about the "characters" in Jewish apocalyptic writings will help to clarify some details of the seer's visions, viz., that men and nations are symbolised by animals, good angels by men, and fallen angels by stars.<sup>19</sup> The author of Revelation adapts this convention by representing fallen angels by falling stars [e.g. Wormwood, 8:10-11; and the Devil, 12:9]. Perhaps he is also

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<sup>18</sup> Caird, Revelation, 16; Beasley-Murray, Revelation, 56; and Harrington, Revelation, 46, see this last phrase as a reflection of Ps 89:27, "I will make him (the Messiah) the firstborn, the highest of the kings of the earth". Harrington also links this with 1 Cor 15:20, where Christ is referred to as "the first fruits of those who have died", i.e., the "first fruits of general resurrection".

<sup>19</sup> David S. Russell, Method and Message, 127.



warning the angels ('stars') of the churches who are censured by Christ in the Letters that their positions are also precarious.

While in a trance-like state on the island of Patmos, 'John' was startled to hear a trumpet-like voice addressing him from behind, telling him to "write in a book what you see, and send it to the seven churches, to Ephesus, to Smyrna, to Pergamum, to Thyatira, to Sardis, to Philadelphia and to Laodicea" (Rev 1:11). He turned to look at the speaker, and saw seven golden lampstands, and in their midst "one like the Son of Man."

The author has borrowed the description from Daniel 7:13 (translated in the NRSV as "one like a human being"), where this figure in Daniel's vision is presented initially as a transcendent individual who is to usher in and rule over the apocalyptic kingdom. When Daniel asks a heavenly 'attendant' (v.16) what the vision means, he is told that the "one like a son of man", in fact, refers to "the people of the holy ones of the Most High"--that is, Jews who remain tenaciously loyal to Yahweh--they are the ones whom all nations shall serve and obey for ever (7:27). This issue reappears in the Son of Man sayings in the NT, where the exact meaning of the term is still unresolved. Some scholars believe that the term was not originally a true title, and that Jesus' recorded use of it as a self-designation may not reflect his own sense of his messianic destiny so much as the Christian community's

post-Easter christological reflection.<sup>20</sup>

The NRSV translates the phrase 'homoion huion anthrōpou' in 1:13 and in 14:14 as "the Son of Man". However, since the original phrase in Dan 7:13 (LXX), 'hōs huios anthrōpou' likewise contains no definite article, I feel that the RSV's "one like a son of man" is a more accurate translation. The NRSV is nevertheless right to identify this figure, both here and in 14:14 as the slain and risen Jesus, because he so identifies himself in 1:17-18. Some scholars argue against this in 14:14,<sup>21</sup> but since these are the only two uses of this term in the whole of the Apocalypse, and the "one like the Son of Man" is undoubtedly the risen Christ in chapter 1, I can see no justification for a different identification in 14:14.

This "one in human form",<sup>22</sup> standing and walking among the seven lampstands (the seven churches in Asia, 1:20), is clothed in a long robe, with a golden girdle around his chest. This was the garb normally worn by the Israelite High Priest and by kings and princes.<sup>23</sup> This regal heavenly being has hair as "white as white wool", signifying the wide experience and great wisdom of extreme old age (cf. 'The Ancient One' in Dan 7:9; 'John' has deliberately used Daniel's language here). Eyes "like a flame of fire" denotes

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<sup>20</sup> Reginald H. Fuller, "Son of Man", Harper's Bible Dictionary. Paul J. Achtemeier (ed). (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1985), 981.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Kealey, Apocalypse, 187-88.

<sup>22</sup> Harrington, Revelation, 50.

<sup>23</sup> Kealey, Apocalypse, 76. Cf. also Dan.10:5-6).

a piercing gaze from which nothing can be hidden--and may also imply the blazing anger of a righteous judge. "Feet like burnished bronze" signifies the invincible power of a mighty ruler. As Kealey says, "The glowing feet can overcome all opposition like hot metal burning what is in its way" <sup>24</sup> (cf. the crumbling feet of clay of the image in Nebuchadnezzar's dream [Dan 2:33-34] ). "A voice like the sound of many waters" implies that his speech is strong and authoritative--and his will unopposable. The risen Christ holds seven stars in his right hand; this suggests that he not only controls the seven churches in Asia and their 'angels', which he also protects, but rules over all astral beings.

From the mouth of the risen Christ comes "a sharp two-edged sword", which suggests the tongue-like shape of the Roman short sword--the two-edged sword which symbolised the responsibility of the Roman governors for justice and judgment--including, of course, capital punishment.<sup>25</sup> Finally, a face "like the sun shining with full force" may well have been inspired by Mal 4:2a: "For you who revere my name the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings"--a verse which early Christians saw as a messianic prediction which they applied to Christ as savior. Rudolph indicates that "the sun of righteousness [with healing in its wings]" was actually of Egyptian origin, and was identified in Rome

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 76.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 76.

with "Sol Invictus".<sup>26</sup> Thus, 'John's' use of this language probably served the dual purpose of glorifying Christ while simultaneously negating the claims of the Roman sun god.

When the seer, overcome by holy terror in the presence of this overwhelming vision fell down "as though dead", the heavenly figure touched him with his right hand, saying, "Do not be afraid; I am the first and the last and the living one. I was dead, and see, I am alive for ever and ever; and I have the keys of Death and Hades" (v.18); that is, Christ claims to have the power to release those confined in Death's prison. This speech of identification was followed by a second command to write "what you have seen, what is and what is to take place after this" (1:19).

### 3. Clues From the Letters.

The letters to the individual churches share a common format. 'John' portrays Christ as using the current convention of self-identification by the writer at the beginning of each letter--and in each case the identifying phrases are drawn from the seer's initial vision of Jesus in 1:12-18--with some additions which will be identified by capitalization and underlining. Following this self-identification the risen Christ expresses a deep awareness of the difficulties in each local congregation, acknowledges their

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<sup>26</sup> W. Rudolph, in Haggai-Sacharja-Maleachi, 289. Quoted in Richard R. Deutsch, "Calling God's People to Obedience: A Commentary on the Book of Malachi", in Graham S. Ogden and Richard R. Deutsch, Joel and Malachi: A Promise of Hope--A Call to Obedience 61-120 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987) 112-113.

successes, condemns their failures and demands their repentance (only Smyrna and Philadelphia have no need to repent). Each church receives the same exhortation, "Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit [through Jesus] is saying to the churches". There follow promises of specific rewards to "everyone who conquers". Thus the author presents the risen Jesus to the churches as their Lord and Judge, who administers both blame and praise, both punishment and reward. As we consider the self-identifying phrases which Jesus uses it will become evident that they are quite specific to the particular situation of each church.

a) To the church in Ephesus.

"These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands" (1:16,13). In this letter to the angel of the church at Ephesus Jesus, who "walks among the lampstands" (the churches), rebukes the Christians there for their lack of love and demands their repentance. If they do not comply their Lord will "remove [their] lampstand from its place" (2:5), that is, they will cease to be a church.

b) To the church in Smyrna.

"These are the words of the first and last, who was dead and came to life" (1:17), is addressed to a congregation for some of whom suffering and perhaps even death seem to be imminent. They are told not to be fearful, but to be faithful if necessary even "until death", when they, like their Lord before them, will receive "the crown of life" (2:10).

c) To the church in Pergamum.

"These are the words of him who has the sharp two-edged sword" (1:16), is addressed to the Christians in Pergamum. They are first commended for their courageous witness to Jesus, and then rebuked for allowing the Nicolaitan 'heresy' to continue among them unchallenged. They are warned to repent, otherwise Christ the righteous Judge will come to them to "make war" against the heretics with "the sword of [his] mouth" (2:16).

d) To the church in Thyatira.

"These are the words of THE SON OF GOD who has eyes like a flame of fire and whose feet are like burnished bronze" (1:14,15). This statement of identification conveys to the Christians in Thyatira the blazing anger of Christ and is followed by threats of the direst of punishments against a seductive heretical prophetess and her followers. This letter, because it contains a title (Son of God) which is not drawn from 'John's' first vision of Christ, will be dealt with more fully a little later, as will the letters to Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea, for the same reason.

e) To the church in Sardis.

"These are the words of him who has THE SEVEN SPIRITS OF GOD and the seven stars". (1:4, [Prologue], 16,20).

f) To the church in Philadelphia.

"These are the words of THE HOLY ONE, THE TRUE ONE, WHO HAS THE KEY OF DAVID, who opens and no one will shut, who shuts and no one opens" (3:7).

g) To the church in Laodicea (3:14).

"The words of THE AMEN, the faithful and TRUE WITNESS, THE

ORIGIN OF GOD'S CREATION". (1:5, [Prologue], "faithful witness").

The additional elements which are not drawn from the vision of Christ in 1:12-18 are:

1. The Son of God (2:18, to Thyatira).
2. He who has the seven spirits of God (3:1, to Sardis).
3. The holy one, the true one, who has the key of David (3:7, to Philadelphia).
4. The Amen, the True witness, The origin of God's Creation (3:14, to Laodicea).
1. The Son of God (2:18, to Thyatira).

This is the only occurrence of this title in the entire Apocalypse, and it is significant that 'John' portrays Jesus as claiming it for himself. Caird sees the use of the title in this verse as "prepar[ing] the way for the quotation from Ps.2 [in verse 27 at the end of the letter], the psalm in which the Messiah is addressed by God as 'my Son'".<sup>27</sup>

Of course, by the time that all four gospels were written down, the title 'Son of God' had already been ascribed to Jesus by the early church, as they tried to evaluate the significance of his life and teachings--and more especially of his crucifixion and resurrection. All of the evangelists, the writer of the Fourth Gospel in particular, came to be convinced of his messianic status and destiny, so Caird is quite right in linking the title to the messianic adoption formula in Ps 2.'

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<sup>27</sup> Caird, Revelation, 43.

The author uses the title 'Son of God' to add weight to his castigation of the believers in the church at Thyatira. Deliberately recalling the "eyes like a flame of fire" and the "feet like burnished bronze" of the all-seeing, all-powerful risen Christ of his vision on Patmos, 'John' may be expressing his own anger as well as Christ's, against the too-tolerant members of that congregation (2:20). His burning indignation is directed primarily against "that woman Jezebel who calls herself a prophet", but he is angry, too, that the members of this church are not prepared to challenge her and, if needs be, to excommunicate her along with her followers (cf. 2:22; They must repent of her doings !)--instead the members 'tolerate' her, and allow her to 'beguile' the Christians into 'fornication' (which may mean either sexual sin or idolatry). The threats against this heretical group are among the harshest in any of the letters, and 'John' portrays Christ as backing up his threats by claiming his ultimate authority within the church as 'The Son of God'.

It is noteworthy that the details of "eyes like a flame of fire" and "feet like burnished bronze" which the author uses in 2:18 to describe the Son of God figure conspicuously in his earlier portrayal in 1:14-15 of the Son of Man. This suggests that, by this time in the early Church, the two terms--which both carry messianic connotations--are virtually interchangeable. Concerning the two uses of the words from Dan. 7:13 "one like a son of man" which occur in Rev 1:13 and 14:14 Colpe writes: "...[I]n keeping with the integration of messianic statements Son of Man sayings are



transferred to the Son of God".<sup>28</sup>

2. He who has 'The seven Spirits of God' (3:1, to Sardis).

The seven spirits of God are before God's Throne in 1:4 and in 4:5, and are servants and messengers of God. Here, in 3:1, the risen Christ claims that they are at his disposal too. When the Lamb first appears in heaven (5:6), he is seen to have 'seven horns and seven eyes which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth'. Some scholars see this as a reference to Is.11:2, where the Messiah is to receive the "manifold energies of the Spirit of God".<sup>29</sup> Caird also sees these seven spirits as "The Spirit of God in all its fulness".<sup>30</sup> It seems to be no accident that these seven spirits are sent out into all the earth just as the risen Lamb first appears in heaven, for had not John the evangelist portrayed Jesus as saying of the Advocate (the Holy Spirit), "I shall send [him] to you from the Father" (15:26)? and again in 16:7, "If I do not go away the Advocate will not come to you: but if I go I will send him to you"? I suspect that the seer had these words of the evangelist in mind, when he portrayed Jesus as claiming to possess the seven spirits in the introduction to

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<sup>28</sup> C. Colpe, "The Son of Man", TDNT (abridged). G. Kittel and G. Friedrich, (eds), 1215-1223. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986. 1222.

<sup>29</sup> Bruce M. Metzger, Commentary in the footnote to Revelation 1:4 in The New Oxford Annotated Bible, RSV, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 1493.

<sup>30</sup> Caird, Revelation, 75.

this letter to Sardis (3:1), and as sending them out into all the earth in Rev 5:6.<sup>31</sup>

Caird insightfully describes the church in Sardis, to whom Christ says, "You have the name of being alive, and you are dead", as "the perfect model of inoffensive Christianity, unable to distinguish between the peace of well-being and the peace of death". It is fitting, he says, that when Christ addresses this congregation, he does so as "the one who holds the seven spirits", for "only the life-giving Spirit of God in all its fulness can bring the dead to life".<sup>32</sup>

3. The Holy one, the True one, who has the Key of David (3:7, to Philadelphia).

"The Holy One" was a title frequently used of God in the OT (Is 40:25; 43:15 etc.; cf. the trisagion in Rev 4:8), and in Revelation 8:10 he is addressed as "Sovereign Lord, holy and true". Here, in applying these terms to himself, Jesus seems to be equating himself with Almighty God, but the words which follow rule out a straight identification. "Who has the key of David" refers to Isaiah 22:22, and, specifically, to Eliakim, who was about to be elevated to chief steward in the household of king Hezekiah. As such, he was to carry "the key of the house of David" on his

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<sup>31</sup> In a personal communication Dr. Adele Reinhartz indicated how closely this parallels Jesus' sending out of the disciples in Matt 10:1-42; Mark 6:7-13; 3:13-19; and Luke 9:1; 6:12-16.

<sup>32</sup> Caird, Revelation, 48.

shoulder, so that "he shall open and none shall shut: and he shall shut and none shall open" (cf. Rev 3:7). Caird quotes this as an example of delegated authority<sup>33</sup>--what Eliakim did was done in the name and on behalf of his master, and with the full backing of the king; but, with this proviso, his authority was total and fully recognised. Similarly then, for 'John', authority for allowing or disallowing entrance into God's kingdom has been delegated by God to the risen Christ.

#### 4. The Amen, the True Witness, the Origin of God's Creation (3:14, to Laodicea).

"Amen" was and is a term used to confirm and verify perceived Truth, and is appropriately used of Christ here, whose words, since he is the faithful and true witness, cannot be disputed. What he has declared about God in his life, death, and teachings both constitute and affirm the Truth. There is no equivocation in his testimony--but equivocation was the hallmark of the Laodicean community. The effect of their Christian witness in the city was neither positive nor negative, but neutral. Laodicea was a wealthy city, and the congregation was affluent (v17), a fact which made them spiritually complacent. As "the origin of God's creation" Christ wants to breathe new life, new vitality into their sick, listless body, which is poor, blind and naked (v17), in spite of their claim to be rich, prosperous, and in need of nothing. In

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<sup>33</sup> G.B. Caird, The Language and Imagery of the Bible, (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1980), 24.

this letter, the author has characterized Jesus as forthright, courageous, faithful and reliable, willing to forgive the penitent (3:20), and to effect reconciliation with them, even to the point of welcoming them personally to the eucharistic table.

#### IV. Summaries of Characterizations Thus Far.

The divine titles found throughout the Apocalypse, by whomsoever they may be used, constitute part of the author's characterizations of God and Jesus. We may sum up this characterization through the ascription of titles as follows:

God is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end, who is and who was and who is to come, that is, the eternal deity. He is the Lord God, the Almighty, the Living God, the God of Heaven and the Lord of the earth--he is also the God and Father of Jesus Christ. He is the Sovereign Lord (cf. the Almighty), God, Holy and True, and the King of the nations.

Jesus is the first, the last and the living one (cf. 'Who is and was and is to come' used of God). To the Christians on earth he is the Lord Jesus, Son of God and Son of Man, and Jesus Christ, the ruler of kings on earth. He is the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the origin of God's Creation, and the firstborn of the dead. He is 'homoion huion anthrōpou',<sup>34</sup> and this I see as one

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<sup>34</sup> That is, "one like a son of man". The term designates a heavenly being in apocalyptic writings.

instance of the author's 'non-specificity' (Alter's term).<sup>39</sup> One suspects that the term "The Son of Man", used as a title for Jesus in the gospels (Matt 19:28; Mark 9:31; Luke 18:31; John 13:31; etc.) would have been familiar to 'John' and to his readers/listeners as well.

The titles applied to both God and Jesus are, The Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end, and Lord; the two adjectives which are applied to both are Holy, and True. The words which Jesus is portrayed as using of himself, ego eimi ho prōtos kai ho eschatos kai ho zōn, ("I am the first and the last and the living one") in 1:17-18 mean essentially the same as the terms the author uses for God in 1:8, "ho ōn kai ho ēn kai ho erchomenos", (who is and who was and who is to come), but I find it noteworthy that 'John' did not use the same terminology for both--he seems to be deliberately avoiding a straight identification of Jesus with God.

To the believers in Asia God is described as the "God and Father" of Jesus Christ in 1:6, and Jesus calls him "My Father" in 2:28; 3:5, and 21. Also, in 2:18 Jesus is portrayed as claiming to be the "Son of God". In the Apocalyptic Drama God is referred to as the "Father" of the Lamb in 14:1. I find it noteworthy that nowhere throughout the whole Apocalypse is this relationship ever claimed by God, nor even verbally acknowledged by him.

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<sup>39</sup> See p 34.

The gospel writers could depict God as saying "This is my Son", (Matt 3:17) or "You are my Son", (Mark 1:11; Luke 3:22), but the author of the Apocalypse stopped short of that, and it is a matter of speculation as to why he did. We have noted already that the most frequently used titles for God are "the Almighty" and "God"--two titles which are never applied to Jesus. Instead, the title most frequently used of him is "the Lamb", the human redeemer, who was worshipped in the Church as the Son of God, but never in the heavenly realm is that title ascribed to him. We remember that, while Eliakim had great authority and responsibility delegated to him by king Hezekiah, he was never thought of as the king's equal, but was completely subordinate to him. By using this metaphor for the risen Christ in Rev 3:7, and by omitting any claim on God's part to be the Father of Jesus, the author may be implying a similar difference in status between the Lord God, the Almighty, and the slain and risen Lamb.

Most of the summary of pre-Apocalypse Christian doctrine in Revelation 1:5-7 has already been covered in this summary, with the exception of the claim that Jesus is soon to return in the clouds to judge all humanity (1:7).

In the seer's first vision Jesus appears as "one like a son of man" (The Son of Man; NRSV)--a heavenly being, both High Priest and King, and all-wise like the Ancient One in Daniel 7:9. He is portrayed to the believers on earth as exercising his protective

control over the churches and their heavenly counterparts, which implies his authority over all other astral beings as well. His glory, light and power are as overwhelming as the noonday Sun; he controls the powers of Death and the Grave, and holds the authority, under God, of the highest-ranking Judge.

The Letters also present Jesus as the all-seeing judge, who commends and rewards, reproves, disciplines, punishes, and demands repentance from his followers. He is portrayed as being particularly angry over the deceit, lying and dissembling which, according to 'John', are present in the churches.<sup>36</sup> The church in Ephesus for example, has experienced "those who claim to be apostles but are not" (2:2), while the churches in Smyrna and Philadelphia are troubled by "those who say that they are Jews and are not" (2:9; 3:9).<sup>37</sup> The churches in Pergamum and Thyatira have among them members who disseminate the false teaching of the Nicolaitans, thus deceiving and 'beguiling' newer Christian converts (2:15,20). While the congregation in Sardis, which is

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<sup>36</sup> Pilch contends that such activities were acceptable in the society of the day when performed in the pursuit of personal or family honor, or for the protection of members of the "In-group", in this case, fellow Christians. See John J. Pilch, "Lying and Deceit in the Letters to the Seven Churches: Perspectives from Cultural Anthropology", Biblical Theology Bulletin, Vol.22, pp126-135.

<sup>37</sup> Harrington sees this as implying conflict over the title "Jew". Christians, he says, "were claiming that they were the genuine "Jews", true heirs of the promises to Israel (see Rom 9:8); understandably, the ethnic Jews of Smyrna reacted angrily." Revelation, 58.

almost completely dead spiritually, masquerades as a vital, flourishing 'successful' church (3:1), the Christians in Laodicea deceive the citizens around them into believing that their church also is a thriving, spiritually healthy community, though, in fact, it is "wretched, pitiable, poor, blind and naked" (3:17).

'John' reproves the Christians in Asia (except for those in Smyrna and Philadelphia) for what he perceives to be their lack of truthfulness and integrity because, to him, it is the honor of Christ himself which is being compromised. Since Jesus was The Faithful and True Witness, who was not prepared to spare himself even the shame of death by crucifixion in his testimony to the Truth of God, the author challenges his fellow Christians to follow their Lord's example, and to triumph over fear and weakness as Christ himself had done.

This unmitigated intolerance of lying and deceit, appears again in 14:5; 21:8,27; and 22:15, and serves to emphasise the "faithful witness" of Jesus. In 3:20 'John' softens his characterization of Jesus as the uncompromising judge of the Church, by showing him as also loving those whom he reproves and chastens, and as waiting to forgive and restore those who truly repent (3:20).

These summaries show how much the author has already disclosed of the characters of God and Jesus through his ascription of carefully selected titles, adjectives and descriptive phrases, and in his account of his vision on Patmos of the risen Christ. In the



next chapter we will discover how 'John' goes on to portray Jesus  
in the Apocalyptic Drama.

## Chapter Two

### 'John's' Characterization of Jesus in the Apocalyptic Drama.

In chapter one we examined 'John's' portrayals to the believers in Asia of Jesus and God, and of their relationship to each other. Chapter two will focus primarily on the five most significant pericopes in the Apocalyptic Drama which deal with the character and roles of Jesus. These are:

1. 5:1-14. The Arrival and Advancement of "The Lamb" in Heaven.
2. 6:1-17. The Catastrophes Initiated by His Breaking of the Seven Seals.
3. 14:14-20. As Son of Man He Reaps (Judges) the Earth.
4. 19:11-21. The Divine Warrior: God's Avenging Representative.
5. 22:6-16. Christ's Final Words to 'John's' Contemporaries.

#### 1. Rev 5:1-14. The Arrival and Advancement of The Lamb in Heaven.

After he had given to the seer the seven messages for the churches in Asia, the vision of Christ vanishes, and 'John', looking heavenward, is surprised to see a door into heaven standing open. The now familiar trumpet-like voice of Christ summoned the seer from beyond the door, saying, "Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this". 'John', again in a trance-

like state ("in the spirit" 4:2), is immediately transported through the open door.

### The Heavenly Realm

The setting in which the seer finds himself is God's dwelling-place, his heavenly temple, which the temple in Jerusalem was intended to duplicate. God's "Throne Room" in heaven is the equivalent of the Holy of Holies in the Jerusalem temple, where stood the magnificent throne known to and mentioned by the prophets Isaiah (Isa 6:1) and Ezekiel (Ezek 1:4-28a; 10:1-14). The only other items in heaven's Holy of Holies, as in the Solomonic temple, are the Ark of the covenant (Rev 11:19; cf. 1 Kgs 8:6), and the altar of sacrifice (Rev 6:9; cf. 1 Kgs 6:22). Outside the Holy of Holies John sees the customary lampstands (seven of them in Rev 1:12; ten of them in 1 Kgs 7:49), and the altar of incense (cf. 1 Kgs 7:48), where the smoke from the incense intermingles with the prayers of 'the saints' on earth (5:8; 8:3). It appears that seven of God's angels (probably archangels, sometimes called 'the angels of the presence'), like the High Priests of old, have access to the Holy of Holies, where they receive their orders from God, and move back into the "Nave" of the temple (Rev 14:15, 17, 18, 15:6; etc., cf. 1 Kgs 6:17) to fulfil his commands. In this sacred setting God is praised day and night without ceasing (4:8).

While what the seer describes in chapter four pertains to "the situation which existed in heaven before the advent of Christ",<sup>1</sup> in

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<sup>1</sup> Rowland, The Open Heaven, 425.

chapter five he reveals events that occurred subsequently in the heavenly realm, beginning with the arrival of the resurrected Jesus. In this vision 'John' describes Jesus as "A Lamb" (that is, a human, since the author seems to be adhering to the apocalyptic convention of using animals to represent people; see p.40, FN 10), which looked as if it had been slaughtered, but was now standing. The author may have had Isaiah 53 in mind, but with his prolific use of the Exodus theme throughout the Apocalypse, the imagery of the Paschal lamb for Jesus seems more likely. Scholars differ as to the significance of the fact that the slaughtered Lamb is seen to be standing. The primary meaning of this symbol seems to be that Jesus has been raised from death to a new life in heaven. Malina refers to Stephen's vision of Jesus standing at the right hand of God (Acts 7:55), and comments, "This posture is that of an avenger rising to his feet to exact vengeance for dishonour done to God".<sup>2</sup> I find this an acceptable interpretation, but feel that Rowland is closer to the truth when he comments on Stephen's words in Acts 7:56; "Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God". This, he says, "leaves the hearer in no doubt of the subordination of the Son of Man to God....the Son of Man stands in Stephen's vision precisely because that was his subordinate position in the heavenly court".<sup>3</sup> My reason for siding with Rowland is that in 'John's' heaven only God

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<sup>2</sup> Malina, Star Visions (Transcript), 114.

<sup>3</sup> Rowland, The Open Heaven, 370.

and the twenty-four elders were seated. All others stood waiting to do God's bidding, and this chapter, I believe, does not depict a judgment scene such as Malina's interpretation would necessitate.

This ram Lamb has seven horns. In apocalyptic the number of horns ascribed to a male animal implies the extent of a ruler's power. Since the number 7 signifies completion and totality, Christ is pictured as omnipotent--a divine attribute. The Lamb also has "seven eyes which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth". Here the author portrays the resurrected Jesus as being omniscient also--another divine attribute. As Malina has observed, "All the imagery associated with the lamb is that of power, force, control and conquest."<sup>4</sup> One of the elders draws the seer's attention to the Lamb as the conquering Messiah (v.5), and declares that, as such, he can open the seven-sealed scroll which is in God's right hand (5:1).

Ellul sees the contents of this scroll as the revelation of God's acts in all of OT and NT history, that is, as dealing with the past.<sup>5</sup> J.J. Collins does not agree. He maintains--I think correctly--that "History is foreshortened in Revelation.... Interest is focused on the period between the death of Jesus and the end."<sup>6</sup> For me, therefore, the sealed scroll symbolises God's

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<sup>4</sup> Malina, Star Visions, (Transcript), 137. But see also Caird, Revelation, 75.

<sup>5</sup> Jacques Ellul, Apocalypse: The Book of Revelation. Translator, Geo. W. Schreiner. New York: Seabury, 1977, 32.

<sup>6</sup> J.J. Collins, The Apocalyptic Imagination. 213.

unalterable future plan for humanity and, indeed, for all of creation.<sup>7</sup> It may be seen as an 'updated version' of the Babylonian Tablets of Fate (Destiny), which Marduk, the Creator-God, sealed and fastened to his breast after creating heaven and earth.<sup>8</sup> The fact that, in 4:11, immediately prior to the first mention of the sealed scroll (5:1), the heavenly court has just concluded a hymn of praise to the Creator God, seems to corroborate this interpretation.

The significance of the seven seals is twofold. In the first place they authenticate both the contents of the scroll and their author, they also preserve the message of the writer for the scrutiny of the intended recipient alone. The breaking of these seals will not only reveal the hitherto secret events inscribed in the scroll, but, as the subsequent narrative clearly shows, also initiate them.

When the Lamb takes the scroll from God's hand, the members of the heavenly court sing a new song--of praise to the Lamb (v.9). Up until now all worship has been addressed to the Almighty Creator God (4:8,11). The new song declares that the Lamb is worthy to open the scroll,

For you were slaughtered and by your blood you ransomed  
for God saints from every tribe and language and people  
and nation: You made them to be a kingdom and priests

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. Caird, Revelation, 72.

<sup>8</sup> Speiser, Translator, "Enuma Elish", ANET, J.B. Pritchard, ed. 67.

serving our God, And they will reign on the earth.

(5:9b-10)

In the first three chapters of the Apocalypse the author has dealt with the relationship of the resurrected Jesus to the believers in Asia--he is their Lord and Judge. Chapter four provides the setting for the Apocalyptic Drama, in which the term that the author uses almost exclusively for Jesus is "The Lamb". This suggests that, to the seer, both the humanity of Jesus and his redemptive death are of paramount significance. This is because a) it was as a truly human person and not as a theos aner ("divine man") that Jesus faced the cross and conquered the powers of sin and death. b) It is also because it is as a resurrected man that he first appears before God in the Apocalyptic Drama.

Chapters 5-22 reveal the development of Jesus' relationship to Almighty God, and his acceptance in heaven, which occurs in three successive stages (5:11-14).

Jesus was recognised as Lord in the churches from the time of his resurrection, but the author has presented his acceptance into heaven as more of a process. Recognition was granted first by the Heavenly Council (5:8-9), then by all the Heavenly Hosts (vv.11-12), and finally by all Creation (v.13). In chapter 5 he is declared worthy to rule; by the end of the narrative section (22:7) he is Vice-Ruler with God, and his 'Functional Equivalent'.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> M. Eugene Boring, "The Theology of Revelation: 'The Lord Our God the Almighty Reigns'". pp257-269. Interpretation: JBibTheol 40 ('86), 265.

To accent this progression to 'functional equivalency' with God--a concept which I find very helpful--the author, in the Epilogue, quotes Jesus as saying, "I am the Alpha and the Omega...the beginning and the end" (22:13). It can be no mere coincidence that these are the same titles that God applies to himself in 21:6. Although the Almighty does not address Jesus anywhere in the Apocalypse, his actions in releasing the sealed scroll into his hand, and in ultimately sharing the Throne with him, are clear evidence of his acceptance of the Lamb as a 'worthy' Vice-Ruler.

But why did the author create this particular scenario to picture for his fellow Christians how the man, Jesus of Nazareth, crucified and raised from the dead, was exalted, not only into Heaven, but beyond that "to God's right hand"? Caird provides a helpful clue when he says, "...John had as guide the preaching tradition of the primitive church that Jesus 'was appointed Son of God (cf. Ps 2:7) with power after he rose from the dead.'"<sup>10</sup> (Rom 1:4).

This may well have been the author's starting-point, but there was an OT figure whose life story, as 'John' would have recognised, was paralleled by that of Jesus to an astonishing degree. That figure was Joseph, Jacob's favorite son, who, I believe, has a greater effect on the content of the Apocalypse than the single mention of his name in 7:8 might suggest.

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<sup>10</sup> Caird, Revelation, 149-50.



It is significant, I believe, that the name of Joseph is included in the list of the twelve Tribes of the people of Israel who are marked by God's seal in 7:5, because, as Hooke categorically states, "Joseph never was a tribe"<sup>11</sup>--and Joseph per se was never referred to by that term. In most of the tribal lists in Numbers (e.g., 2:3-29), the names of Joseph and Levi are replaced by the names of Joseph's two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh. In the list of tribes in Revelation 7:1-8, however, it is the names of Dan and Ephraim which are omitted. These two tribes were "infamous for their idolatry" throughout the Hebrew Bible,<sup>12</sup> and in view of 'John's' strong call for faithfulness to God and Christ, their idolatrous reputations may have been the cause for these omissions. The author's inclusion of "the Tribe of Joseph", I suggest, was deliberate--and not in any sense an oversight.

Whereas conservative commentators on the Apocalypse generally, take the view that every reference to Israel in the book is only a symbol for the Christian Church, more liberal scholars like Feuillet,<sup>13</sup> and Ellul,<sup>14</sup> have less exclusive attitudes.

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<sup>11</sup> Samuel H. Hooke, "Genesis", Peake's Commentary on the Bible. pp175-207. Matthew Black and H.H. Rowley, Eds. (London: Thomas Nelson, 1962) 205.

<sup>12</sup> Schussler Fiorenza, Revelation: Vision of a Just World. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 67. cf. Jeroboam's golden calves set up in Dan. 1 Kgs 12:28-30; Hos 5:3; 7:1; 8:11; etc.

<sup>13</sup> Feuillet writes, "the 144,000 members of the twelve tribes of Israel marked with the seal (7:1-8) which the author opposes to the innumerable throng of converted gentiles (7:9), symbolises the Remnant of Israel...." L'Apocalypse, 50.

<sup>14</sup> Ellul, Apocalypse, 168.

I suggest, however, that the primary opposition suggested by the two groups in chapter 7 is not, as Feuillet claims, between the "Remnant of Israel" (the 144,000 from the 12 tribes, 7:4-8), and the "innumerable throng of converted gentiles" (7:9), but between all of God's faithful people still alive on earth (cf. 7:1-4)--Jews and Gentiles--and those already in heaven ("before the throne", v.9), Jews and Gentiles again, who have been redeemed by the blood of the Lamb (v.14). A. Y. Collins writes, "Since John claims the name 'Jew' for Christians (2:9; 3:9), he does not distinguish between Israel and the Church".<sup>15</sup> Schüssler Fiorenza expresses a similar point of view when she says, "It is...likely that in Rev 7:1-7 the twelve tribes signify the eschatologically restored Israel of which the church is a significant part."<sup>16</sup>

In Revelation 15:3, where the author mentions "the song of Moses, the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb", it is clear that he has both redeemed peoples of God in mind--and at the end of the Apocalyptic Drama, both communities are eternally memorialized through the names of their twelve founders. Those of the twelve tribes of Israel--presumably as listed in Revelation 7:5-8, therefore including Joseph again--are inscribed over the twelve gates in the city walls of the New Jerusalem (21:12), and those of the twelve Apostles of the Lamb are inscribed on the twelve foundations of the city (21:14).

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<sup>15</sup> A. Y. Collins, "The Apocalypse (Revelation)", New Jerome Biblical Commentary, 1008.

<sup>16</sup> Schüssler Fiorenza, Revelation, 67.

There is at least one other reference to Joseph--by inference--in the Apocalypse, which is related to the great portent of the "woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars" (12:1), who, after strong labor, gave birth to the Messiah (v.5). A great deal of scholarly debate has centred on just who the author intended her to represent.<sup>17</sup>

Ramsey Michaels notes other biblical and early Jewish texts where a people of God is likened to a woman in labor, for example, Isa 9:6-7; 26:17-18; and 66:7-9; Mic 4:10; and 1QH 3:3-18. He concludes that this pregnant woman is possibly an idealization of Israel or Jerusalem.<sup>18</sup>

My suggestion is that the author drew these symbols of sun, moon and twelve stars in 12:1 from Joseph's dream in Gen 37:9. This was by way of reminding his readers that Jacob, father of Joseph, had earlier been renamed Israel at Peniel (Gen 32:28), so that, according to the author of Genesis, Joseph and his brothers were the very first "children of Israel". Thus the sun, moon and twelve stars of Joseph's dream identified the woman in 12:1 as faithful Israel,<sup>19</sup> who through much travail gave birth first to the

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<sup>17</sup> See, for example, Mounce, Book of Revelation, 235; Kealey, Apocalypse 167; and Ellul, Apocalypse, 190.

<sup>18</sup> Ramsey Michaels, Interpreting the Book of Revelation (Grand Rapids MI: Baker Book House, 1992), 124. Ref. for 1QH3:3-18 is: G. Vermes, The Dead Sea Scrolls in English (Aylesbury, England: BPCC Hazell Books, 1990), 171-72. See also M.E. Boismard, "The Apocalypse", Introduction to the New Testament. 718.

<sup>19</sup> Kealey, Apocalypse, 167.

Messiah (v.5), and then to "the rest of her children; those who keep the commandments and hold the testimony of Jesus" (12:17).

These three allusions to Israel's son Joseph suggest that, in 'John's' estimation, he played the same kind of key role in Old Testament redemption history as he sees Jesus currently playing in the Church. It will be helpful if the significant, parallel events in the lives of Joseph and Jesus are indicated, as follows. The details concerning Jesus in the first 9 parallels are drawn from the gospels. I suggest that 'John' is using nos. 10-15, which I have marked with asterisks, from the familiar Genesis account of Joseph's rise to the position of Vice-Regent (Vizier) in Egypt to create a comparable sequence of events to depict Jesus' rise to the same position in heaven.

1. JOSEPH was destined to become Vice-Regent of Egypt.

JESUS was destined to become Vice-Regent of Heaven.

2. JOSEPH was his father's favourite son (Gen 37:3).

JESUS was his father's beloved son (Mark 1:11).

3. JOSEPH was rejected by his family (Gen 37:20).

JESUS was rejected by his family (John 7:2-5; Mark 3:19-21; 31-35).

4. JOSEPH was sold into enemy hands (Gen 37:28).

JESUS was sold into enemy hands (Matt 26:14-15).

5. JOSEPH's chief desire was to honour God (Gen 39:9).

JESUS' chief desire was to honour God (John 5:30; 8:29).

6. JOSEPH's enemies sought to entrap him, but he remained a faithful and true witness to God (Gen 39:10).

JESUS' enemies sought to entrap him, but he remained a faithful and true witness to God (Matt 22:15-33).

7. JOSEPH was brought to trial and condemned on the basis of false testimony (Gen 39:16-20).

JESUS was brought to trial and condemned on the basis of false testimony (Luke 23:14).

8. JOSEPH showed that he was worthy during the time of his humiliation (Gen 39:22-23).

JESUS showed that he was worthy during the time of his humiliation (Luke 23:47; Matt 27:54).

9. JOSEPH was indwelt by the spirit of God (Gen 41:38).

JESUS was indwelt by the spirit of God (John 14:10).

- 10.\* JOSEPH was vindicated, and exalted to the rank of Vice-Regent by the Ruler of Egypt, and adopted into the royal court (Gen 41:42-43).

JESUS was vindicated, and exalted to the rank of Vice-Regent by the Ruler of Heaven, and adopted into the heavenly court (Rev 5:6).

- 11.\* JOSEPH was given a new name and a bride (Gen 41:45).

JESUS was given a new name (Rev 3:12) and a bride (Rev 19:7).<sup>20</sup>

- 12.\* JOSEPH was given clothing appropriate to his new rank as ruler and priest (Gen 41:42; Cf. his divining cup in Gen 44:5. Divination was a priestly function).

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<sup>20</sup> Cf. A.Y.Collins, "The Apocalypse (Revelation)" The New Jerome Biblical Commentary. 1013.

JESUS was clothed in garments appropriate for a ruler and priest (Rev 1:13).

13.\* JOSEPH's was a delegated authority (Gen 41:42).

JESUS' was a delegated authority (Rev 3:7).

14.\* JOSEPH had an ultimate Ruler over him--the King of Egypt (Gen 41:40).

JESUS had an ultimate Ruler over him--the Almighty. (In Rev the order of precedence is always, GOD--then the Lamb (Rev 5:13; 6:16; 7:10; etc..).

15.\* JOSEPH's new rank was recognised and acclaimed in three progressive stages:

a) First by the members of the King's council ("the wise men of Egypt") before whom he interpreted Pharaoh's dreams (Gen 41:8).

b) Then by all the servants of the King's household (Gen 41:38).

c) Finally by all the people in the entire realm (Gen 41:43).

JESUS' new rank was recognised and acclaimed in three progressive stages:

a) First by the members of God's heavenly council (Rev 5:8-10).

b) Then by all God's angel-servants in his heavenly "household" (Rev 5:11-12).

c) Finally by every creature in the entire realm of Creation. (Rev 5:13).

With regard to c) above, D.E.Aune has noted that:

the consent of the governed in the making of emperors was taken very seriously in antiquity, both in reality and in imperial propaganda designed to justify or legitimate the assumption of power on the part of particular emperors.<sup>21</sup>

He quotes Klaus Dehler: "In the Roman principate the consensus motif won worldwide (my emphasis) significance for the first time."<sup>22</sup> I have no quarrel with either of these statements--but since Imperialism antedated the Roman Empire by many centuries--even millennia--I am convinced that the propagandistic value of "the consent of the governed" (whether 'voluntary' or enforced) is as ancient as Imperialism itself, and was probably already a time-honoured practice, in the OT patriarchal period, as the Joseph narrative suggests.<sup>23</sup>

The writings of Philo (born c.20 BCE) indicate the tremendous significance to the Jews of his time of such OT heroes as Joseph and Moses. I am sure that 'John' would have been very familiar with both the Gospel traditions and the details in the Hebrew Bible

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<sup>21</sup> David E. Aune, "The Influence of Roman Imperial Court Ceremonial on the Apocalypse of John". 18.

<sup>22</sup> Klaus Dehler, "Der Consensus Omnium als Kriterium der Wahrheit in der antiken Philosophie und der Patristic", Antike und Abendland 10 ('61). 111.  
Quoted in D.E. Aune, "Influence", 18.

<sup>23</sup> See also Paul Barnett, "Polemical Parallelism: Some further Reflections on the Apocalypse". Journal for the Study of the New Testament. 35.'89. 111-120.

of the life of Joseph. Did he see some significance in the first 9 points of comparison between Joseph's early years and Jesus' life on earth as recorded in the Gospels? I propose that the last six points of comparison (#s 10-15) may be elements from the Joseph narrative which the seer deliberately borrowed, and used as a pattern in depicting for his fellow Christians what it meant that the crucified and resurrected man, Jesus, "was appointed Son of God with power after he rose from the dead" (Rom.1:4). Such usage does seem to conform to what Schüssler Fiorenza has observed in 'John's' use of the Old Testament. She writes, "John uses OT texts...in an allusive way....He adapts or borrows whole OT text sequences as patterns for his own original compositions, but never refers to the OT as authoritative Scripture".<sup>24</sup> We can see that in all of the author's allusions to OT events--to Passover night, the crossing of the Red Sea, to 'one like a son of man', to the Divine Warrior, and perhaps the Joseph saga--he is skillfully investing new experiences with traditional significance.

It seems that the author chose a most effective way in which to depict Jesus' advancement in heaven, so that ultimately the human Redeemer/Lamb can function as a divine Shepherd/King to guide his followers who 'have come out of the great ordeal' to the water of life, and to God (Rev 7:13-17).

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<sup>24</sup> Schüssler Fiorenza, Justice and Judgment, 135.



## 2. Rev 6:1-17. The Catastrophes Initiated by the Lamb's Breaking of the Seven Seals.

After the Lamb has received the scroll from the hand of God (5:7), he opens each of the seven seals sequentially. As he opens each of the first four seals, one of the four living creatures (they each take a turn), commands "Come!" In response to each command, a horse and rider appear in heaven. The first rider has a bow, is given a crown to wear, and rides a white horse. He seems to symbolise the thirst of the powerful for yet more power, and the lust to subjugate and dominate others, for "he went out conquering and to conquer" (6:1-2). Some scholars suggest that this figure represents the Parthian army, much dreaded by Rome. Since, however, the other three horsemen symbolise scourges for mankind of a timeless nature, this suggestion seems unlikely. Others have equated this conqueror on a white horse with the Word of God in 19:11-21, or with the gospel itself, but the four horsemen, I think, are presented as 'four of a kind'--equally disastrous to humanity. Besides, the author would not be likely to depict the gospel as being spread throughout the world by threat of arms.

The second rider on a red horse "was permitted to take peace from the earth so that people would slaughter one another; and he was given a great sword" (6:3-4). It has been suggested that the phrase "slay one another" means civil war,<sup>25</sup> which certainly is a possibility, but it could equally well include all forms of

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<sup>25</sup> Grant R. Osborne, "Theodicy in the Apocalypse" TrinJ. 14 NS (1933), 63-77, 71. Cf. Beasley-Murray, Revelation, 132.

killing, murder as well as war, civil or otherwise.<sup>26</sup>

As the third rider appeared mounted on a black horse, holding scales in his hand, the seer heard a voice speaking, and the words implied forthcoming failed grain crops and ensuing famine, though the olive and grape crops would not be harmed. (6:5-6).

The fourth rider, on a pale green horse, was named Death, and his cohort, Hades, followed after him. They were given "authority over a fourth of the earth, to kill with sword, famine, and pestilence, and by the wild animals of the earth". (6:7-8). These four calamities all feature in the Covenant Curses listed in Deut 28:21,22,25, and 26, and represent God's punishments to be visited on faithless Israel in the event of covenant-breaking, that is, worshipping other gods. "A fourth of the earth" hints at the prevalence of idolatry among humankind.

At the opening of the fifth seal (6:9-11), 'John's' attention was drawn to the altar of sacrifice in heaven, where he saw, under the altar, (that is, at the base of the altar where the blood [=life, Lev 17:11] of sacrificial victims was poured out, Lev 4:7), "the souls of those who had been slaughtered for the word of God and for the testimony they had given". There is nothing here to identify these witnesses as Christians, as opposed to OT martyrs. They cried out to God, addressing him as "Sovereign Lord, holy and true", and asking the age-old question of all persecuted people, "How long will it be before you judge and avenge our blood

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<sup>26</sup> Cf. Kealey, Apocalypse, 131.

on the inhabitants of the earth?" They were told to rest a little longer till the others of their number who were also destined for martyrdom (v.11) should join them. Caird believes this to be a warning to the churches that another Nero-like persecution was imminent,<sup>27</sup> but few scholars now subscribe to this interpretation. Malina, for example, sees in the Apocalypse "no great concern about persecution, political or otherwise....There may have been conflict, but conflict is not persecution...."<sup>28</sup> Caird mentions also "the story of continued martyrdom" contained in the scroll.<sup>29</sup> This is appropriate, for, sadly, martyrdom did not cease with the passing of the seer's generation.

The opening of the sixth seal initiated a great cosmic earthquake (6:12-17), which, as Caird points out, 'John' has portrayed in imagery drawn from five OT passages, Isa 2; Hos 10; Isa 24; Joel 2; and Mal 3. "The host of heaven" of Isaiah 24:21 and "the stars of the sky" in Revelation 6:13 were regarded in Isaiah's time and at the time of 'John's' writing as living beings with a divine authority, and were as capable as humans of rebellion against God. The cosmic earthquake implies, therefore, that the time will come when all rebellious beings, celestial as well as earthly, will have to face the wrath of God and the wrath of the Lamb. Caird speaks for a number of scholars for whom the phrase

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<sup>27</sup> Caird, Revelation, 87.

<sup>28</sup> Malina, Star Visions (Transcript), 397-98.

<sup>29</sup> Caird, Revelation, 86-87.

"the wrath of the Lamb" is problematic. He maintains that it is a great mistake to attribute to the Lamb "the menacing attributes of the Lion of Judah".<sup>30</sup> He recalls that, when one of the elders in 5:5 tells the seer that "the Lion of the tribe of Judah...has conquered so that he can open the scroll", 'John' looks for a Lion and sees a Lamb instead. The title 'the Lamb', Caird says, "is meant to control and interpret all the rest of the symbolism. It is almost as if John were saying to us at one point after another: 'Wherever the Old Testament says 'Lion' read 'Lamb.'"<sup>31</sup> "There is no need", he adds later, "to find a place in John's theology for any concept of the wrath of the Lamb, since it is not a phrase which he uses propria persona, but one which he puts on the lips of the terrified inhabitants of the earth".<sup>32</sup> But this juxtaposition of two apparently opposing images is of a piece with that found in Isa 40: 10-11, where God is pictured as both a ruthless conqueror and a tender shepherd. The Lion of Judah and the Lamb are not to be seen as mutually exclusive images. A.Y. Collins admits that the phrase 'the wrath of the Lamb' must seem paradoxical to those who see the Lamb entirely in terms of the Suffering Servant of Isa 53:7. "It is more understandable", she says, "if the symbol Lamb has incorporated some of the connotations

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid. 89-90.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. 75.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid. 92.

of the messianic ram".<sup>33</sup>

After the recognition by all classes of society, in 6:17, that the great day of the Lord is dawning, the reader expects the immediate opening of the seventh seal by the Lamb. It is not until 8:1 that that occurs, and when it does, it is soon apparent that God's punishments are about to descend on the inhabitants of the earth. During the interval between the opening of the sixth and seventh seals, four angels restrain the four winds of the earth from wreaking their havoc prematurely, for the faithful servants of God on earth must be marked for divine protection from his avenging angels, like the Israelites in Egypt on Passover night (Rev 7:1-8. Cf. Exod 12:12-13. See also Ezek 9:3b-6). The first incidence of such a protective mark recorded in the Bible is the one God provided for Cain after the murder of Abel (Gen 4:15).<sup>34</sup>

Before the first angel trumpeter can give the signal for God's judgments to begin, 'John' describes, for the encouragement of his fellow believers on earth, the blissful existence in heaven of those who pass through "the great ordeal" without soiling their pure robes, which have been "made white in the blood of the Lamb" (7:14). They will worship God day and night in his temple, and he will "wipe away every tear from their eyes" (7:9-14).

When the seventh seal was finally opened in 8:1, "there was

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<sup>33</sup> A.Y. Collins, "The Apocalypse (Revelation)" The New Jerome Biblical Commentary. 1005.

<sup>34</sup> This was brought to my attention by Dr. A. Reinhartz in a personal communication.

silence in heaven for about half an hour". This is something of an anomaly, for it seems to play no significant part in the ongoing activity of the narrative. I find myself wondering whether this represented a break in the reading of the Apocalypse to the Christian congregations--a half-hour of silence in which to recall and try to interpret what had been heard so far, before being plunged into the kaleidoscopic scenes and images of the rest of the narrative. Alternatively, the author may have been evoking a sense of ever-increasing foreboding, like that which people experience when caught in the eye of a hurricane.

When the half-hour was over, the seer became aware of the fact that 'the seven angels who stand before God' were each being supplied with a trumpet, but before they could blow them, the angel tending the altar of incense offered before God the prayers of the saints intermingled with the smoke of incense. Then the angel filled the censer with fire from the altar, and hurled it to the earth. This produced thunder, voices, lightning and an earthquake, which most commentators see as God's answer to the prayers of the slain martyrs in 6:10 for vengeance.

The opening of the seven seals by the Lamb has constituted a mini-preview of all that is to follow in the two series of seven--the trumpets and the bowls, in terms both of punishment for the wicked--those who have persecuted the faithful followers of God and those of the Lamb--and of God's plans to sustain his own throughout their testings, and to bring them safely into the New Jerusalem.

Since the two series of trumpets and bowls are accomplished by the seven angels who stand before God (8:2), it is clear that these punishments are initiated by God himself, and not by the Lamb. These will therefore be considered in the next chapter, which deals with 'John's' characterization of God.

### 3. Rev 14:14-20. As Son of Man He Reaps (Judges) the earth.

There are two very similar reaping scenes in this chapter, the first of which depicts the harvesting of ripe grain, while the second portrays a grape harvest. In the first scenario, "one like a son of man", who was identified in the last chapter as the risen Christ--the Son of Man--appeared seated on a cloud, with a golden crown on his head and a sharp sickle in his hand. He was told by an angel who came out of God's heavenly temple, "Use your sickle, and reap, for the hour to reap has come, because the harvest of the earth is fully ripe", and he did so. This scenario has much in common with Jesus' parable in Matt 13:24-30, and with his interpretation of it in vv.37-43, where the Son of Man is both the sower, and the overseer of the reapers at the end of the world. It would seem that 'John' had this parable in mind. If so, then the good grain will be gathered in, and the weeds will be destroyed--a typical implication of harvest imagery. Certainly the emphasis in Matt 13:30 is on the ingathering of the grain, the fruit of the sower's toil, which is an occasion for rejoicing, for "then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father" (Matt 13:43).

In the second passage, a second angel came out of the temple in heaven, and he, too, had a sharp sickle. A third angel followed him, and, as in the first pericope, told the one with the sickle to gather the clusters of the vine, because the grapes also were ripe and ready for harvesting.

Caird believes that the two scenarios are a variation on a single theme; that both pericopes describe the ingathering of the elect. But whereas the first scene depicts a normal harvesting, the second scene ends with the grapes being thrown into "the great wine press of the wrath of God. And the wine press was trodden outside the city, and blood flowed from the wine press, as high as a horse's bridle, for a distance of about two hundred miles" (14:19-20). This is not what one anticipates from the use of the term "the gathering of the elect" (Mark 13:27), so Caird tries to resolve the problem by saying that "by the gory vintage ['John'] meant to portray the death of the martyrs".<sup>35</sup>

Not all scholars agree with him, however, for he admits that "many scholars" have distinguished between the harvest as the ingathering of the elect by the Son of Man, and the vintage as the due punishment of their enemies and persecutors, which is delegated to an angel. "Kiddle is surely right", he says, "to protest that any such dichotomy is artificial and false. Harvest and vintage are described in too close parallelism to be regarded as symbols

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<sup>35</sup> Caird, Revelation, 192.



for contrary realities..."<sup>36</sup>

I agree with Caird and other commentators that Joel 3:13 is probably part of the author's inspiration and model for these two scenarios, and there the images of grain and grape harvest are, indeed, parallel. But 'John', more often than not, gives a new significance to older, familiar images,<sup>37</sup> and there are two phrases in 14:17-20 which set the two apparently parallel scenarios in sharp distinction from one another. a) In the second pericope, where the vintage is to be reaped, it is "the angel who has authority over fire" (v18) who commands the angel with the sickle to begin to harvest the grapes--and fire is a common metaphor, in Old and New Testaments alike, for God's judgment. Rev 8:5 is a case in point, where "the angel took the censer and filled it with fire from the altar and threw it on the earth". Both Osborne<sup>38</sup> and Schüssler Fiorenza, among others, state unequivocally (quoting Schüssler Fiorenza), that "the fire of the altar...signifies God's wrath and punishment."<sup>39</sup> b) The second phrase is "the wine press was trodden outside the city" <sup>40</sup>. John 19:20 reads, "...the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city"--thus outside the

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid, 191-92.

<sup>37</sup> See Schüssler Fiorenza, Justice and Judgment 135 for commentary on 'John's' use of the OT.

<sup>38</sup> Osborne, "Theodicy", 76.

<sup>39</sup> Schüssler Fiorenza, Revelation, 71. Beasley-Murray's term is 'divine Judgment'. Revelation, 229.

<sup>40</sup> See Caird, Revelation 192, Kealey, Apocalypse 188, and Harrington, Revelation 156.

city, so this treading of "the great wine press of the wrath of God" may be seen as a vengeance scenario, in which God exacts "satisfaction" for the murder of his Son.<sup>41</sup>

Harrington is persuaded that the "one like a son of man" (= the Son of Man) in 14:14 comes "in clouds" to "gather his elect" (cf. Mark 13:32), while the second segment in 14:17-20 depicts "judgment on the persecutors of God's people".<sup>42</sup> This confirms my own interpretations of these two pericopes, which, without doubt are similar, but are complementary and contrasting rather than parallel scenarios.

#### 4. Rev. 19:11-21. The Divine Warrior, God's Avenging Representative

Although Jesus is never explicitly identified in this pericope, his names Faithful and True, his role as judge, and the reference to his eyes being like a flame of fire tie this figure to the faithful witness of the prologue (1:5), and to the exalted Christ (1:14) and the judge (1:16) of 'John's' first vision.

Verse 12 tells us that "on his head are many diadems". Malina points to this as an example of an honor/shame transfer, for conquerors acquired honor as they claimed the titles and crowns of the kings whom they had vanquished--which honor the defeated kings

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<sup>41</sup> See Bruce J. Malina, The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology. (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981), pp25-50 for an excellent discussion re the social dynamics of Honor, Shame and Vengeance in the first century Mediterranean world.

<sup>42</sup> Harrington, Revelation, 155-57.

were forced to surrender--to their shame. Similarly, "the behaviour of the early Christians, who applied to the resurrected Jesus all the titles of those who were to overcome evil and death; Messiah, Lord, son of David, son of God and the like", exemplifies the same kind of accumulation of honor.<sup>43</sup> In these cases, though, the honor is not acquired, but ascribed.

Schüssler Fiorenza, Caird, Boismard, and Harrington recognize the aptness of Wis 18:15-16 as a source for the warrior's name, "The Word of God", and this seems most appropriate given the immediate context. Other scholars, like Kealey, believe that the name 'Word of God' "is a remarkable link with the prologue to John's gospel",<sup>44</sup> but while the author was almost certainly aware of this source also, the reference from Wisdom is much more in keeping with this scenario. Wis 18:15-16 reads:

your all-powerful word leaped from heaven, from the royal  
throne

into the midst of the land that was doomed,  
carrying the sharp sword of your authentic command,  
and stood and filled all things with death.

The 'all-powerful word of God' in this passage is the 'destroyer' of Exod 12:23 who, at God's command, slew all the firstborn of the Egyptians on the first Passover night. In Rev 19:11-20 as in Exod 12, the salvation of God's people is

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<sup>43</sup> Malina, The New Testament World, 32.

<sup>44</sup> Kealey, Apocalypse, 214.

accomplished by the 'striking down' (v.15) of his enemies through his word of judgment--'the sharp sword' in the mouth of the avenging warrior.

Schüssler Fiorenza and others make much of the fact that "no battle is recorded",<sup>43</sup> but it is not possible, I think, to assume that no battle takes place. This encounter with the Beast, the false Prophet and the ten kings is undoubtedly the one foreseen in 17:13-14, where the evil allies "make war on the Lamb, and the Lamb will conquer them, for he is Lord of lords and King of kings, and those with him are called and chosen and faithful". In Rev 19:14 these followers of the Lamb are called "the armies of heaven", and they are clothed in fine white linen. While Beasley-Murray identifies these as the angelic hosts (= 'the hosts of heaven' of the OT) whose white garments suggest that they "are on the way to a joyful occasion";<sup>44</sup> other commentators, like Kealey, Caird, and Harrington see them as the faithful redeemed, as do I. (cf. Rev 7:13-14, where the redeemed are identified as those "robed in white". See also 19:8 where 'fine linen' represents "the righteous deeds of the saints").

The picture in 19:20-21, in which the beast and false prophet are thrown alive into the lake of fire, all their human followers are killed by the sword, and all the birds are gorged with their

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<sup>43</sup> Schüssler Fiorenza, Revelation, 105.

<sup>44</sup> Beasley-Murray, Revelation, 281.

See also Wm. Barclay, The Revelation of John, 2 Vols. Edinburgh: St. Andrews, 1960. Vol.2, 234.

flesh, certainly fits in with the picture from Wisdom of a stern warrior filling all things with death in the midst of a doomed land. The imagery implies nothing if not the aftermath of battle. Schüssler Fiorenza notes that the human followers of the beast and false prophet "are not thrown into the lake of fire to be tormented, but instead are killed instantly."<sup>47</sup> I wonder why these should be treated more mercifully than those "whose name was not found in the book of life" in 20:15, who were thrown into the lake of fire.

The "Word of God", 'John' tells us, "is clad in a robe dipped in blood" (18:13). For Kealey the blood on Christ's cloak is his own,<sup>48</sup> for Beasley-Murray "it indicates his function as executor of the divine wrath".<sup>49</sup> It is Christ, the "functional equivalent of God" who, as his avenging representative is to 'strike down the nations', to 'rule them with a rod of iron', and to 'tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty' (Rev 19:15). These images surely imply that the blood on Christ's cloak is that of his enemies. Caird, however, cannot accept this interpretation, for he writes:

This is the second time that John has drawn his imagery from the gruesome vintage scene of Isaiah 63. There the vintager is God himself (my emphasis), who comes from

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<sup>47</sup> Schüssler Fiorenza, Revelation, 106.

<sup>48</sup> Kealey, Apocalypse, 215.

<sup>49</sup> Beasley-Murray, Revelation, 280.

treading the wine press with his garments stained with the blood of his enemies.<sup>50</sup>

He concludes that "The [Word of God] bears on his garment the indelible traces of the death of his followers, just as he bears on his body the indelible marks of his own passion" (1:7; cf. John 20:20-27).<sup>51</sup> Caird is right to recognise that the presence of the wine press motif here and in Rev 14:17-20 makes it mandatory that his interpretations of both scenarios should be consistent--and they are--for his conclusion about the wine press scenario at the harvesting of the grapes in 14:19-20 was that "by the gory vintage [John] meant to portray the death of the martyrs".<sup>52</sup>

But perhaps there is a simpler explanation. Because 'John' does not at the start identify the Rider of 19:11 as Jesus or The Christ, the readers/listeners inevitably ask "Who is this?" But they would have recognised immediately the words 'He is clothed in a robe dipped in blood' as the language of Isaiah 63, and their question would have been answered by God's reply in verse 1d. "It is I, announcing vindication, mighty to save" (my emphasis). 'John' makes it quite clear that the one who treads this wine press is Jesus, The Word of God (v15), and that he does so as God's 'functional equivalent' and avenging representative, thus bringing about the vindication of himself and his persecuted followers, and

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<sup>50</sup> Caird, Revelation, 242.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid. 243-44.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid. 192.

avenging the assaults on God's honour.<sup>53</sup> The reference to Yahweh's punishment of Edom in Isaiah 63:1-6 also implies that 'John' understood Edom to be another symbolic name for Rome, and that her overthrow would be accomplished in his near future.<sup>54</sup>

As far as his immediate audience was concerned, it has to be recognised that the author used his 'gruesome' imagery with good reason, for the magnitude of the vengeance portrayed mirrors the magnitude of the dishonour done to Almighty God by sinful humanity. For this twentieth century reader of these visions, however, it is regrettable that this portrayal of Jesus as a Great King after the manner of a Sargon, who is satisfied with nothing less than the complete annihilation of all his enemies, almost displaces entirely that of the self-giving Redeemer/Lamb.

##### 5. Rev 22:6-21. Christ's Final Words to 'John's' Contemporaries.

As in 'John's' first vision of Jesus (1:12-20) and the letters to the seven churches (2:1-3:22), it is the risen Christ, the Lord and Judge of the churches who addresses some final words to his followers. Three times in the next fourteen verses (22:7-20) they are told by Jesus himself, "I am coming soon" (7,12,20). It is a three-fold assurance of his imminent parousia, and the most explicit reference to this eagerly-awaited event is in verses 12-

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<sup>53</sup> Malina has shown that, in the first century Mediterranean world view, 'outrages' such as the killing of Jesus and his followers require vengeance. The New Testament World, 40.

<sup>54</sup> A.Y. Collins, "Apocalypse", New Jerome Biblical Commentary, 1014.

13. "See, I am coming soon; my reward is with me, to repay according to everyone's work. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end."

The phrases "See I am coming soon, Idou erchomai (tachu), and "my reward is with me", ho misthos mou met emou, tie this pericope to Isaiah 40:9-11, where Deutero-Isaiah likens Yahweh to a Great Shepherd-King returning in triumph to his people before leading them, as a watchful shepherd, back to the holy land and to the old Jerusalem, the city of God, after their seventy-year exile in Babylon. In Isaiah 40:10 (LXX) the Greek is the same, except for the necessary changes from first to third person. Idou kurios (meta ischuos) erchetai and ho misthos autou met'autou.

These verses describe a scene which Deutero-Isaiah must have seen on several occasions. It represents the excitement in Babylon over the return of Nebuchadnezzar and his conquering armies. It was their custom to march in victory through the sacred Ishtar Gate and down the Processional Way, which was also used for all religious processions <sup>88</sup> (cf. Isa 40:9). The watchman from the high city wall (in Zion it was to be from "a high mountain", v9) would call to the thousands of citizens inside to tell them that the king and his conquering troops were almost at the city gates--this king was returning "with might" (Isa 40:10). The same kind of victory parades, of course, were to be seen in Rome under the Caesars. Isaiah had seen the booty taken in war paraded ahead of

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<sup>88</sup> Roux, Ancient Iraq. 329.



Nebuchadnezzar--slaves, domestic animals, the quantities of gold, silver and jewels from which would be drawn the soldier's wages--their "reward"--and perhaps even the defeated king, and his idols which were customarily captured and paraded through the streets of the conqueror<sup>96</sup> (cf. Isa 60:11). All this constituted the King's "recompense" (Isa 40:10; Rev 22:12; RSV) and the Conquerors' "reward". Isaiah was saying that when God leads the exiles back to Jerusalem, it will be a similar march of triumph. Just like Yahweh of old, and like Nebuchadnezzar too, Christ as "the Alpha and the Omega" will return "with might" to judge and to reward, for "to repay according to everyone's work" surely implies both roles. Jesus is here claiming for himself the titles the Almighty also claims in 1:8 and 21:6; and in 22:17 "the water of life as a gift" is offered to everyone who is thirsty--just as God also offered the same in 21:6.

In v.16 Jesus speaks again, and tells his followers something further about himself. "I am the root and descendant of David, the bright morning star." Christians already acknowledged that Jesus, as the Messiah, was the "descendant of David", but here he is claiming something more, "I am the root of David"--as Caird explains it "the Root from which David himself sprang, the eternal, archetypal King".<sup>97</sup> "The bright morning star" is a reference to

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<sup>96</sup> S. Smith, "A Chronicle of the Years 680-625. BM.86379. Babylonian Historical Texts Relating to the Capture and Downfall of Babylon. (London: Methuen, 1924), Obverse, lines 3-8.

<sup>97</sup> Caird, Revelation, 286.

Balaam's oracle in Num 24:17 ("A star shall come forth out of Jacob"), which was generally understood as referring to the Messiah. The significance to 'John' and to his fellow believers must have been that the morning star is reputed to shine most brightly just before the dawn, thus that their night of testing is soon coming to a close, since Jesus' "full shining" is as imminent as daybreak. Schüssler Fiorenza identifies this star as Venus, the sign of sovereignty and victory over the nations,<sup>58</sup> thus Jesus claims again the role of Messiah.

For the third time in the Epilogue 'John' puts on Jesus' lips the promise that he and all the believers longed to hear: "I am coming soon!" But this time the assertion is even stronger, for the "See" (Idou) of verses 7 and 12 is replaced in 22:20 with "Surely (Nai) I am coming soon!"--to which 'John' replies, on behalf of his Christian brothers and sisters with the customary Eucharistic response, "Amen. Come Lord Jesus!"<sup>59</sup> (cf. 1 Cor 6:22; "Maranatha!")

One suspects that when the Christian pastors read 'John's' Apocalypse to their congregations, the listeners too would have responded in this way.

### III. Summary of Chapter Two.

In the first pericope to be studied, Revelation 5:1-14, we

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<sup>58</sup> Schüssler Fiorenza, Revelation, 115.  
Cf. Beasley-Murray, Revelation, 343.

<sup>59</sup> Caird, Revelation, 287.

discovered how closely Jesus' life on earth, as depicted in the gospels, resembled that of the early years of Joseph as described in Genesis, and how the author used the events of Joseph's rise to power in Egypt as a way of explaining to his fellow Christians how it was that the crucified and resurrected Jesus also attained power in Heaven. In 6:1-17 we were given, through the Lamb's opening of the seven seals which inaugurated 'the Day of the Lord', a mini-preview of the punishments which were to be meted out to God's enemies through the two ensuing septads of trumpets and bowls. In 14:14-20 we saw the two aspects of the judgment by the Son of Man--the salvation of the faithful and the annihilation of the wicked--in the two harvesting scenarios. In 19:11-21 we saw Jesus in the guise of the Warrior-King, as God's avenging Representative. Finally, in 22:6-16 we considered the promise of Jesus to his followers that he would return to them 'soon', "to repay according to everyone's work" (v12).

In chapter three, using the same methodology as was used in this chapter, we will study the author's characterization of God in the remaining pericopes in which clues to his character--as 'John' understands him--are to be found.

### Chapter 3

#### 'John's' Characterization of God in the Apocalyptic Drama

In this chapter we will investigate first the six most significant pericopes in chapters 4 through 22 which reveal how 'John' has characterized the 'person' of God. These are:

1. 4:1-11. The Appearance of God in his Throne Room.
2. 8:1-9:20. The Catastrophes Initiated by the first Six Trumpets.
3. 10:1-3a, 5-7; 11:15-19. The Seventh Trumpet and the Ark of the Covenant.
4. 15:1, 5-8; 16:1-20. The Seven Bowls of God's Wrath.
5. 17:1-19:6. God's Judgment on "Great Babylon" (Rome).
6. 20:7-21:7. God's Final Dealings with the Wicked and the Righteous.

At the end there will be a brief summing-up of the accrued 'evidence' and some discussion of the author's theology.

#### 1. Rev 4:1-11. The Appearance of God in his Throne Room.

It has already been noted that a person's outward appearance and the setting in which he/she is placed imply a great deal about

his/her social status. 'John' says very little about the appearance of God, but what he does say is highly suggestive. He first notes that God is seated on the throne, and the fact that the throne is mentioned twelve times in chapter 4 alone--forty-seven times altogether throughout the Apocalypse--emphasizes that God is supremely a Ruler. The seer portrays this great throne as emitting lightning, rumblings and peals of thunder (4:5)--this is the language of theophany such as is found in Exod 19:16, Ezek 1:4, 13; and Dan 7:9-10; so too, is his depiction of the seven spirits of God as flaming torches which burn before his throne (4:5).

In keeping with centuries of Jewish religious tradition there are no details concerning God's 'personal' appearance. But such statements as, his appearance was "like jasper and carnelian", that the rainbow surrounding the throne looked "like an emerald", and that before the throne there was what appeared to be "a sea of glass, like crystal", conjure up a scene of indescribable splendour and wealth. An earthly ruler set amid such brilliance would have to be supremely powerful, able to conquer, subdue, and demand tribute from, and trade with, many nations. The rainbow which surrounds the throne signifies that God faithfully remembers and keeps covenant with his people. Along with this suggestive imagery, there are no less than nine verses throughout the Apocalypse in which God is called "Almighty" (Pantocrator). So 'John's' scant description of God's 'appearance', together with the frequent use of the title "Almighty", and the many references to the throne make God's status eminently clear. He is the omnipotent

Ruler of the universe.

This fact is emphasized by the presence of the four living creatures around the throne, which combine some features from the four living creatures in Ezekiel's vision of God on his chariot-throne (Ezek 1:5-11), and some from the six-winged seraphim of Isaiah's vision of Yahweh enthroned (Isa 6:2). These four living creatures praise God day and night without ceasing, and when they do so the twenty-four crowned elders who constitute God's heavenly council (cf. 1 Kgs 22:19; Dan 7:10), seated on thrones surrounding the Throne of God as befits their status, prostrate themselves before him, and cast their crowns at his feet in homage as they praise him for his creative power. Prostration is a posture of absolute submission. The casting of their crowns before God's feet implies that their power and kingship derive from him.

## 2. Rev 8:1-9:20. The Catastrophes Initiated by the first Six Trumpets.

In verses 1-5 of chapter 8, an angel offered "a great quantity of incense...with the prayers of all the saints on the golden altar that is before the throne" (8:3). The fragrant smoke, intermingling with the prayers, rose before God. "Then the angel took the censer and filled it with fire from the altar and threw it on the earth: and there were peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning and an earthquake"--all symbols of a theophany. In the series of seven trumpets which immediately follows this symbolic vignette, an angel blows a trumpet in heaven,

and a pattern of disasters ensues on earth--and all of this, the text implies, is God's answer to the prayers of the martyred saints in 6:9-10 (and 8:3-4) for vengeance on "the inhabitants of the earth". The trumpets are blown by the seven "angels of the presence", or archangels of Jewish tradition (named in I Enoch 20:1-8), who wait in God's presence to fulfil, unquestioningly, his every command. (See Luke 1:19 "I am Gabriel, who stand in the presence of God.")<sup>1</sup>

Many of the punishments initiated by the blowing of the trumpets are reminiscent of the plagues of Egypt. At the first trumpet blast, hail and 'fire' (lightning) mixed with blood were hurled to the earth (cf Exod 9:23-26; and Joel 2:30). In Revelation 8:7, a third of the earth, a third of the trees, and all green grass were destroyed by the ensuing fire. The 'third' implies a greater degree of punishment than occurred at the opening of the first four seals, when 'a fourth' of earth's population was destroyed (6:8)--it implies also that a limit had been set upon the punishments against the cosmos which were initiated by the blowing of the first four trumpets.

When the second trumpet was blown, "something like a great mountain, burning with fire, was thrown into the sea" (8:8). The author may here be recalling the eruption of Vesuvius in 79 BCE when Herculaneum and Pompeii in the bay of Naples were wiped out.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Harrington, Revelation, 103.

<sup>2</sup> Kealey, Apocalypse, 148.

In 'John's' vision a third of the sea became blood, a third of the marine creatures died, and one-third of the ships in the area were destroyed. The water turning to blood recalls the first plague on Egypt when the waters of the Nile became blood (Exod 7:14-25), though the devastation in 'John's' vision was of cosmic, not merely local, proportions.

At the third trumpet blast a great star ( a rebellious angel) named Wormwood fell from heaven, landing on "a third of the rivers and on the springs of water" (8:10). Since wormwood is a plant with a powerful bitter taste, the fresh water became so bitter that "many died from the water" (v10), though wormwood, in fact, is not poisonous. This plague is the reverse of the plague of Marah which occurred when Israel was wandering in the desert.<sup>3</sup>

At the blowing of the fourth trumpet 'John' depicts one third of the sun, moon and stars as having been 'struck' so that for a third of the day and of the night their light disappeared (cf. Exod 10:21-23).

In this trumpet septad the author follows the format of the opening of the seven seals. In both cases the first four visions are linked together, in the seals series by the four horses and their riders, while the opening of the fifth and sixth seals initiate totally diverse visions. Before the seventh seal is opened there is a long interlude, where 'John' recounts a separate vision (Rev ch.7) which is not an integral part of the septad at

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<sup>3</sup> Harrington, Revelation, 106.



all, but which has the dramatic effect of heightening the suspense.

Similarly, with the trumpet series, the first four plagues 'target' a part of the created order, and these four visions are linked by the fact that the destruction in each case is escalated from "a fourth" to "a third". The last three trumpet visions are separated from the first four by the ominous words of an eagle--Caird suggests 'vulture' as an equally valid, and more apt translation of aetos--<sup>4</sup> crying aloud as it flew, "Woe, woe, woe to the inhabitants of the earth, at the blasts of the trumpets that the three angels are about to blow" (8:13). And again, after the fifth and sixth disasters are concluded, another, apparently unrelated vision is interjected between those of the sixth and seventh trumpets.

When the fifth angel blew his trumpet, the visionary saw another fallen angel-star, and he was given the key to the shaft of the bottomless pit--the 'abyss'--which implied that he was to be God's instrument in the meting out of punishments on his enemies. When the shaft of the abyss--the provisional prison of Satan and the fallen angels--<sup>5</sup>was opened, an immense army of locusts was unleashed on the earth (cf. Joel 2:1-11). These demonic locusts were forbidden to devour any grass, green plants or tree bark, but were, instead, commanded to attack those people who did not have the seal of God on their foreheads (9:10). The

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<sup>4</sup> Caird, Revelation, 117.

<sup>5</sup> Harrington, Revelation, 109.

locusts were allowed to torture these for five months, but not to kill them. The torture was inflicted from scorpion-like stingers in their tails, which produced such agonising pain that the people affected longed to die, but death evaded them (9:6).

The statement that 'John's' locusts wore "what looked like crowns of gold" (9:7) suggests that, like the rider on the white horse in 6:1 who also wore a crown, this army is invincible. The locusts have as their king the angel of the bottomless pit, named Abaddōn (Heb.) and Apollyōn (the Greek equivalent). According to A.Y. Collins, "These names resume Hades (underworld) and Death in the vision of the fourth seal (6:8). Here, however, the point is not death, but prolonged torture" (my emphasis).<sup>6</sup> This idea, though cruel and sadistic, is in keeping with the accepted norms of kingly behaviour which attached to the image of the all-powerful Shepherd/Kings. In Apollyōn, which means 'Destroyer', Kealey,<sup>7</sup> Beasley-Murray,<sup>8</sup> and Harrington<sup>9</sup> see an indirect attack on the Emperor Domitian, who claimed to be Apollo incarnate.

After the sixth angel had initiated the second "woe" by a trumpet blast, 'John' heard "a voice from the four horns of the golden altar before God", which again recalls the prayers of the martyrs in 8:2-5. While the voice (v13) was not God's, the command

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<sup>6</sup> A.Y. Collins, "The Apocalypse": The New Jerome Biblical Commentary, 1006.

<sup>7</sup> Kealey, Apocalypse, 152.

<sup>8</sup> Beasley-Murray, Revelation, 162.

<sup>9</sup> Harrington, Revelation, 110.

clearly was. It was addressed to the sixth angel: "Release the four angels who are bound at the great river Euphrates"--which angels, the seer explains, "had been held ready for the hour, the day, the month and the year, to kill a third of humankind" (9:15). This indicates a predetermined divine plan.<sup>10</sup> The four destroying angels dispatched from the area of the Euphrates--the land of the dreaded Parthian empire--two hundred million troops of cavalry (9:16). These mounted troops had the appearance and coloration of a massive advancing wall of fire, and 'a third' of the earth's population was annihilated by the three 'plagues' of fire, smoke and sulfur which issued from the mouths of their demonic horses (9:18), who also had snake-like tails which could "inflict harm" (9:19).

Revelation 9:20-21 implies that all these horrendous catastrophes were inflicted on humanity by God himself to 'persuade' them to repent of their idolatry, their murders, sorceries, fornication and thefts--a traditional list of vices such as appears also in Romans 1:29-31; Galatians 5:19-21; 1 Corinthians 6:9-10, etc.

This pericope raises disturbing questions, for the behaviour that 'John' attributes to Almighty God closely resembles that of the Roman Emperor and other Great Kings before him. There is a dual message here. For the Christians the Exodus Plagues motif offers the promise of coming liberation and entry into the promised

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<sup>10</sup> A.Y. Collins, "Apocalypse", New Jerome Biblical Commentary, 1007.

land of the New Jerusalem. For the 'inhabitants of the earth', however, the vision offers cosmic disasters, prolonged torture, and one chance in three of being annihilated (9:18). Of course, the author is using symbolic language, nevertheless God's treatment of those who resist his will is portrayed as being without mercy. Further comments must wait until the summary at the end of this chapter.

### 3. Rev 10:1-3a,5-7;11:15-19. The Seventh Trumpet and the Ark of the Covenant.

The stage has now been set for the blowing of the seventh trumpet which is preceded by the arrival of a mighty angel who came down from heaven "wrapped in a cloud, with a rainbow over his head..." He raised his right hand to heaven [the traditional posture for oath-taking] and swore by the eternal Creator-God, "There will be no more delay, but in the days when the seventh angel is to blow his trumpet, the mystery of God will be fulfilled, as he announced to his servants the prophets". 'John's' readers/listeners must have recognised the significance of the rainbow over the head of the mighty angel, which would recall for them God's covenant with Noah, assuring them that this new promise of God through the angel was also inviolable, and would, in truth, be accomplished by the time of the seventh trumpet blast (10:7). It is not for another twenty-five verses, however, that the seventh trumpet is blown, in 11:15.

After this suspense-building interlude, the seventh angel

finally blew his trumpet, which was a signal to the heavenly throngs that the long-awaited Kingdom of God, the Messianic reign, had at last been inaugurated. Loud voices in heaven immediately proclaimed that "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah, and he will reign forever and ever." Harrington and Beasley-Murray both note that the kingdom of the world is now under the sovereignty of "our Lord and of his Messiah", and that "he will reign forever and ever."<sup>11</sup> This they interpret, quoting Harrington, as "another instance of the assimilation of Lamb to God; the rule of God and Christ is one."<sup>12</sup> I am not convinced that such a claim can be substantiated from this particular passage. The fact that Jesus is God's Messiah seems to put him in a subordinate position, and what follows the announcement of verse 15 is the worship of God alone--not of "God and the Lamb". The worship is addressed to the "Lord God Almighty" only--titles which, as we saw earlier, are never applied to Jesus throughout the Apocalypse. We saw in Revelation 3:7 that Jesus' authority is a delegated authority, and the blowing of the seventh trumpet has not raised his status to that of the Almighty--he remains God's 'functional equivalent' and 'Vice-regent'. It is most noticeable that in 10:17 God is not addressed as in the past, as "the one who is to come", but simply as "Lord God Almighty, who are and who were, for you have taken your great power and begun to

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<sup>11</sup> Beasley-Murray, Revelation, 189.

<sup>12</sup> Harrington, Revelation, 125-26.

reign"--in other words, the future is now--God has come, and the long-awaited reign of once-future bliss has begun. The future is simply a continuation of the present joyful existence with God in his kingdom.

But we need to look more closely at the words of the mighty angel. What is "the mystery of God"? and to which of his servants the prophets did he announce it? The technical term mystērion was used in early Christian literature to denote "...a heavenly secret revealed to humanity by God."<sup>13</sup> It may concern a hidden present reality--as here, where the kingdom of God is understood as already present, but unrevealed--or it may refer to an event in the more distant future.<sup>14</sup> Such secrets were known only to the initiated.

The mystery referred to here is the beginning of a new way of living in harmony with all people and with all of Creation, under the kingship of God. The Old Testament prophets were unanimous in saying that first there must be a time of judgment and repentance, and then righteousness and harmony would be restored to God's people (cf. Is. 24:21-23; Amos 9:9-10, 14-15, etc.). I think, however, that the word of God to the prophet Jeremiah in 31:31-33, 38; is at the back of the author's words in Revelation 10:7 and 21:2-3.

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will  
make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the

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<sup>13</sup> A. Y. Collins, "Apocalypse (Revelation)", New Jerome Biblical Commentary, 1012.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 1007.

house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt--a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people....The days are surely coming, says the Lord when the city [Jerusalem] shall be rebuilt for the Lord...."

The motifs which I have underlined in this passage from Jeremiah reappear in Revelation 21:2-3.

I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, See, the home of God is among mortals, He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples.

After a long delay of 25 verses the seventh trumpet blast was sounded, and the beginning of the reign of God and of his Messiah was announced in heaven, and the twenty-four elders prostrated themselves and worshiped God (11:15-16).

Then God's temple in heaven was opened, and the ark of his covenant was seen within his temple; and there were flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, an earthquake, and heavy hail (11:19).

This theophany reveals that Almighty God has always honoured the

covenants he has made with his people:

- a) The covenant with Noah, symbolised in the rainbow,
  - i) around the throne (4:3)
  - ii) over the head of the mighty angel (10:1)
- b) The first covenant with Israel symbolised by the open display of the Ark in the heavenly temple (11:19)
- c) The "new covenant" of Jeremiah 31:31-33, consummated, as promised in 10:7, at the seventh trumpet blast in 11:15 as "the kingdom of God and of His Christ."

#### 4. Rev 15:1,5-8, 16:1-20. The Seven Bowls of God's Wrath.

Revelation 15:1 introduces another seven-part vision--"seven angels with seven plagues, which are the last, for with them the wrath of God is ended", etelesthe. teleō can also mean "I complete", cf. the noun telos which means "end" or "goal". This seems to say that the seven last plagues will complete that specific amount of punishment against the unrepentant inhabitants of the earth which is necessary to restore God's honor in their eyes.

Before recounting the seven plagues, 'John's' narrative is interrupted by a vision of the opening of the temple of "the tent of witness" (or 'tabernacle') in heaven" (15:5). This 'tent of witness', presumably, is the heavenly archetype after whose pattern the 'tabernacle in the wilderness' was modelled. (Cf. Exod 25:-40:33; Heb 8:5). The tabernacle of Moses' day pointed forward to this heavenly dwelling-place of God, of which it was "the sketch



and shadow" (according to the writer of the epistle to the Hebrews in 8:5). I would suggest that, in contrast to the earlier opening of the heavenly temple in 11:19, which revealed the ark of the covenant, pointing backwards through time to the long history of God's covenant faithfulness, the significance of this vision of the heavenly tabernacle is that, like the Mosaic tabernacle, it points forward, to the ultimate dwelling-place of God among mortals, the New Jerusalem, which the author elaborates in 21:1-27.

Concerning the repelling force of the "smoke from the glory of God and from his power" within the heavenly tabernacle (15:8) Beasley-Murray writes:

The mention of this feature here suggests...that God himself is present in his majesty and glory to perform that action which will execute his judgments and establish his kingdom in power. The angels with the bowl-like cups are instruments in the hands of the almighty Judge and Redeemer. They empty the bowls. He acts. <sup>15</sup>

Harrington sees things differently. He maintains: "God is not vindictive. God does not punish. The problem for humans...is to maintain...faith in the infinitely forgiving love of God and, at the same time, to grasp...his abhorrence of evil and sin" <sup>16</sup>--and all this in the face of 'John's' description of God in 16:9 as the

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<sup>15</sup> Beasley-Murray, Revelation, 238.

<sup>16</sup> Harrington, Revelation, 157.

One "who had authority over these plagues"!

In contrast to Harrington, I would suggest that "the infinitely forgiving love of God" does not feature in 'John's' Apocalypse. This is an aspect of Christian theology which Harrington, Caird and others import into their interpretation of the text from other Christian sources, such as, for example, Jesus' words to Peter in Matthew 18:21-22. A.Y. Collins sees things differently. She thinks it likely that in chapters 8, 9, and 16 'John' may have used sources in which the purpose of the plagues "may have been to bring humanity to repentance". In their present context, however, she sees the plagues as "divine punishment of sinners" (my emphasis).<sup>17</sup>

As the seven angels emerged from the temple of the tent of witness, one of the four living creatures presented each of them with a golden bowl "full of the wrath of God who lives forever and ever" (15:7). Then "a loud voice from the temple" (16:1, cf. 16:17) commanded the angels to "Go and pour out on the earth the seven bowls of the wrath of God"--and the obedience of the angels is immediate and unquestioning. The 'plagues' of the seven bowls are similar to those of the seven trumpets. Both septads are based on the plagues of Egypt, with minor variations. The two most significant differences are, first, that the bowls of wrath 'target' not just the cosmos itself, but people--specifically "those who had the mark of the beast and who worshiped its image"

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<sup>17</sup> A.Y. Collins, "Apocalypse". New Jerome Biblical Commentary, 1011.

(16:2), and, second, the devastation affects not just "one third" of creation, but the whole of each stricken part. Compare, for example, the effects of the second trumpet plague (8:9), where "a third of the living creatures in the sea died", and those of the second bowl plague where "every living thing in the sea died" (16:3).

When the first angel poured his bowl of God's wrath on the earth, the followers of the beast were afflicted with "a foul and painful sore" (16:2; cf. Exod 9:9-12). The emptying of the second bowl into the sea produced a foul, blood-like pollution which annihilated every marine creature (16:3). The outpouring of the contents of the third bowl into all sources and rivers of fresh water had a similar effect--"they became blood" (16:4; cf. Exod 7:14-24). At this, "the angel of waters"--(cf. "the angel who has authority over fire", 14:8)--and "the altar" joined to praise God who has thus given to those who "shed the blood of saints and prophets...blood to drink. It is what they deserve!" (16:6. Emphasis mine).

In the plague of the fourth trumpet, the sun, moon and stars were stricken, resulting in total darkness for a third of the day and of the night (8:12). The contents of the fourth bowl were also emptied on the sun, the effect of which was an increased intensity in its heat, so that the followers of the beast (the Roman Empire) "were scorched by the fierce heat...cursed the name of God...and...did not repent" (16:9). This fierce heat inflicted on rebellious humanity stands in sharp contrast to the eternal future

of the innumerable multitude from every nation, robed in white, who have passed through "the great ordeal". These will hunger and thirst no more, and "the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat" (7:9-16).<sup>18</sup>

When one considers the horrendous nature and cosmic scale of what Caird appropriately calls "The Natural Plagues", one has to question the interpretations of some commentators which downplay the severity of the author's depictions of the punishments God inflicted on the human race. For example, when God's two witnesses to Jerusalem in chapter 11 are restored to life and taken up to heaven in a cloud, "there was a great earthquake, and a tenth of the city fell; seven thousand people were killed in the earthquake, and the rest were terrified and gave glory to the God of heaven" (vv.11-13; my emphasis). Harrington refers to this catastrophe as "mitigated punishment", and speaks of the "terror" of the survivors "nudg[ing] them to repentance". He adds, "All in all, v.13 does suggest that the faithful witness unto death of the witness-prophets achieved what the punitive plagues failed to bring about"<sup>19</sup> Caird expresses the same idea: "Where retributive punishment had failed to bring men to repentance, the death of the martyrs would succeed."<sup>20</sup>

If their interpretation is correct, how is it that chapters 15

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<sup>18</sup> Kealey, Apocalypse, 195, et al.

<sup>19</sup> Harrington, Revelation, 124.

<sup>20</sup> Caird, Revelation, 140.

through 20 continue to catalogue God's punishments which constantly fail to bring the objects of those punishments to repentance? Is God so much slower than they to see how ineffectual brutal punishment is in terms of winning people's loyalty? With reference to 11:13 Beasley-Murray writes: "For John, who sees in the great city an image of the world, this glorification of God prefigures the repentance of multitudes of mankind. The judgments of God have been revealed, and all nations have come and worshiped (15:4)".<sup>21</sup> Caird also believes that "the song of the martyrs [15:3-4] clearly states that God is King of the nations...and will be recognised by the nations as their King; and it implies that this world-wide turning to God will be the outcome of the world-wide martyrdom".<sup>22</sup> These seem to be brave claims when one recollects that what Caird calls "the song of the martyrs"--the author calls it "the song of Moses...and of the Lamb"--immediately precedes the outpouring of the seven bowls of God's wrath in chapter 16, where, in vv. 9, 11, and 21 those being punished--the followers of the beast-- "did not repent" (9, 11) but "cursed God" (11, 21). A.Y. Collins, I feel, has a much more objective approach to the text. Of the phrase in 16:11, "they did not repent of their deeds" she writes, "In the present context, there is no expectation that those affected by the plagues (outsiders) will repent (see 22:11)...The inhabitants of

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<sup>21</sup> Beasley-Murray, Revelation, 187.

<sup>22</sup> Caird, Revelation, 199.

Jerusalem are a special case" (my emphasis).<sup>23</sup>

Caird subsumes the last three bowls under the heading "The Political Plagues". The symbolism of the darkness initiated by the outpouring of the fifth bowl (cf. Exod 10:21-22) evokes for Caird<sup>24</sup> and Kealey<sup>25</sup> the political darkness and chaos which enveloped the Roman empire after the suicide of Nero, which lasted until the accession of Vespasian. It was a time of great uncertainty, fear, and hysteria, a dark epoch indeed. 'John' may be suggesting either that something similar could happen again, or hinting that "what must soon take place" (1:1) is already under way.

When he pictures the sixth bowl as being emptied over the Euphrates river, so that its waters dried up (cf. Exod 14:21; Josh 3:17), "to prepare the way for the kings of the east", 'John' is almost certainly playing once again upon the Romans' fear of a Parthian invasion, which, as was popularly thought, would be led by Nero redivivus--a scenario which, in Barclay's estimation "painted horror both to pagan and to Christian".<sup>26</sup> The author may have in mind Herodotus' account of Cyrus' damming of the Euphrates river upstream, which dried up the river bed to create a road of access for his Persian troops to invade and capture the city of

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<sup>23</sup> A.Y. Collins, "Apocalypse", New Jerome Biblical Commentary, 1011.

<sup>24</sup> Caird, Revelation, 204.

<sup>25</sup> Kealey, Apocalypse, 196.

<sup>26</sup> Barclay, Revelation v.2. 168.

Babylon.<sup>27</sup>

In addition to this (possibly Parthian) invasion (the author's reference is to "kings from the east") the seer envisaged three demonic spirits in the shape of frogs, which emerged from the mouth of the dragon (Satan), the beast (the Roman empire), and the false prophet of the cult of the Emperor. These frogs/spirits stirred up "the kings of the whole world"--that is, the kings of the civilised world, the oikoumenēs (meaning the Empire), as distinct from the 'barbarian' kings of 16:12.<sup>28</sup> These were to join with the Parthians in a concerted onslaught to overthrow Babylon/Rome. But the battle which these massed armies were tricked into fighting was actually the one which is to be fought "on the great day of God the Almighty" (16:14), that is, the final eschatological battle, and the foe they are to engage will be the Lamb and his followers (17:14). The place where the battle is to be fought is called in Hebrew Harmagedōn--a symbolic name<sup>29</sup> concerning which, to date, there is no scholarly consensus.

When the seventh angel poured his bowl into the air, a loud voice from the throne within the temple--the author clearly implies that this time the voice is that of the Almighty--pronounced "It is done!" The customary theophanic signs followed, listed in precisely the same order as in 11:15, when the ark of the covenant

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<sup>27</sup> Herodotus, 1.191. Quoted in Kealey, Apocalypse, 196.

<sup>28</sup> Harrington, Revelation, 166. cf. Beasley-Murray, Revelation, 244.

<sup>29</sup> Caird, Revelation, 207.

literally, fatal. To those commentators who insist that there is no vengeance in the Apocalypse, such verses as 16:6, "Because they shed the blood of saints and prophets, you gave them blood to drink. It is what they deserve!" are difficult to explain. But it must also be said that, for the Christians who had experienced times of persecution and harassment, the constant references to the Exodus offered the promise that God would liberate them also in his own time.

#### 5. Rev 17:1-19:6. God's Judgment on "Great Babylon" (Rome)

Although the destruction of Rome was a fait accompli by the end of chapter 16, the author has more commentary on this event. He first describes his vision of 'the great whore' who was "drunk with the blood of the saints and the blood of the witnesses to Jesus" and seated on the scarlet beast with seven heads and ten horns (17:1-6). In v.7 the seer begins to explain the symbolism of the vision. "The great whore" is the city of Rome. The beast with seven heads and ten horns represents the oppressive rule of the Roman empire. The ten "horns", being part of the beast, though not yet kings, are briefly to receive kingdoms within the empire (17:17). They will, at first, wholeheartedly support the beast, then, led by Nero redivivus, will overthrow the city of Rome and burn it to the ground (17:16). The real cause behind this vandalism, treachery and slaughter, the author tells us, is God himself! "For God has put it into their [the ten horns'] hearts to carry out his purpose by agreeing to give their kingdom to the



beast until the words of God will be fulfilled" (17:17, my emphasis). God's purpose, we recall, was already fulfilled by the pouring out of the seventh bowl (cf. "It is done", 16:17), which is described in 16:19 as "the wine-cup of the fury of his wrath".

Of this total obliteration of Rome by the beast and his allies, whom Schüssler Fiorenza calls "the divine henchmen",<sup>30</sup> Caird writes, "The savaging of the whore by the monster and its horns is John's most vivid symbol for the self-destroying power of evil".<sup>31</sup> It is my contention that the concept of "the self-destroying power of evil" would have been quite foreign to the author of the Apocalypse. For him, God Almighty had been outrageously dishonored by Rome's brutal slaughter of "the saints and the witnesses to Jesus (17:6)" and "of the prophets...and of all who have been slaughtered on earth (18:24)". In addition, Rome was guilty of debauchery, immorality, brutality, greed and idolatry. The cultural norms of the day dealing with the social dynamics of Honor and Shame<sup>32</sup> demanded that God should not merely "render to [Rome] as she herself has rendered", but that she should receive "double for her deeds", and be made to drink "a double draught [of suffering] mix[ed] for her in the cup she mixed (18:6)". In keeping with his presentation of God as the Almighty Great King, infinitely more powerful than any Roman emperor, 'John' makes it

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<sup>30</sup> Schüssler Fiorenza, Revelation, 99.

<sup>31</sup> Caird, Revelation, 221.

<sup>32</sup> See p83 FN #42. Cf. Luke 14:7-9, (RSV) for example.

clear throughout the Apocalypse that annihilation is the price to be paid by any and all who persistently oppose him.

Because of her abuse of power and wealth, her deceiving "sorcery", and her delight in bloodshed, Rome would never again be inhabited. Both segments in chapter 18 which present heaven's viewpoint on her downfall (1-8; 21-24;), make it explicit that, as the author sees it, Almighty God in heaven was himself responsible for Rome's destruction--even to the point of manipulating his opponents on earth to act as his "henchmen". What this means for 'John's' fellow-Christians, of course, is that God is always in control of human affairs.<sup>33</sup> No matter how overwhelming the forces arrayed against them, they can know that it is the Almighty himself who has the final word.

In 18:20 the author depicts a call to "heaven"--presumably from an angel--to rejoice over God's verdict against Rome. "Rejoice over her, O heaven, you saints and apostles and prophets! For God has given judgment for you against her". Now, in 19:1-8, the author recounts the rejoicing in heaven which was evoked by that call. The jubilation stands in stark and horrifying contrast to the dark, lifeless and silent picture conjured up by the mighty angel as he portrayed the non-future of the once-bustling city (18:21-24).

The first group to voice their rejoicing appears to be the angelic hosts, who join in saying "Hallelujah! Salvation and glory

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<sup>33</sup> Barclay, Revelation, v.2. 193.

and power to our God, for his judgments are true and just; he has judged the great whore who corrupted the earth with her fornication, and he has avenged on her the blood of his servants". Once more they said, "Hallelujah! The smoke goes up from her forever and ever." (19:1b-3).

The second group to worship God was the heavenly council--the twenty-four elders and the four living creatures--whose praise was expressed in just two words: "Amen. Hallelujah!" This is the last time that the heavenly council is mentioned in the Apocalypse, perhaps because, with the coming of the new heaven, the new earth and the new Jerusalem, which together ushered in the age of righteousness, God no longer needed a council of advisors with whom to confer. Thus all the hosts of heaven have responded to the call to rejoice contained in 18:20a. The "saints and apostles and prophets" who were also called to rejoice in 18:20b, are called again, this time by a voice from the throne. "Praise our God, all you his servants, and all who fear him, small and great" (19:5). The response of this "great multitude" roared forth like loud thunder: "Hallelujah! For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns!" (19:6). 'John' could not make it more clear that the downfall of Rome and the vindication of God's persecuted people were inextricably intertwined. It was not possible to have either one without the other. He makes it clear also, that in his estimation, God's judgments are "true and just" (19:2).

6. Rev 20:7-21:7. God's Final Dealings with the Wicked and the Righteous.

It may appear strange at first to deal with two such contrasting pericopes together in the last section of this chapter. However, the juxtaposition of the depictions of God's barbaric treatment of Gog and Magog (20:9) and of those whose names were not found written in the book of life (20:15), and of his tender dealings with his people in the New Jerusalem is the author's own. The latter pericope would have followed the former immediately before the text was divided into chapters. Together they present a perfect example of the two facets of the Shepherd-King--the ruthless annihilation of all opponents, and the tender provision for loyal followers.

During the thousand years when Satan was locked in the Abyss (20:1-3), those Christians who had been beheaded for their testimony to Jesus came to life, were given thrones of judgment, and reigned with Christ as kings and priests.<sup>34</sup> 'John', who is alone among apocalyptists in his notion of two resurrections,<sup>35</sup> therefore reserves the 'first resurrection' for the martyrs of the Lamb who, since the second death has no power over them (20:6), must be

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<sup>34</sup> A.Y. Collins, "Apocalypse", New Jerome Biblical Commentary, with Rev.22:2 in mind, writes that "surviving Gentiles would be the subjects of that rule." 1014.

<sup>35</sup> Harrington, Revelation, 200. cf. Beasley-Murray, Revelation, 295, and Caird, Revelation, 254.

exempt from the final judgment.<sup>36</sup>

When the (symbolic) thousand years were ended, Satan was released from his prison to resume his earlier practice of "deceiving the nations (20:8)." This time the mythical nations are "Gog and Magog" who dwell "at the four corners of the earth", and are "as numerous as the sands of the sea". These Satan gathers for battle. 'John' uses this traditional scenario, drawn from Ezekiel 38:14-23--in which, by his time, Gog and Magog have developed into two nations which typify the enemies of both God and the people of Israel (so Barclay, Beasley-Murray et al.)--in order to elaborate again on the final eschatological battle. The enemy hordes "surrounded the camp of the saints and the beloved city", which Beasley-Murray interprets to mean 'the holy city Jerusalem' which 'John' views as the centre of the kingdom of Christ.<sup>37</sup> For Harrington also "the beloved city" is the New Jerusalem,<sup>38</sup> while for Kealey it is the faithful Christian community.<sup>39</sup> Caird understands "the city of God" to mean the gathering together of God's people in any place or time.<sup>40</sup> I believe Caird's position to be the most appropriate.

Of this attack against the saints the author says starkly,

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<sup>36</sup> Schüssler Fiorenza, Revelation, 109, Kealey, Apocalypse, 218.

<sup>37</sup> Beasley-Murray, Revelation, 298.

<sup>38</sup> Harrington, Revelation, 201.

<sup>39</sup> Kealey, Apocalypse, 220.

<sup>40</sup> Caird, Revelation, 257.

"And fire came down from heaven and consumed them" (20:9). This is a précis form of the account in Ezekiel 38:21-23, where God vows to inflict upon the armies of Gog and Magog "the sword.... pestilence and bloodshed", and to pour down upon them "torrential rains and hailstones, fire and sulfur" in order to establish his righteousness in the eyes of the nations. Whether one thinks about the more detailed account in Ezekiel 38:21-23 of God's intended treatment of his enemies, or 'John's' foreshortened version in Revelation 20:9, the picture is barbaric. Caird, in his commentary on this passage writes,

John shows no squeamishness about the destruction of the armies of Gog. His emotional attitude to them is very much that of the modern reader of science fiction, who can contemplate with equanimity the liquidation of Mars-men with a ray-gun, because they do not belong to the order of structure of human existence [but]....come from the four corners of the earth, the outlandish territory beyond the bounds of civilization."<sup>1</sup>

The same cannot be said, however, about those humans who are to be thrown into the lake of fire because their names are not found written in the book of life (20:15). Any squeamishness on 'John's' part is absent from this verse also. The pericope ends with the devil being thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur, into which the beast and the false prophet were thrown in 19:20, there to be

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<sup>1</sup> Caird, Revelation, 257-58.

"tormented day and night forever and ever" (20:10).

Not unnaturally, scholars have discussed the significance of such a gruesome symbol as the lake of fire. For Schüssler Fiorenza it portrays the "final and everlasting destruction of all evil and demonic power"--but only "those who participate in the 'first resurrection'" are exempt from final judgment and eternal punishment" (my emphasis).<sup>42</sup> For Kealey the lake of fire is a place of eternal torture for Satan and his evil minions, and the ultimate destiny for those whose names are not written in the book of life.<sup>43</sup> Barclay seems to see the lake of fire as a place of eternal torment for the Devil, the beast and the false prophet,<sup>44</sup> as well as being the ultimate destiny of those whose names are absent from the book of life, but whether for annihilation or eternal torment he does not say.<sup>45</sup>

Beasley-Murray states categorically that the symbol represents "the place to which Satan and his evil agencies and the wicked of mankind are condemned perpetually after the judgment....That it does not have the meaning of annihilation (my emphasis) is indicated by 20:10".<sup>46</sup> For Caird<sup>47</sup> and Harrington<sup>48</sup> the second

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<sup>42</sup> Schüssler Fiorenza, Revelation, 108.

<sup>43</sup> Kealey, Revelation, 220-21.

<sup>44</sup> Barclay, Revelation, v.2. 249.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid, 252.

<sup>46</sup> Beasley-Murray, Revelation, 304.

<sup>47</sup> Caird, Revelation, 260.

death means annihilation. I find myself in agreement with Beasley-Murray, simply because all of the author's imagery for divine punishment has been consistent with the practice of the most extreme sadism towards enemies, which was long understood as being typical of the Shepherd-King. (cf. 19:3; 20:10).

The pericope in 20:11-15, which deals with the final judgment, recounts the seer's vision of "a great white throne, and the one who sat on it..." While the identity of the judge is not specified here, throughout the Apocalypse 'the throne' has always meant the Throne of God. Only in two places, only after the final judgment, and only with reference to the New Jerusalem is the throne designated as "the throne of God and of the Lamb" (22:1,3). Barclay comments that most NT writers claim that Jesus is the final judge (John 5:22; Matt 25:31-48; Acts 17:31; 2 Tim 4:1), but they also stress that God and Jesus are one (see especially John 10:30), and therefore "...what is said of one may be said of the other."<sup>49</sup>

To the Christians on earth Jesus is consistently portrayed as their Lord and Judge. But nowhere throughout the Apocalyptic Drama is he presented as the heavenly Judge: his function is simply to initiate or to carry out the divinely appointed punishments, as in the septad of the seals, and in the final battle depicted in 19:11-21. Barclay offers an insightful comment on these facts when he writes: "To a Jew, even when [like 'John'] he became a

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<sup>49</sup> Harrington, Revelation, 205.

<sup>50</sup> Barclay, Revelation, v.2. 250.



Christian, God stands unique and alone; and it would seem natural to him that God [not Christ] should be the judge".<sup>50</sup>

All of the dead were seen standing before the throne, and many books of records, as well as the book of life, were opened for the purpose of evidence. Death and Hades yielded up the buried dead, and the sea gave up those who had died without benefit of burial. The two types of books by which all people are to be judged appear to be mutually exclusive. It would seem that, if all people are to be judged by the record of their works (20:12,13), there should be no need for the book of life. Harrington presents a quotation from Boring which, while not solving the puzzle, is helpful nevertheless.

In these two books are pictured the paradox of works and grace. We are ultimately responsible for what we do, for it has eternal consequences--we are judged by works. God is ultimately responsible for our salvation, it is his deed that saves us, not ours--we are saved by grace. Propositional language will always sound paradoxical on such ultimate issues; John's pictorial language makes both statements in one picture. <sup>51</sup>

After the Judgment was completed, Death, Hades, and anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life, were thrown into the lake of fire, which is "the second death". Since all of

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> M.E. Boring, Revelation, Interpretation. (Louisville: John Knox, 1989), 212. Quoted in Harrington, Revelation, 204-05.

the evil forces and all of the people who opposed God's reign have finally been annihilated, the way is now clear for the author's presentation of the new heaven and earth (cf. Is. 65:17) and of the New Jerusalem, which immediately follows in 21:1-7.

The seer's first observation is that, with the passing away of the first cosmos, the sea no longer exists (21:1). That was traditionally seen as the source of all that was disjunctive with the good and perfect will of God. Then 'John' sees the descent from heaven of the 'New Jerusalem'--his symbol for God's long-awaited, ultimate dwelling-place among mortals (21:3)--and also for the whole company of the people of God, pictured here as "a bride adorned for her husband". In contrast to 19:7, where the bride is specifically the bride of the Lamb, the husband of the bride in 21:2 is not specified. The idea that God had taken the nation of Israel as his wife is well attested in the prophetic writings (cf. Hos 2:19-20). I suggest that Christians and Jews alike could identify with 'the bride' in 21:2, and that 'John' wrote in this way intentionally.

We need next to examine the promises in 21:3-5, spoken by "a loud voice from the throne"--by which 'John' probably meant one of the angels of the presence--and to trace their biblical sources.

21:3b,c,d. "The home (tabernacle) of God is among mortals. He will dwell (tabernacle) with them as their God;

They will be his peoples."

Compare Lev. 26:11-12. "I will place my dwelling (the tabernacle constructed in Ex. 36-40) in your midst....and I will walk among

you, and will be your God, and you shall be my people."

21:3e. "And God himself will be with them."

Compare Is.7:14, where "God is with us" is the meaning of the name "Immanuel".

21:4a,b. "He will wipe every tear from their eyes,  
Death will be no more."

Compare Is.25:7d-8a. "[The Lord] will swallow up death forever.  
Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces."

21:4c,d. "Mourning and crying and pain will be no more.  
For the first things are passed away."

Compare Is.35:10, which is quoted verbatim by Deutero-Isaiah in  
51:11. "The ransomed of the Lord shall return,  
and come to Zion with singing,  
Everlasting joy shall be upon their heads;  
they shall obtain joy and gladness,  
and sorrow and sighing shall flee away."

After these promises were made to the seer, God himself declared from the throne, "See, I am making all things new.... Then he said to me, "It is done!"(5-6). This is reminiscent of the account of the first Creation in Genesis 1, where God said, "Let there be....And it was so." With the phrase "It is done!" the New Creation is inaugurated. "It is done!" was also the phrase which marked the final downfall of Rome in 16:17. I understand the same phrase here to mean that all the promises quoted in 21:3-4 concerning the new life in the holy city pertain from this moment on. His next words, "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning

and the end" are titles which the Almighty had already claimed for himself in 1:8. The author has placed these at the beginning and the end of the Apocalypse to form an inclusio; therefore all that is contained between them bears the stamp of the eternal deity. God adds, "To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life" (cf. Is. 55:1), which water, we find in 22:1, springs "from the throne of God and of the Lamb".

In verse 7 the author brings his readers/listeners back to earth with a jolt. He portrays God as saying that these blessings are set aside like an inheritance to be claimed only by those who conquer--they will be God's children (lit. huios, 'son') and he will be their God. But as for those guilty of cowardice, faithlessness, pollution, murder, fornication, sorcery, idolatry or lies--and many of these transgressions were addressed to Christians in the letters to the seven churches--their place will be "in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death" (v8).

To summarize, the first pericope, dealing with God's appearance, presents him as the supreme Ruler of the Universe. The second, fourth and fifth pericopes portray him as a merciless judge, as does the one which deals with the final judgment in the last section. 'John' maintains, however, that since God's enemies have themselves acted without mercy, God's retaliation is "just". The third pericope clearly emphasizes his covenant faithfulness.

It comes as a surprise to realise that Revelation 21:3-7--a mere five verses--contain virtually all that the author has to say

about the tender, shepherd-like aspect of the character of God. From the remainder of the text, in terms of characterization, we learn that the heavenly city is irradiated by the glory of God (21:23), and that he has made provision for the needs of his people in the water of life, and the fruit-bearing tree of life, whose leaves also provide healing for the nations (22:2-3). He will graciously accept the worship of his servants, who finally have the joy and privilege of seeing him face to face (v.4). His tenderness is epitomized and best expressed in 21:4a--"He will wipe every tear from their eyes"--these words suggest both great compassion and deep love.

That having been said, it has still to be acknowledged that this gentler side of God is overwhelmed by the sheer volume of what the author has written concerning the power, the wrath, and the catastrophic, vengeful punishments visited by God upon sinful humanity in the septads of the trumpets and the bowls of wrath--albeit in vindication of his martyred son and servants. This reflects similar proportions which are present in the Covenant Blessings and Cursings in Deuteronomy chapters 27 and 28. The Blessings are contained in 28:1-14, while the Cursings take up a total of 65 verses, in 27:15-26, and in 28:16-68.<sup>52</sup> It seems, then, that the author may be continuing a traditional biblical emphasis.

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<sup>52</sup> This was brought to my attention by Dr. Adele Reinhartz in a personal communication.

We have now finished investigating the eleven pericopes which are most significant for an understanding of the author's characterizations of God and Jesus. In the concluding chapter we will consider the implications of this study for the Christology and Theology of 'John', the seer of Patmos.

## Conclusion

It is time now to bring together all that the author has said about God and Jesus, and all that he has conveyed about their characters through inferences drawn from their own roles and actions, and from the actions, words and roles of the other dramatis personae in the scenarios/visions he has described. In chapter one we noted that there is a distinction between the way in which the relationship between the two characters is portrayed to the believers in Asia in the Prologue, the Letters (1:4-3:22) and the Epilogue (22:6-21), and the way in which it is portrayed in the Apocalyptic drama throughout the main body of the book (4:1-22:9). We have noted also that the character of God, while displaying two very different modes of behaviour, remains consistent throughout Revelation. This summary will keep these observations in mind, and, at the end, some of the implications and consequences of 'John's' characterizations will be considered.

## Summary

What 'John' says about God in the segments addressed to the believers in Asia can scarcely be considered detailed characterization. He simply introduces him as the God and Father of Jesus Christ (1:6), and then designates him in 1:8 as 'the Lord

God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty'. Also in 1:8, and in one of only two speeches in the Apocalypse, God briefly introduces himself with the words, "I am the Alpha and the Omega". Yet even these few simply stated facts convey to the readers/listeners something of the mystery which surrounds the 'person' of the Almighty, and bring the relationship between him and Jesus to the forefront of his readers' minds. Culpepper notes how significant a part introductions play in the 'fashioning' of characters. <sup>1</sup>

Throughout the Apocalyptic Drama, however, the author has portrayed GOD as the Eternal, All-powerful (4:8), Omniscient Creator of all that is (4:11), Holy (16:4), Just and True (15:3). The hosts of heaven worship him continually (4:8-11) because, as the Ruler of the Universe, that is his due. He is the faithful keeper of his covenants (4:3; 11:19; 21:3), who demands utter loyalty and obedience from all humanity--but especially from those who have covenanted to be his people. He comes to the aid of those who are faithful to him (11:12; 12:5-6), and when the final Judgment is past and gone, he promises that he will dwell among them face-to-face (22:4) in a newly-created world (21:5), when he will vindicate and comfort them, wipe away their tears (21:4), and provide them with heavenly food and with the water of life (22:1,2). As for those who persistently oppose him, there is but one consequence. For them there is no mercy, only eternal torment

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<sup>1</sup> Culpepper, Anatomy, 106.



in the lake of fire (20:10, 15). Also within the Apocalyptic Drama, he is the Father of the Lamb (14:1)--of the man who offered himself as a sacrifice for sin. He accepts the priestly service of the redeemed in heaven (7:15; 22:3). He is the Pantokratōr, supreme over all other beings, including Jesus, who is portrayed in the heavenly realm as God's co-ruler (5:13b).

To the believers in Asia, JESUS is portrayed as the Risen Christ (1:12-20), the first and the last and the living one (1:17-18)--the formula "who is and who was and who is to come" is reserved for God. He is their Lord and Judge, who insists that, if they are to spend eternity in heaven with him, then, while on earth, they must be true and faithful witnesses to him, even until death (2:10), just as he was the faithful and true witness (3:14) until death par excellence to God, whose Son he claims to be (2:18). He will forgive and restore the penitent (3:20), and will reward the conquerors--those who have followed (14:1), and those who are yet to follow him (6:11) to a martyr's death--with thrones (20:4), from which they will rule over the nations with iron rods (2:26-27) as kings. Five times throughout the Apocalypse, in 1:7; 16:15; 22:7, 12, and 20, his faithful followers on earth are reminded that the Risen Christ is coming soon to judge them, and to repay each according to his work.

It is as the slain, now risen Lamb that Jesus is introduced into the Apocalyptic drama (5:6). Once there, he is acclaimed as God's Messiah, first by the heavenly council (5:8-10), next by the angelic hosts (5:11-12), and finally by all of God's creation,

when, still as "the Lamb", he is recognized as 'Vice-Regent' (5:13)--God's 'functional equivalent' and Representative.

This three-fold process of acclamation shows marked similarities to the story of the rise to power of Joseph, son of Jacob, in the court of Pharaoh (Gen. 41:37-44). To Jesus are ascribed many of the Messianic titles which are found in the Old Testament (cf. 2:28; 5:5; 22:16; etc.).

Even when Jesus claims for himself the divine title "Alpha and Omega" in 22:13, the author is not, I suggest, equating Jesus with God. This claiming for himself, by Jesus, of the divine title is made directly to the believers in Asia, and indicates that, to them, he represents and functions as God. 'John' has been careful, from beginning to end of the Apocalyptic Drama, to make Jesus subordinate to God, just as Eliakim, who also represented his king, Hezekiah, and was recognised as his 'functional equivalent', never was Israel's monarch. I see this as being in keeping with 1 Cor 15:28, where Paul writes, "When all things are subjected [to Christ by God], then the Son himself will also be subjected to the one who put all things in subjection under him, so that God may be all in all". I believe it to be truly significant that the seer makes it perfectly clear that God is the only Almighty, the only Lord God, and the only Creator.

In the role of Vice-Regent Jesus initiates all the catastrophes that the Almighty foreordained in the seven-sealed scroll to chasten the inhabitants of the earth (6:1-8:1). When all except some of those who live in Jerusalem (11:13c) continue

unrepentant (9:20,21; 16:9-11, 21) the severity of the punishments increases until, in the final day of Judgment, they, along with all the evil forces that have been at work in the world since time began (19:20; 20:14), are thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur (20:15) to be tormented forever and ever (20:10).

This summary of 'John's' characterizations of God and Jesus has raised some significant and thought-provoking questions, as follows.

1. Both characters and the relationship between them, are presented in different and contrasting ways in the two segments of the book, a) in the sections addressed directly to the believers in Asia, the Prologue, letters (1:4-3:22) and Epilogue (22:6-21), and b), in the Apocalyptic Drama (4:1-22:9). In a), the author portrays Jesus as claiming to be "the Son of God" (2:18), whose Father is the Almighty Ruler of the universe (1:8). This has the obvious effect of accentuating Jesus' divinity and status. Nowhere in these segments addressed directly to his fellow-believers does 'John' use the title "the Lamb" for Jesus. In b), however, Jesus is designated as "the Lamb"--the Human/Redeemer--no less than 28 times, one of which is where 'John' refers to God as "the Father of the Lamb" (14:1). It is noteworthy also that nowhere in the Apocalyptic Drama does God verbally acknowledge Jesus as his Son. Thus, in this segment, the humanity of Jesus is accentuated, and his status is clearly subordinated to that of God. What is the author signifying by these contrasting portraits and relationships?

2. As a corollary to the first question, we must also ask whether the Apocalypse implies that Jesus is co-equal with God.

3. At the beginning of the Apocalyptic Drama Jesus stands before God's throne as a subordinate (5:6); at the end, he shares it. Does this imply that Jesus' character has developed throughout the narrative?--or simply that his status and roles have increased?

4. The verbs agapaō used in 1:5 and in 3:9, and philō, used in 3:19, and the noun agapē (love) used in 2:4, 19; are never used in the Apocalyptic Drama. Is there a reason for this?

5. Throughout the Apocalyptic Drama both God and Jesus are portrayed after the ancient figures of the Shepherd/King and the Divine Warrior--tender and protective toward their followers (God, in 21:3b-7; Jesus, in 7:16-17), and ruthless to all who oppose them. In both portrayals, at least in terms of the relative quantities written about both aspects of each character, the characteristics of ruthlessness and vengefulness very nearly displace entirely those of tenderness and compassion. Was this likely to have been the author's intentional emphasis?

I find these questions both challenging and intriguing, and will deal with each of them in turn.

1. The contrasting characterizations in a) the Prologue, Letters and Epilogue, and in b) the Apocalyptic Drama.

When I read the segments which 'John' addresses specifically and directly to his fellow-believers in Asia Minor, it appears to me that he is quite intentionally stressing a) Jesus' divinity

(2:18); b) the uniqueness of his achievements--(i) "faithful witness" to God (1:5) and (ii) his redemptive death (1:5); c) God's vindication of him in the resurrection (1:5,18); d) his transformation of forgiven sinners into priests (1:6); and the multiple roles of (i) Son of God (2:18); (ii) Ruler of the kings of the earth (1:5); (iii) the Lord (1:12); and (iv) Judge (1:16; 2:16; 22:12) of the Christian church.

'John' seems to have been encouraging them to think of the risen Christ, as well as of their current, uncertain future, from the perspectives of heaven and eternity. In this way he could make a stronger claim on their obedience and loyalty as faithful witnesses. At the same time he was helping them to understand that, even though they may have to face political or social harassment, persecution, or death itself, they could be assured that they would "soon" be able to participate in the eschatological Kingdom of God, beyond the reach of their tormentors, who in any case were destined for destruction.

The relationship between God and Jesus is portrayed to 'John's's fellow-believers, in these segments, as a very close one: like that of a father and his first-born son, or that of a monarch and his prime minister. Such images, clearly, would have encouraged his readers/listeners to endeavour to be steadfast witnesses to Christ--if need be, even 'until death'.

If all this is true, why did the author find it necessary to characterize God and Jesus, and the relationship between them, so differently throughout the Apocalyptic Drama? Some possible

reasons come to mind. In the first place, though quite obviously deeply committed to Jesus the Messiah, 'John' is a Jewish Christian through and through. His mind is steeped to a remarkable degree in the Hebrew Bible and the traditions of Judaism, and the Shemah, (Deut. 6:4) which reads, "Hear O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord" (RSV), or, as the NRSV translates it, "Hear O Israel: the Lord is our God, the Lord alone", was the absolute foundation of his covenantal faith. William Barclay comments insightfully on this matter. "The whole background of the book is Jewish; and for a Jew nothing may be allowed to obscure or to lessen the awful loneliness of Almighty God. To a Jew, even when he became a Christian, God stands unique and alone..." <sup>2</sup>

Thus, the author portrays God within the heavenly realm as the Pantokratōr, with no equal. Although Jesus has been exalted above all other heavenly beings, including every member of the heavenly council, it is as God's Messiah; it is God's throne that he shares, and he does so because God permits him to do so, as his Representative and Functional Equivalent.

Why, in the Apocalyptic Drama, does the author not follow the example of the evangelists Matthew (3:17), Mark (1:11), and Luke (3:22), who portray God as acknowledging Jesus as his Son (at the time of his baptism, cf. John 1:32-34)? Mark describes the event as follows: "Just as he was coming up out of the water...a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well

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<sup>2</sup> Barclay, Revelation Vol.2, 250.

pleased.'" The words "You are my Son" are a quotation from Ps.2:7, which reads, "You are my son; today I have begotten you." These words constituted a formula of adoption during Israel's Coronation ceremony for a newly-anointed monarch ("Messiah"), and by means of this formula the king was deemed to have become God's son.

By including this messianic adoption formula in the account of Jesus' baptism, the writers of the synoptic gospels are implying messianic status—including divine sonship—for Jesus, from the time of his baptism, when he consciously dedicated himself to the fulfilling of God's will for his life. The fact that this incident is recorded in all of the synoptic gospels suggests that it was probably well-known to the author of the Apocalypse. Therefore the belief in Jesus as Messiah/Son of God had already been recognised in the Church for some decades by the time the Apocalypse was written. Since the author has already presented Jesus at his introduction into the Apocalyptic Drama in messianic terms ("Lion of Judah", "Root of David"), he may have decided that any separate acknowledgment of him on God's part as "My Son" would be redundant.

## 2. Does the Apocalypse imply that Jesus is Co-equal with God?

On the basis of what has emerged from this narrative critical study of 'John's' characterizations of Jesus and God, the answer to this question must be "No". In dealing with the previous question it became very obvious that, especially throughout the Apocalyptic Drama, that is, within the heavenly realm, the author is very careful to make much of the Almighty's authority over the

Lamb. In the Prologue, Letters and Epilogue written to the believers on earth, however, Jesus' subordination to God is considerably toned down. Also, the fact that within the churches his roles as God's Functional Equivalent are accentuated, makes his claim to divine Sonship in 2:18 seem appropriate. It must nevertheless be recognised that this claim had been made by many rulers before him, including several of the emperors of Rome, some of whom were worshipped in Thyatira as "son of Zeus",<sup>3</sup> others of whom even claimed to be an incarnation of the god himself. For example, Domitian is reputed by some to have claimed to be an incarnation of Apollo, the Roman sun god.<sup>4</sup>

There are those who say that the facts that Jesus, as the Lamb, is worshipped together with God in Rev.5:13, and that the statement in 11:15 that the kingdom belongs to "our Lord and his Christ" implies the divinity of Jesus. That may be so, but it is not possible, I think, to get around the following facts:

1. The title, "the Lamb", implies both the humanity of Jesus, and the sacrificial death he endured as a man, and it is in this capacity and as God's Functional Equivalent that he shares the worship and the throne of God (22:1,3).
2. When the names of God and the Lamb are used together, as in 21:22 for example, "the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb", Jesus is never given precedence over God.

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<sup>3</sup> Schüssler Fiorenza, Revelation, 54.

<sup>4</sup> Beasley-Murray, Revelation, 162.



3. In 21:23, the Lamb is presented as the lamp which bears the light in the New Jerusalem, but the light which he bears is not his own glory, but the glory of God.

4. As was noted earlier, the supreme titles used for God in the Apocalypse, the Almighty, and Lord God, are never applied to Jesus, nor is it ever implied that he was the Creator of the Universe.

5. We also noted earlier that, when the seventh angel blew his trumpet in 11:15, "there were loud voices in heaven, saying, 'The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign for ever and ever'". Jesus may be Messiah, but he is God's Messiah, and the hymn of praise which follows this pronouncement is addressed, not to God and the Lamb, but to the Lord God Almighty.

For these reasons, I am persuaded that 'John' of Patmos did not present Jesus as being co-equal with Almighty God. Even though he may have attributed some measure of divinity to the Lamb, the status of the Lamb appears to be less than that of the Almighty Pantokrator. It would seem that, for 'John', divine status, and perhaps even divinity itself, may be a matter of degree.

3. Does the author portray Jesus' character as developing throughout the narrative?

On my first few readings of the Apocalypse I was very conscious of Jesus' advancement throughout the narrative, from the time of his first appearance in the Apocalyptic Drama, in 5:6. There, he is seen standing before God's throne, like all the other

angel-servants who wait to fulfil God's every command. By the end of the Drama, in 22:1,3, he shares God's throne in the New Jerusalem. I mistakenly attributed this rise to power to the fact that Jesus' character had developed throughout the narrative. Such is not the case, however. At the very beginning of the Drama he is authenticated as a worthy character, because of his atoning death for humanity (5:9). On account of this he has won the right to open the seven seals of the scroll in God's hand. In 5:11 he is acknowledged as being "worthy" to reign over all the hosts of heaven, and in 5:13 as being "worthy" to rule over the entire Creation as well.

It is not his character per se that develops over the course of the narrative, but the recognition of his dignity. The development that takes place is in his status, his roles and functions, and his power. Though he is clearly the major protagonist for Good, fighting God's battles for him, he, nevertheless, like God himself, falls within the classification of "static" characters.

4. Why are the words,  $\alpha\gamma\alpha\pi\alpha\omega$ ,  $\alpha\gamma\alpha\pi\epsilon$ , and  $\phi\iota\lambda\omega$  which appear in the messages to the believers, absent from the Apocalyptic Drama?

In the messages addressed specifically to the believers, the author is trying to motivate them to be 'faithful witnesses' to Jesus, by reminding them of all that they owe him for dying for them. Jesus is  $\text{ho } \alpha\gamma\alpha\pi\omega$  in 1:5, who loves them in the present, in 3:9 he states his love for them in the past,  $\epsilon\gamma\alpha\pi\epsilon\sigma\alpha$  (aorist), and in 3:19 it is again the present tense which is used ( $\phi\iota\lambda\omega$ ).

In 2:19 he commends the believers in Thyatira for their continuing love, and in 2:4 rebukes the Christians in Ephesus for abandoning the love they had shown one another in earlier years.

The author of I John was able to write, "This is the message you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another (3:11)"; and the author of the Fourth Gospel depicts Jesus as saying, "Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (13:34-35).

This long-standing emphasis on the love of Christ for his followers, and of his followers for one another is present--minimally--in the Prologue and Letters, but is completely absent from the Apocalyptic Drama. This should not be too surprising. In this segment of Revelation, the message 'John' has for the believers is one of ultimate vindication for all who have suffered oppression, in whatever form, from their brutal Roman conquerors. Their vindication will come in an eschatological reversal which will bring justice for the abused, and annihilation for the abusers, for whom there is no possibility of a final pardon.

The author appears to have been a stern pastor in the churches, who had more to say to his fellow-believers about error and correction than about love. For him the enemies of the Christians were the enemies of Christ, and, what was worse, of Almighty God himself. For such, eternal punishment was appropriate. 'John' has no words of hope or love for them.

5. Which images for God and Jesus are more influential in Revelation? King and Divine Warrior? or Shepherd and Lamb?

This is a very pertinent and complex question which highlights the contrasting facets of 'John's' characterizations of both God and Jesus. Not surprisingly, there are two very different schools of interpretation. For Caird, the imagery of the Redeemer/Lamb is paramount. He believes that the title "the Lamb" is meant to control and interpret all the rest of the symbolism the author uses for Christ. "It is almost as if John were saying to us at one point after another: 'Wherever the Old Testament says "Lion", read "Lamb".'<sup>5</sup> "There is no need", he adds later, "to find a place in John's theology for any concept of the wrath of the Lamb, since it is not a phrase which he uses propria persona, but one which he puts on the lips of the terrified inhabitants of the earth".<sup>6</sup>

A.Y. Collins presents a different point of view. She addresses the question of whether the image of Christ as divine warrior in chapter 19 is transformed by the image of the suffering Lamb in chapter 5, or whether the latter image is transformed by the former. She concludes that the character of the book as a whole implies that the image of the divine warrior overpowers that of the Lamb. She adds, "The impression that the older Christian image of the sacrificial Lamb is being reinterpreted in Revelation is supported by the introduction of the figure as the 'Lion of the

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<sup>5</sup> Caird, Revelation, 75.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 92.

Tribe of Judah' (5:5)".<sup>7</sup>

In Crisis and Catharsis she presents the thesis that the scenarios of horrendous punishments visited upon the Roman Empire by God, the Almighty Judge, were created by the author as "a literary means for dealing with the aggressive feelings aroused by the perceived crisis." But she does not leave the matter there, for she does not see such catharsis as being without problems. She adds,

We must assess critically the Apocalypse's means of resolving tension. Such critical assessment is important because the experience of such tension is a perennial human experience, and because Revelation's resolution continues to have influence due to the book's status as a canonical text (emphasis mine)....If Revelation's vision of the future is adopted, it must be in the full realization that it is a partial and imperfect vision.<sup>8</sup>

Schüssler Fiorenza also expresses reservations about 'John's' Imperial imagery. She writes:

[The] envisioning of God and Christ in analogy to the Oriental Great King and the Roman emperor ...calls for theological evaluation. In likening God's glory and power to Roman imperial power and splendor, in portraying Christ as the divine "warrior" and "King of kings", Rev

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<sup>7</sup> A. Y. Collins, "Book of Revelation", ABD Vol.5, 695-708. 705.

<sup>8</sup> A. Y. Collins, Crisis and Catharsis, 165-171.

is in danger of conceiving divine power as "power over" in terms of Roman domination.'

I believe 'John' used these militaristic images in an attempt to reassure his fellow-Christians that God and Christ were infinitely stronger and more powerful than the Roman Emperor, who could not, therefore, defy the Almighty and remain unpunished. Nevertheless, for me the images of King and Divine Warrior so completely overwhelm those of Shepherd and Lamb in the Apocalypse, that the gentler imagery is very nearly without influence.

#### 6. 'John's' Use of Scripture

The author of the Apocalypse was well-versed in the Hebrew scriptures. His use of them is different from that of other NT writers. He does not quote them verbatim, but alludes to them freely, often singling out isolated features from one place, and combining them with others from somewhere else. Thus, in the vision of the risen Christ in 1:12-16, he draws upon, among other things, the lampstands from Zech 4:2, 'one like a son of man' from Dan 7:13, the white hair of the Ancient of Days from Dan 7:9, and eyes like fire and the feet/legs like burnished bronze of the angel from Dan 10:6. Similarly, Jesus can be both the Lamb--an open-ended symbol which may signify the Paschal lamb of Passover night (Exod 12:21), or the slaughtered lamb of Isa 53:7-8, or both--and the Shepherd who will guide the redeemed in heaven to the springs

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\* Schüssler Fiorenza, Justice and Judgment, 9.

of living water (Rev 7:17).

In terms of Israel's salvation-history, by far the most prominent motif is the Exodus. It appears in the identifying seal on the foreheads of God's faithful servants in 7:3, which is reminiscent of the blood of the paschal lamb on the lintels and doorposts of the Israelite homes in Egypt on passover night, singling out their firstborn sons for protection from the angel of death (Exod 12:7,12-13). God's anger against the brutal Egyptian oppressors is recalled through numerous allusions to the Egyptian plagues in the punishments of the two series of the trumpets and bowls directed against Rome. The Exodus motif is present again in 15:3, where the conquerors, having apparently traversed the sea of glass mingled with fire, stand on its farther shore and sing "the song of Moses, the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb". It may even be present, I suggest, in 21:10, where 'John', like Moses (Deut 34:1-4), is given his first glimpse of the Promised Land/New Jerusalem, from the top of "a great, high mountain". The Exodus story of God's intervention in history on behalf of his oppressed people offered great hope to the author's beleaguered fellow-believers, who felt themselves to be similarly oppressed.

The second most prominent, specifically Jewish motif, I suggest, is the life of Joseph, God's faithful and true witness at the beginning of Israel's sojourn in Egypt. For example, the believers in Smyrna are warned in 2:10 that some of them will be thrown into prison, be tested, and experience great affliction. They are exhorted to be faithful (until death if needs be) and they

will be rewarded with a crown. Similarly, in chapter 5 the process portrayed in Jesus' acceptance in the heavenly realm is virtually identical to that of Joseph under Pharaoh in Gen 41.

Uncharacteristically, Joseph's name is included in the list of the twelve tribes in 7:8, and the sun, moon and stars which are featured in Joseph's portentous dream in Gen 37:9, identify the pregnant woman of 12:1 as the nation of Israel, from whom sprang both the Messiah (12:5) and the Christian church (12:17). Finally, just as Pharaoh delegated the authority for some of his many functions and roles as Egypt's ruler to Joseph, his vice-regal representative (Gen 41:43, 55), so Almighty God delegates much of his authority to Jesus as his Functional Equivalent and Representative.<sup>10</sup>

The OT imagery the author uses to describe the heavenly realm is that of the Solomonic temple, drawn from 1 Kings 6-8. The descriptions of the four living creatures in Revelation 4:6b-8a owe much to Ezekiel's vision of the four living creatures which transported God's chariot-throne in Ezekiel 1:5-11, and to Isaiah's vision of God on his throne in the temple, in Isaiah 6:1-3. The motifs of the river of the water of life flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb in the New Jerusalem, and of the tree of life with its fruit and healing leaves in Revelation 22:1-2 are inspired by Ezekiel 47:1-12.

The author has included in Revelation some specifically

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<sup>10</sup> Harrington refers to the Lamb's taking of the scroll from God's hand in 5:7 as "a transfer of power". Revelation, 85.



eschatological motifs which are typical of many apocalyptic writings. One such motif is 'eschatological reversal', in which the roles of the oppressors and the oppressed are to be reversed in the last days. A. Y. Collins sees this principle at work in Revelation 18:7-8 where Rome, the complacent and arrogant tyrant, is brought down from the throne to the dust and ashes of destruction.<sup>11</sup> It is present again in 20:4, where the conquerors--those Christians who were killed by Rome--are given thrones and authority to judge, and in 2:26-27 where they are given authority to rule over the nations 'with an iron rod, as when clay pots are shattered'. This vision of eschatological reversal was present at least from the time of Deutero-Isaiah (cf. Isa 49:8), and became a standard feature of apocalyptic.

W.S. Towne brings our attention to a second apocalyptic feature when he says: "Only the apocalyptic books of the Bible appear to admit of no exception to the conviction that God's purpose for his creation cannot be completed until his retributive justice has run its full course, and all evil forces have been extirpated."<sup>12</sup> The Bowls of God's Wrath in Revelation chapters 15-16 illustrate this well. Grant R. Osborne is clearly at ease with this particular apocalyptic feature. He writes in an article entitled "Theodicy", "In light of an 'eternity' of rejections [of

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<sup>11</sup> A. Y. Collins, "Apocalypse", New Jerome Biblical Commentary. 1013.

<sup>12</sup> W. S. Towne, "Retribution", IDB Sup. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1985, 742-44), 743-44.

God by depraved humanity] eternal punishment is mandated....This is the Roman legal principle of lex talionis, and the point is that the earth dwellers in the Apocalypse have earned their punishment".<sup>13</sup> However, J.J. Collins, referring to "the Christian adaptation of apocalyptic" sees things differently. He writes:

The idea of love for one's enemies, often considered the most distinctive aspect of Christ's message was not noted in Revelation. The desire for vengeance characteristic of the Jewish works was not lessened (Rev 6:10; 19:17-21).... Christ was not without influence on this adaptation of apocalyptic, but it is doubtful if that impact was of the kind envisaged in his own teaching. <sup>14</sup>

He makes a similar point in The Apocalyptic Imagination:

The portrayal of Christ as the rider whose robe is dipped in blood and who rules the nations with a rod of iron is not based on the stories or deeds of Jesus of Nazareth, but on traditional portrayals of the divine warrior or of the Messiah. <sup>15</sup>

I find myself concerned by the way in which the Jesus of the gospels has been transformed into the divine warrior of the Apocalypse. Of course, the transformation probably began with the stories of the resurrection, post-resurrection appearances and

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<sup>13</sup> Osborne, "Theodicy". 70-71.

<sup>14</sup> J. J. Collins, "Pseudonymity, Historical Reviews and the Genre of the Revelation of John", CBQ 39. 1977, 329-343. 342-343.

<sup>15</sup> J. J. Collins, The Apocalyptic Imagination. 213.

ascension in the four gospels and Acts, but the pre-crucifixion traditions present a very different Jesus. He is the (son of) man who came, not to be served, but to serve others (Mark 9:35; 10:42-45; Matt 20:25-28; Luke 22:24), and who willingly washed his disciples' feet (John 13:3-15) to teach them by his own example the importance of humble service. In John 6:15 he is shown as repudiating political power and the role of king for himself, and in Luke 12:14 as refusing the role of judge. In the Apocalypse, however, both these roles are thrust upon him.

While the powerful Shepherd/King, so dominant throughout the Apocalyptic Drama, undoubtedly arose in the cultures of Sumer and Akkad, he was a familiar figure for millennia throughout the Ancient Near East--including Palestine--in the great rulers of Egypt, Assyria, Babylonia, Persia, Greece and Rome. Though the faces, names and empires changed, the Shepherd/King, like the sun, was a perennial factor in every ANE culture. This is why Israel's psalmists and prophets used the figure of the Great Oriental King as a metaphor for Yahweh himself (cf. Ps 95:3; 96:10; 97:1; 99:1-5; 103:19; Isa 6:1; Dan 7:9-10; Ezek 1:26-28)--a metaphor adopted by many NT writers as well--by none more so than by the author of the Apocalypse.

It is impossible in a paper such as this to enumerate all of the OT scriptures to which 'John' alludes. Suffice it to say that each successive reading of the Apocalypse brings still more examples to one's attention.

In conclusion, 'John' of Patmos, out of pastoral concern for his fellow-Christians, wanted to offer them hope and encouragement which would enable them to be Jesus' faithful and true witnesses to their life's end, whether or not it should come by violence. Having experienced himself the power of Rome to seduce, intimidate and persecute, he assured them of Rome's imminent downfall ("what must soon take place" Rev 1:1) and of Christ's--and their own--ultimate triumph. He was only too well aware that "there is a limit to the capacity of faith to survive in the face of hostile fact. Unless in the end right obviously triumphs over wrong, faith in a just God is utter illusion." <sup>16</sup> And so he penned the Apocalypse to show his fellow-believers, in a series of dramatic 'visions', that the Lord God the Almighty, and Jesus his Messiah, would 'soon' bring the mighty Roman empire down to defeat and judgment, simultaneously effecting their own vindication.

Some would say that 'the obvious triumph of right over wrong' has been vividly portrayed in the Apocalypse. However, an alternate, but equally valid conclusion is possible, and it is this--a ruthless power (Rome), has been overcome by a greater and equally ruthless power (God). In the author's characterizations of God and Jesus, his overwhelming use of the Great Oriental Shepherd/King imagery has left the Christian church with a confused message. The result is that the Shepherd-like characteristics of compassion and nurturing have been rendered ineffectual in 'John's'

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<sup>16</sup> Caird, Revelation. 73.

Apocalypse by the unopposable power of God, the Almighty, and of Christ, the Divine Warrior.

## APPENDIX

## The Historical Figure of the Shepherd/King.

Because the motif of the Shepherd-King dominates the theology and christology of the Apocalypse, it needs to be scrutinised and analyzed in depth. This ancient figure was immortalized in one of the oldest extant documented legends. The story of Etana, the first Shepherd-King, is as old as the Enuma Elish--it dates from the Old Akkadian period. J.B. Pritchard writes:

The legendary dynasty of Kish which followed the Flood, lists among its rulers 'Etana, a shepherd, the one who to heaven ascended'. (The Sumerian King List, 1939, 80-81). Cylinder seals of the Old Akkadian period depict a shepherd rising heavenward on the wings of an eagle. And a figure by the name of Etana...is the subject of an elaborate legend.<sup>1</sup>

There are three extant recensions of this legend, Old Babylonian (A), Middle Assyrian (B), and the neo-Assyrian (C)--from the library of Ashurbanipal.

Lines 10-12 of the Old Babylonian version read (with my

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<sup>1</sup> J. B. Pritchard, "Legend of Etana" pp114-118, ANET:Sup. Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1955, 114.

emphases):

Sceptre, crown, tiara and shepherd's crook  
 Lay deposited before Anu in heaven,  
 There being no counselling for its [i.e., the earth's] people  
 (Then) Kingship descended from Heaven.

Lines 1-8 and 20-21 of the neo-Assyrian version read (again with my emphases):

They planned the city[...]  
 The [...] gods [la]id [the foundation]  
 They planned the [sh]rine, not [...],  
 The [...] gods laid its foundation.  
 May [the city] be the nest, the resting place of  
 [mankind]  
 May [the king] be the shepherd, they [...],  
 May Etana be the builder, they [...]  
 ...the staf[f...]

Ishtar a shepherd [for the people...]  
 And a king she seeks [for the city].

Pritchard comments: "The city referred to in these lines is certainly Kish, since it was, according to the Sumerian King List, the city to which the Kingship first descended after the flood and

Etana was a king of that city"<sup>2</sup> These excerpts from the Sumerian legend show that the figure of the Shepherd-King had had a long history centuries before the Israelites encountered the living reality in such powerful conquerors as the Assyrian Shalmaneser (2 Kgs 17:30) and the Babylonian Nebuchadnezzar (2 Kgs 24:1).

From ancient seals and stamps on bricks, from documents commemorating the foundation and construction of various monuments and from long annalistic accounts, M.J. Seux has compiled various titles and epithets which were customarily ascribed to Sumerian and Akkadian kings.<sup>3</sup> In the earliest of these, those from the Akkadian dynasty, the ascriptions were brief, and often consisted of only one, or perhaps two epithets. This was, of course, true throughout the centuries of inscriptions on bricks and seals, due to the restrictions of space. But in the later Babylonian times, for Hammurapi, for example, in commemorative inscriptions, and in the neo-Assyrian annals, more than a hundred expressions were sometimes strung together in praise of the king.

A number of these titles persisted through the millennia, the following two examples are familiar to readers of the Apocalypse. (Rev 17:14; 19:16):

sar sarrani = King of kings

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<sup>2</sup> Pritchard, Ancient Near Eastern Texts: Supplement, 81.

<sup>3</sup> I am indebted to M-J Seux for all of the information which follows re the titles and terminology used of the 'Ideal' Sumerian and Akkadian "Shepherd-Kings". See Epithets Royales Akkadiennes et Sumeriennes (Paris: Letouzey et Ane, 1967), pp 11-26.



bel bele = Lord of lords.<sup>4</sup>

From this same body of ancient inscriptions Seux has also put together a silhouette of the person of the ideal King--his appearance, status and roles, and his relationship with the gods. He includes two other compilations, one of the king as King in the treatment of his enemies, and another of the king as Shepherd, in his relationship with his own people. (The emphases are mine throughout the three portraits, and draw attention to phrases echoed in both Old or New Testaments, or emphasise the dual roles of Kingship, i.e., Shepherd and King).

#### 1. The Person of the King

- Is worthy of the sceptre and crown;
- has a shining face;
- is worthy of praise;
- is haloed, and is surrounded by and enrobed in light;
- is the Beloved Son of Shamash, the Sumerian High god.

The gods:

- have named the king to the pastorate of the land;
- have entrusted the king with the principate, the sceptre, the rod and the shepherd's crook;

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<sup>4</sup> G.K. Beale believes that, although the titles 'King of kings' and 'Lord of lords' were present in Egyptian and Babylonian tradition, it is more likely that 'John' drew upon the LXX version of Dan. 4:37 "since John usually limits his sphere of reference to the Old Testament and its related traditions." See "The Origin of the Title 'King of kings and Lord of lords' in Revelation 17:14." New Testament Studies 31. '85. 618-620.

--have lifted up his head (i.e., have honoured him);

--are well pleased with him;

--name him to their service: he is their anointed priest.

As priest the king founds, builds, restores and completes sanctuaries for the gods.

## 2. The King and his Enemies

The following selected terms reveal the usual methods for dealing with those who try to resist domination.

Since the King is established over his enemies by the gods, by victory and by force he conquers, weakens, binds and tames them. He exchanges populations, changes their princes, and installs governors of his own choosing. He imposes the yoke of his sovereignty on the vanquished, and demand[s] tribute from them.

He is merciless and unpitying to those who resist. If he has not repulsed, dispersed, or caused them to flee, he encircles them, dislocates their troops, breaks their arms, brings them to their knees; spreading their armies over great distances he tramples them underfoot, crushes and levels them to the ground; he bludgeons them, beheads them, breaks them like reeds, shatters them like earthenware pots or figurines, beats them to death, impales or annihilates them.

From among the survivors[!] he captures hostages whom he places in bondage and deports like common booty. At last he destroys the enemy strongholds, burns and levels the towns and the country and turns them into a desert.

### 3. The King and his People

The [ideal] King is a faithful, experienced, zealous, marvellous Shepherd, and the conquered populations gratefully welcome his ministrations. He never gives orders to do evil or to oppress, he loves his people and treats them with benevolence, he seeks out and turns himself towards the Good, and accomplishes it. He seeks help for, and comes to the aid of the poor whom he feeds, he repairs the harm endured by the humble, and lifts up the fallen. He shows himself indulgent to the guilty, blotting out their transgressions, because he is conciliatory and magnanimous.

He repeoples, rescues or provides shelter for the populations in distress, gathers them together and gives them a place in which to live. He cares for, protects and reorganizes his people, and, keeping them in good order, he makes them to prosper, and rest in safe pastures (cf. Ps 23:1-2, 4c), and extends the land and the inhabited places. He provides for all the needs of his realm, restores it and assures its stability; he is its builder, its true Father, its light, its God and its Sun.

The fact that so much of this language reappears in the Bible, some as late as the end of the first century B.C.E., shows the enduring nature of the influence of the imagery surrounding the figure of the Shepherd-King. <sup>5</sup>

Sargon I is an early example of just such a Great Shepherd-King. Here are some selected excerpts from "The Sargon

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<sup>5</sup> Schüssler Fiorenza's term for this figure is the Oriental Great King. Justice and Judgment 9.

Chronicle".

Sargon, King of Agade, rose (to power) in the era of Ishtar....and spread his terror-inspiring glamor over all the countries....He marched against the country of Kazalla and turned Kazalla into ruin-hills and heaps (of rubble). He (even) destroyed (there every possible) perching place for a bird....Later on Subartu rose with its multitudes, but it bowed to his military might. Sargon made sedentary this nomadic society. Their possessions he brought into Agade.<sup>6</sup>

It goes without saying, of course, that this language is propagandistic, and often hyperbolic. Nevertheless, Israel's obliteration as a national entity under the Assyrian conquest, and Judah's experiences under Babylon underline the very brutal truth which this language expresses.

History is replete with tales of a long succession of great Shepherd-Kings who rose to power, ruled, and were subsequently dominated by new conquering empires throughout the Ancient Near East during the millennia from the reign of Sargon I to the time of the writing of the Apocalypse. Being at the crossroads and surrounded by larger, more powerful nations, Palestine was overrun time and again by Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greece and finally Rome, each empire giving rise to a succession of monarchs

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<sup>6</sup> A. Leo Oppenheimer, Translator "Texts from the Beginnings to the First Dynasty of Babylon." Pritchard, Ancient Near Eastern Texts, 266.

whose concept of kingship had changed little since the eras of Sumer and Akkad. The tactics of "terror-inspiring glamor" and ruthless domination remained unchanged.

Any society's religious concepts are culturally derived, and are shaped by the collective experience.<sup>7</sup> The figure of the Shepherd-King is an excellent example of this. For millennia the 'collective experience' of the peoples of the Ancient Near East was subjugation to incredibly powerful rulers; this became, in Geertz' terminology, their "culture pattern", and he has shown that such culture patterns

have an intrinsic double aspect: they give meaning, that is, objective conceptual form, to social and psychological reality both by shaping themselves to it and by shaping it to themselves. It is, in fact, this double aspect which sets true symbols off from other sorts of significative forms.<sup>8</sup>

Cultural patterns are 'models', sets of symbols, which are both models of the reality which the society lives--its ethos--and models for the reality embodied in its world view, that is, the ultimate reality which the society tries to model in its cultural pattern.<sup>9</sup> Thus a pastoral culture, such as Israel was in the early period of its settlement in Canaan, accentuated the Shepherd-like

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<sup>7</sup> Clifford Geertz, The Interpretation of Cultures, (New York: Basic Books Inc., 1973), 126-140.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. 93-94.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. 93, 118.

character of God (Ps 23), but after it became a monarchy and experienced both imperial expansion and subjugation to first Assyria and then Babylon, with the subsequent longing to be wealthy and powerful again, the Great King largely displaced the Shepherd as the symbol of Israel's God (cf. Ps 95:3; 96:10; 97:1; 99:1; 103:19; etc.).

Nowhere is this more clearly seen than in the prophecy of Ezekiel, who had experienced the punishing power of the Great King Nebuchadnezzar in the siege and overthrow of Jerusalem, in the destruction of what had long been perceived as the inviolable Temple, and in the brutal deportation of the leadership of Judah, including himself, to Babylon. He did, indeed, know the dimensions of kingly omnipotence. For Ezekiel the Great 'King of kings' first symbolised the reality of daily life in the Babylonian empire, and came to symbolise the ultimate Reality of the cosmos, God himself.

Ezekiel's prophecies of God's judgments against Israel and the surrounding nations are full of wrath and fury, threatening war, wild beasts, pestilence and utter devastation upon all, Jew and gentile alike. The bitter tirades conclude with such phrases as "I the Lord have spoken" (Ezek 5:13,15,17) or "Then they (or you) shall know that I am the Lord" (Ezek 10:13,14; 7:9,27; 11:10,12; 12:15; etc.etc.). The verse which epitomizes best the iron will and the power of both Nebuchadnezzar and Yahweh is Ezek 20:33, addressed to the house of Israel: "As I live, says the Lord God, surely with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, and with wrath poured out, I will be King over you!" However, almost as an

afterthought, Ezekiel recalls the Shepherd imagery for God in Ezek 34:11-31, but reverts to judgment oracles once again in the very next verse.<sup>10</sup>

Mario Liverani has written an excellent analysis of "The Ideology of the Assyrian Empire".<sup>11</sup> In it he outlines a 'grammar' of the Neo-Assyrian imperialistic ideology, but admits that in attempting such a historical reconstruction there is a "risk of identifying what could be in fact the universals of imperialistic ideology".<sup>12</sup> In the event he succeeds admirably in his stated goal, but it is surprising how many features of the Assyrian ideology have proved to be 'universals', some of which may be identified in the Apocalypse. The imperialistic practices of deculturation, subjugation and homogenization (linguistic, political and cultural) were supported and legitimated by the state religion, which is why alien shrines and temples were invariably destroyed.

For the Assyrians, any interaction between themselves (the 'correct') and the 'strange' (the enemy), must lead to the eradication of the 'strange'. This was accomplished by annihilation or deportation, or assimilation by the 'correct'.

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<sup>10</sup> Remembering Boismard's comment about the author of Revelation drawing so heavily upon the prophet Ezekiel, we should expect to see some of the Shepherd-King imagery there also.

<sup>11</sup> Mario Liverani, "The Ideology of the Assyrian Empire", in Power and Propaganda, M.T. Larson, Ed. (Copenhagen: 1979), pp297-317. All that appears in this section re Assyrian imperial Ideology is from this source.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. 303.

"Assimilation" is a euphemism for submission, and this involved such ceremonial manifestations as "kissing of the feet" and "walking on all fours", and, of course, the inevitable economic one of enforced tribute, which was touted as a fair exchange of raw materials for such ideological goods as order, justice, protection, and so on.

In spite of their humiliation and servitude those who submitted were deemed to be sane and assimilable. On the contrary, those who fought to maintain their cultural identity were seen, not only as mad, but as irremediably rebellious and even sinful in their perverse diversity. The Assyrians believed that they did well to rid the world of such wicked people. In the event that a battle took place, it was never a clash between two armies, but a one-sided massacre (cf. Rev 20:9.).

In the following statement Liverani has condensed this Assyrian imperialistic ideology:

The process of reducing an outer territory to an Assyrian province [i.e., conquering it]...is the culmination of the elimination of the local characteristics, a movement going towards an universal extension of the Assyrian cosmos....The imperialistic expansion of the central kingdom is therefore the prevailing of cosmos over the surrounding chaos, it is an enterprise that brings order and civilisation".<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Liverani, "Assyrian Ideology", 307. cf. The Kingdom of God in the Apocalypse.



Liveranis's analysis of the Assyrian ideology of empire both verifies and informs Seux's portrait of the Great Shepherd-King, both as Shepherd to his own people and as ruthless Conqueror to the vulnerable nations on the periphery of his empire. When we study the text of the Apocalypse it becomes apparent how great an influence the millennia-old figure of the Shepherd-King, still present in the Roman Emperor, had on the author's concepts of God and of Christ.

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