

# *Reading the Book of Revelation in the Twentieth Century*

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On the deepest level, the Book of Revelation provides a story in and through which the people of God discover who they are and what they are to do.

**A**T LEAST SINCE THE TIME OF ORIGEN, the crucial issue in the interpretation of the Book of Revelation has been whether to take it literally or spiritually. One focus of the controversy in the early church was the prophecy contained in Revelation 20:1–6. Some early Christian writers like Papias, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, and Tertullian believed that this passage predicted an earthly kingdom of Christ which would follow his second coming and last a thousand years.<sup>1</sup> This teaching, especially in Irenaeus, may have been emphasized in order to refute the purely spiritual notion of salvation held by the Gnostics. Origen, however, taught that hope for an earthly kingdom was an indulgence of desires and lusts. He rejected literal interpretation of prophecies of the End and argued that they ought to be interpreted figuratively (*De Principiis* 2.11.2–5). The tension between those who believed in the earthly reign of Christ for a thousand years (the chiliasts or millenarians) and those who did not (the allegorists) was mediated by Augustine's synthesis of eschatological teach-

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1. Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 3.39 (Papias); Justin Martyr, *Dial. Trypho* 80–81; Irenaeus, *Adv. haer.* 5.30–33, Tertullian, *Ag. Marcion* 3.25.

ing.<sup>2</sup> He interpreted Revelation 20:1–6 figuratively as a reference to the ministry of Jesus, because during that ministry Satan was bound (Luke 10:18). Thus the reign of a thousand years was understood as the Age of the Church which would be followed by the Second Coming of Christ. Augustine's interpretation of the beasts of Revelation 13, as this wicked world and hypocrisy respectively, undercut the tendency to identify these beasts with the Roman Empire and its agents or with other specific political or social institutions. Even though Augustine understood the thousand years and the events of the End literally, his spiritual interpretation of the present and his location of the End in the distant future significantly reduced speculations about the End and expectation of its imminent advent.

Augustine's view of eschatology became dominant. Gradually, the number one thousand came to be understood symbolically rather than literally. The notion of an earthly reign of Christ or new age remained dormant until the twelfth century, when it was revived by Joachim of Fiore.<sup>3</sup> From the thirteenth century onward, the notion of a new age on earth erupted from time to time into history.<sup>4</sup>

In modern times, the issues have been analogous to those of the early church. The debates about eschatology continued to center on the question of literal versus spiritual and to focus on Revelation 20:1–6. In the twentieth century, the old eschatological debate is expressed in distinctions like fundamentalist versus liberal or premillennial versus amillennial. Those who expect a literal reign of Christ on earth for a thousand years believe that they hold the historic faith of the church.<sup>5</sup> As a movement they have their more proximate roots in the teaching of John N. Darby, who founded the Plymouth Brethren in England, and in various movements in nineteenth-century America, such as the Millerites.<sup>6</sup> Today these people call themselves *premillennialists* because they believe that

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2. On the chiliasts see Hans Bietenhard, "The Millennial Hope in the Early Church," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 6 (1953), 12–30.

3. On Joachim and the Joachites see Bernard McGinn, *Visions of the End: Apocalyptic Traditions in the Middle Ages* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), pp. 129–30, 146–48, and *The Calabrian Abbot: Joachim of Fiore in the History of Western Thought* (New York and London: Macmillan and Collier Macmillan, 1985).

4. See McGinn, *Visions of the End*, pp. 219–21, 261, 267–68, 272, 279; "Millenarianism," *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 2nd ed., ed. F. L. Cross and E. A. Livingstone (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974), p. 916; Charles C. Ryrie, *The Basis of the Premillennial Faith* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers, 1953), pp. 27–33.

5. Ryrie, *The Basis of the Premillennial Faith*, p. 12.

6. "Darby, John N." and "Plymouth Brethren" in *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, pp. 376, 1104; Ryrie, *The Basis of the Premillennial Faith*, p. 33; Robert Jewett, "Coming to Terms with the Doom Boom," *Quarterly Review* 4 (1984), 13.

Christ will return before the thousand year reign on earth.<sup>7</sup> They oppose the official eschatological teaching of the major denominations, which is rooted in Augustine, and describe it as *amillennial*, since it does not include an earthly reign of Christ between the second coming and the final state. The premillennial faith is taught, for example, at Dallas Theological Seminary where Hal Lindsey studied.

In the United States in the twentieth century, several points of view on the question of the End may be distinguished. The position which has attracted the most attention and caused the most concern is that which combines premillennial faith with imminent expectation.<sup>8</sup> This point of view sometimes includes calculations of various periods in history and a more or less specific prediction of the date of the Second Coming. One of its fundamental principles is the literal interpretation of Scripture. Its adherents accuse "amillennialists" of being inconsistent, because they interpret other parts of Scripture literally, but have a special hermeneutic for prophecy. The Books of Daniel and Revelation are important resources for this point of view.

The modern premillennial position may be seen as a contemporary analogue to ancient chiliasm. A contemporary version of the spiritual or allegorical point of view may be characterized by commitment to the scientific method and thus by considerable skepticism and agnosticism with regard to the actual events of the beginning and end of our universe. From this point of view, Daniel and Revelation suggest the inner meaning of our universe and of the human experience of that process. The biblical apocalypses are viewed not as forecasts of what is to be, but as interpretations of how things were, are, and ought to be. Their purposes are to inform and to influence human life by means of the values and insights expressed in symbolic and narrative form.

#### IMMINENT EXPECTATION AND THE BOOK OF REVELATION

According to premillennial faith, the sequence of events which constitutes the End is part of a long sacred history. This history is predetermined and may be known by studying biblical prophecy. The sequence of events is revealed in coded form in the Book of Revelation. The figures of speech in Revelation must be correlated with the historical events to which they correspond. These historical events constitute the

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7. For a summary of their beliefs, see Ryrice, *The Basis of the Premillennial Faith*, p. 12.

8. See Michael Barkun, "Divided Apocalypse: Thinking About The End in Contemporary America," *Soundings* 66 (1983), 257-80 and Jewett, "Coming to Terms with the Doom Boom."

literal meaning of the figures.<sup>9</sup> The task of the interpreter is to decode the figurative speech and to determine at what point on the historical timetable the world is at present.<sup>10</sup> The most widely read premillennialist writer in this century is Hal Lindsey. His book *The Late Great Planet Earth* was the best-selling American book of non-fiction in the nineteen seventies.<sup>11</sup> His subsequent books *The Last and Future World* and *The Terminal Generation* have been widely read also.

Following the premillennial principle of the unity of Scripture, Lindsey interprets Daniel and Revelation together. The fourth beast of Daniel is interpreted as Rome. In phase two of its power (the twentieth century), it will appear as a ten-nation confederacy (the Common Market or a United States of Europe). The beast of Revelation 13 is identified with the Antichrist, whom Lindsey calls "The Future Fuehrer." This figure is correlated with a future Roman dictator who will take over the ten-nation confederacy. He will be known when he recovers from a fatal wound in a sudden and miraculous manner.

A recent interpretation of Revelation 13 from a perspective similar to Lindsey's is contained in an article by the late Herbert W. Armstrong, the leader of the "Worldwide Church of God" based in Pasadena, California.<sup>12</sup> According to Armstrong, the Bible reveals God's master plan for humanity from its beginning on into eternity. This plan is primarily the history of the nation of Israel and of the system of gentile world empires from Nebuchadnezzar's Babylon down to the Second Coming of Christ. The purpose of the article is to show what Bible prophecy reveals about world events now leading to the end of the world. Revelation 13 is a message given to John "for you and me of this day."

Like other premillennialists, Armstrong believes that the symbols of Revelation 13 stand for real, literal things. The interpretation of these symbols must be guided by the Bible itself. Since the figures appear also in Daniel 7 with an interpretation, that interpretation then applies to Revelation 13 as well. Instead of interpreting the ten horns as representing a new phase of the fourth kingdom, as Lindsey does, Armstrong views them as ten succeeding kingdoms or governments growing out of the fourth kingdom (Dan. 7:24). Because of the sequence of kingdoms in Daniel 2,

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9. Ryrie, *The Basis of the Premillennial Faith*, pp. 42–43.

10. Barkun, "Divided Apocalypse," p. 267.

11. Hal Lindsey, *The Late Great Planet Earth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970; rpt. 1974); *New York Times Book Review*, April 6, 1980, p. 27; cited by Barkun, "Divided Apocalypse," p. 260.

12. Herbert Armstrong, "Who or What Is the Prophetic Beast?" *The Good News of the World Tomorrow* Oct.–Nov. (1985), pp. 3–6, 21–22 and Dec. (1985), pp. 3–6, 29 (Parts One and Two of several; also available as a booklet).

Armstrong concludes that the ten successive governments span the time between the end of the fourth kingdom and the Second Coming of Christ. According to Armstrong, nine of the ten governments succeeding the Roman Empire have already appeared. The tenth kingdom is still future; it will be a United States of Europe consisting of a federation of ten European nations.

#### HISTORICAL-CRITICAL STUDY OF REVELATION

The most fundamental problem with the premillennial interpretation of Revelation as represented by Lindsey and Armstrong is its failure to appreciate the historical character of the Bible. Responsible, thoughtful Christians cannot ignore the insights of historians and philosophers into the nature of historical method and the historicity of human existence.<sup>13</sup> These insights make untenable one of the general principles of interpretation held by premillennialists: "Compare Scripture with Scripture."<sup>14</sup> This principle means that one passage in Scripture may be used to interpret another passage, even when the two passages were written by different authors at different times. Premillennialists see no problem with this process, since they believe that God is the real author of every biblical book. Yet such a view does not take seriously enough the human contribution to the composition of Scripture.

Historical consciousness excludes the possibility of interpreting Daniel and Revelation as if they were written to address the same situation, namely "for you and me of this day." Responsible interpretation of a text from another time and place requires that the text be interpreted in terms of its original historical context.<sup>15</sup> From this point of view, it is imperative to recognize that the symbol of the fourth beast in Daniel 7 represents a historical reality important in the context in which that text was composed. Lindsey and Armstrong are in agreement with historically oriented interpreters in associating the beast of Revelation 13:1–10 with the ancient Roman Empire. The problem lies in the assumption that the significance of the beast in both texts must be the same and that, therefore, the two texts may be interpreted as if they constituted a single text (as Armstrong

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13. On the implications of these insights for traditional Christian faith, see Van Harvey, *The Historian and the Believer* (New York: Macmillan, 1966; rpt. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981).

14. Ryrie, *The Basis of the Premillennial Faith*, p. 37. This principle was referred to above in the discussion of Lindsey's interpretation as "the premillennial principle of the unity of Scripture."

15. See Adela Yarbro Collins, *Crisis and Catharsis: The Power of the Apocalypse* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984), pp. 18–20.

especially does). If the two texts may not be so interpreted, then Armstrong's intricate and ingenious interpretation breaks down.

#### THE HISTORY-OF-RELIGIONS APPROACH

Another basic problem with the Lindsey-Armstrong approach is its understanding of the nature of the symbols in Revelation. The view that the images in Revelation are simple code-words for historical entities is rooted in the idea that the images in the Bible are unique and that they were created primarily to convey historical information. The work of the history-of-religions school in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries has demonstrated the invalidity of these two closely related ideas. Hermann Gunkel, in his brilliant study of Genesis and Revelation, showed that the key images of these books and of Daniel are not simple allegories or figures of speech created for their present biblical context. Rather, such images, like the beast, are traditional symbols which have their origins in ancient Near Eastern myths.<sup>16</sup> Thus, these biblical symbols have much of the richness, complexity, ambiguity, and depth of meaning that archaic myths have. They may be read as expressing the rhythms of nature, the conflicts of human interaction, the origin and identity of a people and more.

The symbol of the beast in Revelation 13 is clearly an adaptation of the beasts of Daniel 7, as premillennialist and historical-critical commentators alike agree. The beasts of Daniel 7 in turn are modeled in part on other images in the Hebrew Bible.<sup>17</sup> At the point of origin, however, this biblical tradition involving beasts of watery chaos was an adaptation of the mythic traditions of Israel's neighbors: Canaan (Ugarit), Mesopotamia, and Egypt. Furthermore, as Gunkel and others have shown, there is evidence that this biblical tradition maintained its fluid, mythic character down to the time of Revelation and later. The depiction of the Roman Empire as a beast does not have a primarily informational purpose. It does not serve mainly to announce that there will be such a political power, how long it will last, and so forth. Rather such a portrayal has an expressive character; it expresses a particular interpretation and evaluation of the Roman

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16 Hermann Gunkel, *Schöpfung und Chaos in Urzeit und Endzeit Eine religionsgeschichtliche Untersuchung über Gen 1 und Ap Joh 12* (Göttingen Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1895) For more detailed studies of Revelation from a history-of-religions viewpoint, see Wilhelm Bousset, *Die Offenbarung Johannis* (Meyer Kommentar 16, rev ed, Göttingen Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1906, rpt, 1966), Ernst Lohmeyer, *Die Offenbarung Johannes*, HNT 16 (Tübingen Mohr [Siebeck], 1926), Adela Yarbro Collins, *The Combat Myth in the Book of Revelation*, Harvard Dissertations in Religion 9 (Missoula Scholars Press, 1976)

17 See Isa 27 1, 51 9, Job 9 13, 26 12, Pss 74 13, 89 10

Empire.<sup>18</sup> The evaluation is not simply that Rome is wild or terrifying like a natural or even an extraordinary beast or monster. The portrayal has all the rich connotations of the myths of creation and conflict in which the beast appears as an actor in the narrative. An important connotation in the mythic tradition which is emphasized by the overall context of the Book of Revelation is the role of the beast as an aspirant to universal kingship. Thus the Roman Empire in general and the emperor in particular are presented as rivals to the universal kingship of God through Christ.

#### THE GENRE APOCALYPSE

One of the fundamental principles of the history-of-religions method is that biblical texts should be interpreted on the basis of comparison of those texts with extra-biblical texts of the same type (in form, content, or function). This observation leads to the question which texts are of the same type as Revelation. The idea that there is a body of ancient literature which may be called "apocalyptic" has been prevalent since the first attempt was made in 1832 to interpret Revelation in light of similar texts.<sup>19</sup> Nevertheless, in 1970 there was still great confusion about just what it was that these books had in common and precisely which books should be included.<sup>20</sup> The prominent German scholar of the Hebrew Bible, Gerhard von Rad, had argued that apocalypticism was not represented by any particular literary genre but was rather contained in composite works made up of a variety of small literary forms.<sup>21</sup> A number of scholars did not agree with von Rad; these took the first steps toward defining the genre apocalypse. First of all, an attempt was made to clarify the issues by distinguishing between apocalypses (a group of texts) and apocalypticism (a system of ideas) and by avoiding the vague use of the adjective "apocalyptic" as a noun.<sup>22</sup>

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18. On the distinction between informational and expressive language, see G.B. Caird, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1980), pp. 7–36, Philip Wheelwright, *Metaphor and Reality* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1962) and *The Burning Fountain* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1968).

19. Friedrich Lucke, *Versuch einer vollständigen Einleitung in die Offenbarung Johannis und in die gesamte apokalyptische Literatur* (Bonn: Weber, 1832).

20. See Klaus Koch, *The Rediscovery of Apocalyptic: A Polemical Work on a Neglected Area of Biblical Studies and Its Damaging Effects on Theology and Philosophy*, *Studies in Biblical Theology* 2/2 (Naperville, IL: Allenson, 1972), pp. 18–35. The original German title was "Perplexed in the Presence of Apocalyptic."

21. Gerhard von Rad, *Theologie des Aliens Testaments*, 4th ed. (Munich: Kaiser, 1965), II, 330.

22. Michael E. Stone, "Lists of Revealed Things in the Apocalyptic Literature," in *Magnalia Dei: The Mighty Acts of God*, ed. F. M. Cross et al. (Garden City: Doubleday, 1976),

In the mid-nineteen seventies the Society of Biblical Literature initiated a Forms and Genres Project whose purpose was to reexamine the forms and genres of biblical and related literature. One of the working groups of that project focused on apocalypses.<sup>23</sup> The purpose of this group was not to isolate some timeless essence called apocalypticism nor to make a new descriptive list of formal and contentual elements which appear in some or many apocalypses. Rather, its goal was to determine what unique and unified configuration of formal and contentual elements characterize the texts most commonly thought to be apocalypses. When such a configuration was determined, it was used to define which works could most reasonably be called apocalypses and which works were better described as related types (i.e., similar in form or content, but not in both). The results of the group's work were published in Volume 14 of *Semeia*, an experimental journal for biblical criticism sponsored by the Society of Biblical Literature.<sup>24</sup> The following definition of the genre was proposed: "Apocalypse" is a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial, insofar as it involves another, supernatural world.<sup>25</sup> It was concluded that a number of early Jewish, early Christian, Gnostic, Greco-Roman, later Jewish, and Persian texts fitted this definition.

Prior to the work of this group, most scholars emphasized the historical and eschatological dimensions of apocalyptic literature (e.g., Paul Hanson), although a few pointed out that interest in heavenly mysteries was at least as prominent (Michael Stone).<sup>26</sup> The definition of the working group showed that both aspects are essential to the genre. Only a few, mostly Jewish, apocalypses have a review of history. All have some form of eschatology. In some apocalypses the eschatology involves political and cosmic transformation; in others only personal afterlife. In all apocalypses

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pp. 414–52; Paul D. Hanson, "Apocalypse, Genre" and "Apocalypticism," *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, Supplementary Volume*, ed. Keith Crim (Nashville: Abingdon, 1976), pp. 27–34. Hanson distinguishes apocalypses, apocalyptic eschatology and apocalypticism; he views the last as a social movement.

23. This group was convened and led by John J. Collins and in addition consisted of Harold Attridge, Adela Yarbro Collins, Francis T. Fallon, and Anthony J. Saldarini.

24. John J. Collins, ed., *Apocalypse: The Morphology of a Genre*, *Semeia* 14 (1979).

25. John J. Collins, "Introduction: Towards the Morphology of a Genre," *Semeia* 14 (1979), 9.

26. Paul D. Hanson, "Apocalypse, Genre," "Apocalypticism," and *The Dawn of Apocalyptic* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975); Michael E. Stone, "Lists of Revealed Things in the Apocalyptic Literature."



the heavenly world plays a crucial role as the source of revelation, both about heavenly secrets and the hidden events of the future. Transcendence is the key word in the definition and is the quality which unites the form and content of an apocalypse in a coherent whole. Not only is the heavenly world the ultimate source of revelation, but that revelation must be mediated by a heavenly being (e.g., an angel or the risen Christ). The future which is foretold is radically different from ordinary present experience. Both form and content suggest that ordinary present experience must be interpreted from a heavenly perspective.

Following the publication of *Semeia* 14, an international colloquium on apocalypticism was held in Uppsala in August 1979. One of the participants in that colloquium, Lars Hartman, supported the definition of *Semeia* 14 but argued that the element of function is as essential to a useful definition as those of form and content. He distinguished three types of function: (1) the functional relations between the elements of content, that is, how the text works (literary function); (2) what the author wants to accomplish with the text, its message; and (3) the social function, the relation between the text and its social setting.<sup>27</sup>

Those interpreters of apocalypses who have emphasized their historical and eschatological aspects have tended to define apocalypticism in terms of its social function.<sup>28</sup> Another participant in the colloquium at Uppsala, E. P. Sanders, proposed a return to an "essentialist" definition (of Jewish Palestinian apocalypses at least), which does not ignore the heavenly aspect but emphasizes the socio-political dimension. This definition is aimed at texts marked off as an identifiable group "by the combination of revelation with the promise of the vindication or redemption of a group."<sup>29</sup> In the meantime, the number of scholars who emphasize the heavenly or revelatory aspect of the apocalypses has been growing. Several of these have gone so far as to conclude that eschatology is not an essential characteristic of apocalypses and apocalypticism.<sup>30</sup>

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27. Lars Hartman, "Survey of the Problem of Apocalyptic Genre," in David Hellholm, ed., *Apocalypticism in the Mediterranean World and the Near East* (Tübingen: Mohr [Siebeck], 1983), p. 339.

28. E.g., Paul D. Hanson; see the works cited in note 26.

29. E. P. Sanders, "The Genre of Palestinian Jewish Apocalypses," in *Apocalypticism in the Mediterranean World and the Near East*, pp. 456 and 458.

30. J. Carmignac, "Qu'est-ce que l'Apocalyptique? Son emploi à Qumrân," *Revue de Qumrân* 10 (1979), 3-33; Hartmut Stegemann, "Die Bedeutung der Qumranfunde für die Erforschung der Apokalyptik," in *Apocalypticism in the Mediterranean World and the Near East*, pp. 495-530; Christopher Rowland, *The Open Heaven: A Study of Apocalyptic in Judaism and Christianity* (New York: Crossroad, 1982). According to David Aune, the content of apocalypses is "often eschatological" ("The Apocalypse of John and the Problem of Genre,"

The fundamental issue at stake in the various definitions is the determination of those texts which are most similar to the biblical apocalypses and therefore of the context in which they should be interpreted. The definitions which emphasize eschatology link apocalypses most closely to the prophetic literature of the Hebrew Bible. Those which emphasize the heavenly world link the apocalypses primarily to the revelatory literature of the Greco-Roman world, including Jewish mystical texts.<sup>31</sup>

#### THE FUNCTION OF APOCALYPSES

The colloquium at Uppsala recognized the importance of the question of function by devoting one portion of the conference to the sociology of apocalypticism and the social setting of apocalypses.<sup>32</sup> A seminar on early Christian apocalypticism has been at work at the Annual Meetings of the Society of Biblical Literature since 1981. Its purpose has been to explore the phenomenon of early Christian apocalypticism by assessing and continuing the work of the previous SBL group and the Uppsala conference. The proposal of Lars Hartman, that more attention be given to function, has been taken up in various ways. David Hellholm has studied the first two types of function mentioned by Hartman, literary function (how the text works) and the message of the text, in his work on the *Shepherd of Hermas* and the Book of Revelation.<sup>33</sup> He has concluded that these apocalypses are so structured as to highlight one or two passages. In these passages the reader reaches the deepest and most authoritative level of revelation (e.g., Rev. 21:5–8). The function of these passages is two-fold: (1) They provide a weighty degree of authorization of the apocalypse as a whole (it derives from God) and (2) they express the central message of the work. In the case of the *Shepherd of Hermas*, the central message is the announcement of a final opportunity for repentance. In Revelation, the message is the promise of eternal reward for the righteous and pun-

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in *Early Christian Apocalypticism: Genre and Social Setting*, ed. Adela Yarbro Collins, *Semeia* 36 [forthcoming]).

31. See Adela Yarbro Collins, "Introduction: Early Christian Apocalypticism," *Semeia* 36 (forthcoming). For a response to criticism of *Semeia* 14 and a discussion of subsequent work on the genre of apocalypse, see also John J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to the Jewish Matrix of Christianity* (New York: Crossroad, 1984), pp. 1–32 and *Daniel: With an Introduction to Apocalyptic Literature*, *The Forms of the Old Testament Literature* 20 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), pp. 2–24.

32. See *Apocalypticism in the Mediterranean World and the Near East*, pp. 639–768.

33. David Hellholm, *Das Visionenbuch des Hermas als Apokalypse* (Lund: Gleerup, 1980); "The Problem of Apocalyptic Genre and the Apocalypse of John," in *Society of Biblical Literature 1982 Seminar Papers*, ed. Kent Richards (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1982), pp. 157–98; a revised form of this paper will be published with the same title in *Semeia* 36.

ishment for the wicked.<sup>34</sup> Hellholm has also suggested that the definition of an apocalypse in *Semeia* 14 be expanded to include function: "intended for a group in crisis with the purpose of exhortation and/or consolation by means of divine authority."<sup>35</sup>

David Aune has also focused on the literary function of apocalypses.<sup>36</sup> He emphasizes the way in which an apocalypse mediates a new actualization of the original revelatory experience through literary devices, structures, and imagery. This actualization took place in a communal setting in which the apocalypse was read aloud (such a setting is plausible at least for the Book of Revelation and the *Shepherd of Hermas*). The images of apocalypses are somewhat opaque. Thus the hearers must participate in order to understand and apply them. Aune compares this process to the function of Jesus' parables, suggesting that apocalyptic imagery to some degree conceals the message which it reveals. He also calls attention to an important article by Hans Dieter Betz which shows that ancient interpreters understood the function of Greco-Roman apocalypses to be the motivation of changes in life-style through the shock-like experience of fear based on a journey to the places of punishment in the afterlife.<sup>37</sup> Aune suggests that apocalypses in general encourage their audience to modify their cognitive and behavioral stance in conformity with transcendent perspectives.

Alongside work on the literary function of apocalypses, the study of their social function has continued. An influential study of the social function of the Book of Revelation was offered by John Gager.<sup>38</sup> He views the Book of Revelation as "an irreducibly mythological and tightly structured product of literary creativity."<sup>39</sup> Its purpose was to convey consolation in a concrete situation of persecution and martyrdom. This consolation is not only the promise of a happy fate in the near future but also the anticipatory enactment of that salvation in the present. The Book of Revelation oscillates between images of oppression and despair and

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34. The notion that an apocalypse has a single simple message is problematic; see Yarbro Collins, "Introduction: Early Christian Apocalypticism," *Semeia* 36 (forthcoming).

35. Hellholm, "The Problem of Apocalyptic Genre," *1982 Seminar Papers*, p. 168.

36. David Aune, "The Apocalypse of John and the Problem of Genre," in *Semeia* 36 (forthcoming).

37. Hans Dieter Betz, "The Problem of Apocalyptic Genre in Greek and Hellenistic Literature: The Case of the Oracle of Trophonius," in *Apocalypticism in the Mediterranean World and the Near East*, pp. 577-97.

38. John Gager, "The Attainment of Millennial Bliss Through Myth: The Book of Revelation," *Kingdom and Community: The Social World of Early Christianity* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1975), pp. 49-65; reprinted in *Visionaries and Their Apocalypses*, ed. Paul D. Hanson (Philadelphia/London: Fortress/S.P.C.K., 1983), pp. 146-55.

39. *Ibid.*, p. 50.

symbols of victory and hope. This oscillation reflects the unbearable tension which the readers were experiencing between their belief that they were the chosen people of God and their overwhelming experience of suffering, deprivation, and death at the hands of their enemies. The triumphant visions suppress the distinction between the flawed present and the ideal future. They also dissolve the contradiction between faith and experience by making the experience of millennial bliss a living reality.

Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza has argued that Revelation is a poetic-rhetorical construction of an alternative symbolic universe that “fits” its historical-rhetorical situation.<sup>40</sup> In other words, the book not only creates an imaginative experience, but it also seeks to motivate the hearers to act in a certain way. The purpose of Revelation was to motivate its audience to make a decision for God in the face of the destructive power of Rome. The rhetorical situation which gave rise to the book was characterized by threat to life, imprisonment, execution, economic deprivation, and destitution. The beast not only threatened the hearers with death but also made it impossible for them to have enough to live.

The present writer differs from Gager and Schüssler Fiorenza in questioning whether Revelation was simply a response to an obvious external crisis.<sup>41</sup> The Roman authorities took no initiative against Christians in the late first and early second centuries A.D., so they were not persecuted in any massive or systematic way. They were, however, a despised minority and so individual Christians were accused (and thus brought to trial) from time to time by a hostile gentile or Jewish neighbor. In the first century, Christians were vulnerable to a variety of legal charges. In the second century, being a Christian was itself a crime. The Book of Revelation is first and foremost an interpretation of the situation of Christians in western Asia Minor toward the end of the first century. This interpretation makes sense of a *perceived* crisis which involves conflict with Jews, mutual antipathy toward neighboring Gentiles (pagans), conflict over wealth, and precarious relations with Rome. The book also deals with experiences of trauma, including the destruction of Jerusalem (a symbolic center for Christians as well as Jews), Nero’s police-action against Christians in Rome, the offense of the ruler-cult to Christian messianism (Christ, not Caesar, is God incarnate), the execution of Antipas (Rev. 2:13), and the banishment of John. These elements of perceived crisis and trauma were interpreted

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40. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, “Visionary Rhetoric and Social-Political Situation,” *The Book of Revelation: Justice and Judgment* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), p. 183.

41. Adela Yarbro Collins, *Crisis and Catharsis: The Power of the Apocalypse* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984).

by the construction of a symbolic system which is the inverse of the Roman ideology. According to the Romans, Roman rule was divinely ordained and Christians were atheists because of their refusal to worship the pantheon and the emperor as its earthly representative. According to Revelation, the Christians are destined to rule the world with Christ, whereas the Roman Empire rules through the power of Satan. Rather than God incarnate, the emperor is the beast, symbol of the forces of chaos which threaten the order and well-being of the world.

The opposition of positive symbols in Revelation (God, the Lamb, those who have the seal of God) to negative symbols (Satan, the beasts, those who have the mark of the beast) reflects the tension between the expectations of Christian faith (well-being, rulership with Christ) and the negative experiences of a religious minority who are marginal in relation to the dominant social structures (rejection by Jews and Gentiles, harassment, threat of legal proceedings which could lead to execution). The Book of Revelation sets up a conflict between these two poles and then resolves it by the masterful use of effective symbols and narrative patterns (plot). The function of Revelation is analogous to Aristotle's explanation of the function of Greek tragedy. In each case certain emotions are aroused and then a catharsis of those emotions is achieved.<sup>42</sup>

#### CONCLUSION

As indicated at the beginning of this article, the controversies over the interpretation of Revelation may be understood as arising from differing opinions on whether its images ought to be interpreted literally or spiritually. More precisely, the referents of Revelation's symbols have been seen variously as (1) political and historical events; or (2) metaphysical and ethical characteristics of reality. American premillennialists of the nineteen eighties view the Apocalypse of John as an encoded prediction of God's interventions into history in the last days by means of specific historical and political events. Historical critics tend to leave their notions about the application of Revelation to the present implicit, rather than articulating them explicitly. One generalization that can be made is that such application is made by analogy. First one discovers the purpose and function of the text in its original setting (and ideally in settings in the history of interpretation). Then the similarities and differences between

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42. *Ibid.*, pp. 152–61. For a different interpretation of the relation between the symbols of Revelation and its social setting, see David Barr, "The Apocalypse as a Symbolic Transformation of the World," *INTERP.* 38 (Jan. 1984), pp. 39–50 and Leonard Thompson, "A Sociological Analysis of Tribulation in the Apocalypse of John," *Semeia* 36 (forthcoming).

the original and the interpreter's settings are noted. Finally an attempt is made to discern how the text may fulfill its original purpose, or function socially in a way analogous to its effect upon its original readers, in the situation of the interpreter.

Recent studies of the genre and function of the Revelation of John to some degree correlate its symbols with historical events. Underlying these studies, however, is the assumption that the symbols are not primarily informational (predicting future events). On the deepest level, the Apocalypse expresses an interpretation of reality and exhorts its audience to live in a way that is an appropriate response to that interpretation. A hermeneutic which takes historical criticism seriously can no longer work with an interventionist notion of God. An alternative is to view Revelation as expressing God's intentions for the world.<sup>43</sup> The Book of Revelation expresses what is real and what is good from the point of view of a believer in the God of Israel and the God of Christ. It thus provides a story in and through which the people of God discover who they are and what they are to do.

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43. For the contrast between an interventionist and an intentional hermeneutic, see John Shea, *Stories of God: An Unauthorized Biography* (Chicago: The Thomas More Press, 1978), pp. 77–116.



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