

INTERPRETING THE BOOK OF REVELATION

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21 MAY, 2011: Judgment Day—again! While Howard Camping’s calculation of the date for Judgment Day, or more accurately his *third* calculation of the date of Judgment Day—May 21, 1988, and September 6, 1994 also having passed, reluctantly it would seem, without a gnashing of teeth—does not draw specifically on John’s *Revelation*; its apocalyptic overtones are all sourced through Biblical ‘interpretation’.

The challenge of interpreting *Revelation* today stands as a symbol of modern interpretative practice. One might say if you can come through the hermeneutical minefield that is John’s *Revelation* you can take on anything. Its seeming distance from modern sensibility, the violence of its imagery, extremity of its vilification, its high context symbolism and its refusal to sit easily within one genre, ensure that the scholar must bring to the fray an array of methodologies and strategies ‘in order to see clearly what God wanted to communicate to us.’¹

Yet contemporary society with all its modern sensibility churns out apocalypses by the hundreds. In the imagery of the recent conclusion to the Harry Potter saga one can see direct echoes of the language of John’s *Revelation*. Harry’s journey and final battle is full of graphic physical violence, extreme vilification of the ‘enemy’ and high context symbolism. The by-line for the final film: ‘It all ends’, makes its point clear enough, combined with a series of teaser posters of a devastated London and a burning Hogwarts, we were being prepared for a journey redolent with symbol, and catharsis. Reception of the film would say that it delivered. Yet the text of *Revelation*, which shares much in common with our con-

cerns, remains distant. How is this so?

Revelation’s apparent ‘meaninglessness’² can be ‘a mind-boggling experience’³ that takes us into a ‘strange, bizarre new world.’⁴ Yet given the initial shock can be overwhelming, such a reaction is a powerful affirmation of *Dei Verbum*’s insistence that ‘God speaks in Sacred Scripture through men in human fashion.’⁵ Its ‘arcane symbols’⁶ evoke a response that ‘the book simply does not make sense’⁷ and provides a test case for exegetes to ‘carefully investigate what meaning the sacred writers *really* intended, and what God wanted to manifest by means of their words’⁸ [my emphasis]. Therein lies the rub. What did John *really* intend?

To seek ‘what the sacred writers *really* intended,’ any interpretation of *Revelation* must take on *Dei Verbum*’s exhortation: ‘attention should be given...to ‘literary forms’...which are variously historical, prophetic, poetic... [and] to the customary and characteristic styles of feeling, speaking and narrating which prevailed at the time of the sacred writer.’⁹

Over the last forty years there has been a wealth of scholarship that has tried to bring to the populist fascination with this text an understanding with ‘attention...to ‘literary forms’ that elicits neither ‘one of two extremes: some simply avoid it in despair; others take an exaggerated interest in it, thinking to find here all the keys to the end of the world.’¹⁰

This conversation with our world and scripture as illustrated with *Revelation* can be said to be reflective of the world’s use of scripture in general. Any creation of meaning for readers stems from their view of their own world. So one must journey to our world and

begin with what one knows: our world. How we ‘use the Bible to inform our world’¹¹ is as equally important as being informed about the Bible’s world. So let’s begin with how our culture views it.

Why are we Fascinated with Revelation?

‘The complexity of the book and its language has given rise to a bewildering variety of approaches and conclusions’¹² which has created ‘a yawning chasm, between scholarly and devotional interest, an abyss out of which all sorts of beasts have emerged.’¹³ Over the forty-year period striding the advent of the third Millennium, popular culture has time and again used Revelation to flush out the real antichrist and beast that lurks around the corner (always) in someone else’s heart. Napoleon, Hitler, Stalin, Saddam, Gaddafi and of late Osama have all got a jersey, along with the Pope (probably all of them) and even Enron.

Furthermore, along with Nostradamus, Mayan calendars, sunspots, asteroids and the Dresden Codex (I don’t even know what this is!) John’s *Revelation* has provided the main blue-print for how the end of days will pan out. Its language was the powerhouse of the framework for the Branch Davidians in Waco suggesting that ‘those involved in such movements understand the power of this literature better than do dispassionate exegetical inquiries.’¹⁴

In popular culture from *The Omen (I–IV)* to Hal Lindsey’s *The Late Great Planet Earth* or more recently the *Left Behind* series, we have, as a culture, sought to recapture or impose the essence of John’s *Revelation* on our own time. We will even go so far as to allow Arnie Schwarzenegger to fire an M203 grenade launcher at Satan—which didn’t work—forcing a later impalement on the sword protruding from a fallen statue of *Michael the Archangel* in the oh-so-creatively titled ‘blockbuster’ *End of Days* released in 1999. Why do we do this?

We do it because the book is popular. It



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has been from the start, as it began its life as the first ‘popular’ Christian literature due to its ‘promising deliverance to a church labouring under vicious persecution.’¹⁵ *Revelation* became more so as the popular culture appropriated John’s images and symbols for more literal interpretation.

Augustine was one of the first to warn against the ‘ridiculous tales’ that had been extrapolated from the text suggesting in *City of God* ‘that the prophecies are not meant to be taken literally.’¹⁶ This didn’t stop Joachim of Fiore from developing the ‘direct prediction’ hermeneutic which meant that ‘instead of treating each of *Revelation*’s prophesies as an analogy with a moral interpretation...each image [stood] as a specific prophecy predicting a future event.’¹⁷ So 11th century!

We also do this because we still love it; *Revelation* draws us because its symbolic language is so powerful, graphic and extreme. Such language offers answers which we choose to interpret as literal. The power of the text—its language and imagery, its didactic symbolism and implicit ritual, with all its explicit mysticism—led to people’s adoption of *Revelation* as a blue-print. Within Trainor’s framework of how to view the Bible, a blue-print provides a ‘simple and universal solution’¹⁸ that allows us to believe ‘that God has programmed everything in the Bible’¹⁹ and as such denies ‘this world is an important area for God’s self-revelation.’²⁰

Revelation’s language is its enduring legacy. People ask of it as they ask of no other book in the Second Testament: ‘Is what it says

in the *Book of Revelations* [*sic*] real? Will it come true?' And as such it is a bookend to *Genesis*. As happened with *Genesis* and evolution, so too with *Revelation* and current political events 'the interpreter goes through the Bible and locates all the places where the present practice... seem to be evident.'²¹ This approach, where one gathers 'a 'tissue' of quotes, to offer self-evident teaching',²² turns the Bible into 'a source of 'proof-texts',²³ disregarding any reference to context.

The seemingly extreme symbolic language of both texts arouses in us the need to know what is *really* happening in these texts. The challenge laid down in *Dei Verbum* is to avoid seeking a simple literal sense but instead to seek what 'the sacred writer intended to express and actually expressed in particular circumstances by using contemporary literary forms in accordance with the situation of his own time and culture.'²⁴

I am always struck that no-one ever asks of the message of the other Second Testament books: 'Is it true that God created us as unique beings and loves each one of us, and all we need to do is love each other?' I suppose there's no copy in it.

I am suggesting that part of our fascination lies in *Revelation's* sensational and extreme nature. Like the old journalistic adage, *Revelation* pulls the punters because it contains all the elements of sensational story: blasphemous religion, direct reportage, nobility, mystery, crime, and sex all contained in one little book. No wonder it made the canon!

I could spend the rest of this article drawing the correspondences (in fact it could be a good PhD). But instead I will just make the claim that the reason why we are still fascinated by it, why it matches our expectations of 'blockbuster' material, how we are still drawn into it for meaning, is that it is still able to fulfil the purpose for which it was written in its original context.

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Literature Frameworks: Genre and Symbolism

I have been referring to John's *Revelation* by the English translation from its Latin title *Revelatio*. However, if one uses the *Koine* Greek original the title is *Apocalypse*. They both mean 'unveiling'. I have avoided the use of the Greek term so far as it is a heavily-laden word. In common parlance it has lost all reference to any sense of unveiling and common English usage refers to the end of the world. I use the term 'apocalypse' now to discuss the genre of literature to which John's book gives its name, but by no means is John's *Apocalypse* the first occurrence of such. The Bible, both First and Second Testaments contain what has come to be termed apocalyptic literature and such 'literature is an example of the adage that 'man's [*sic*] extremity is God's opportunity'.²⁵ Raymond Brown insists that the term *Apocalypse* be used because it 'has the advantage of catching the esoteric character of the genre.'²⁶

This extreme genre includes, most notably, the *Book of Daniel* from the first testament as well as second testament era apocalyptic literature such as Mark 3 (the Olivet Prophecy), 1 Corinthians 15:20-28, 2 Corinthians 5:1-3, 1 Thessalonians 4:15-18, 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12 and even 1 Peter. The popularity of this genre can be seen in the range from the Apocrypha such as *The Ascension of Isaiah*, *Apocalypse of Peter*, *Apocalypse of Paul*, *Apocalypse of Thomas*, and *Christian Sibyllines*.

Yet it is from John's *Revelation* that the genre gets its name and it is through hindsight that we have amassed a definition of the genre. Indeed, 'The application of the term to a group of works similar to the apocalypse apparently did not occur until the patristic writers of the second century and later began using it this way.'²⁷

Characteristics of apocalypses are that they are often pseudonymous, yet named after ancient heroes. They are set as if written in the

past, thus making their ‘predictions’ up to the present time spot on, and are to a certain extent anachronistic. Yet they contain a timeline of the past and speak of ‘what must take place’ (Rev 1:1). Such texts are full of beasts and monsters which have correspondence to the author’s contemporary political identities. The apocalypse is framed narratively but representing a vision or dream which is guided by an angel or supernatural guide. Finally, what is revealed is the cosmology of the author.

Most important of all, the language of this genre is highly symbolic. It is this which makes much of it unintelligible to modern readers. These symbols are grounded solidly in the world of John’s hearers. Firstly, in many aspects of the Jewish faith: the liturgical Temple practice (bowls, trumpets, smoke), numerology or *gematria* of numbers and names (7 for perfection and fullness, 666 a gematrial reading of Nero) and the all too many allusions to the First Testament (Daniel, Egypt plagues, Jezebel, Babylon and Exile), all of which still had power due to the continuing belief in the authority and reliability of the prophets of the Jewish Bible.²⁸ White gowns, Lamb and last days refer to the second source—Christian Liturgy—while finally the world of the hearers was reflected in popular images from the Greco-Roman world of empire (purple silk, seven hills) and cosmic combat of Near East myth (rebellion, dragon, beasts, kings, gods, banquets and temples). Such rich symbolic and polyvalent references are typical of high context literature, the result of living in a high context culture: ‘In a high context society, little needs to be said to set off a range of associations in a reader; a great deal is thus invested in every detail of a text and a writer will not need to explain a great deal.’²⁹

However John’s *Revelation*, though the template text for the definition of apocalypse, is not pure apocalypse and like most great art is a hybrid as ‘it violates the rules in some way,’³⁰ creating an intertextuality that opens the ‘text to multiple interpretations,’³¹ thus cre-

ating another barrier to easy contemporary analysis.

The genre boundaries blur right from the beginning because, while the bulk of the text clearly is connected and alludes to the First Testament apocalyptic writing, it is also framed by a series of the much overlooked letters, and it is this more than the genre which points to the social context in which John’s Revelation was conceived.

Social Frameworks: Letters

Indeed: ‘the opening of the Apocalypse is so intertextual that it frustrates the reader who tries to categorize the book in a single genre.’³² The letters to the seven churches are themselves a possible development of the Pauline style of communicating with a community, building upon urgings by Paul to the Colossians, ‘And when this letter has been read among you, have it read also in the church of the Laodiceans; and see you read also the letter from Laodicea’ (Col 4:16).

John of Patmos streamlines and multiplies this interconnectedness of communities. Instead of mail-merging, making each letter seem unique while having the main revelation the same for all, John has sent a bulk mail-out, where his inclusion of each of the letters enables each of the other communities to hear the others’ status in the eyes of John, eliciting an ‘eaves-dropping’ effect which enhances his symbolic message. The letters make clear that this wide ranging community has a story that must be listened to.

Social Frameworks: Liturgy

It is in the frame of the letters and the social context they suggest that the real impact of *Revelation*’s expressive language hits home. While the connection and allusions to the First Testament are important and keep the scholars in work, it is the insistence on the performance of the letter from the very first that creates a performance/ritual setting for the *hear-*

ing of the text: ‘Blessed is he who reads aloud the words of the prophesy, and blessed are those who hear, and keep what is written herein; for the time is near’ (Rev 1:3). One should therefore focus on ‘the first ‘hearers’ rather than the first ‘readers’.’³³

Adela Yarbo Collins’ analysis of how the *Apocalypse* creates its effect in her *Crisis and Catharsis*, demonstrates that ‘the *Apocalypse* handles skilfully the hearer’s thoughts, attitudes and feelings by the use of effective symbols and a narrative plot that invites imaginative participation.’³⁴ This is powerfully and eerily demonstrated in Dale Martin’s Yale lecture 23 *Apocalypse and Resistance* at the 31 minute mark. Martin creates a re-enactment of the fourth chapter, The Heavenly Worship, where a tripartite chorus of his students takes on the roles of the four living creatures, the elders and seven Angels and cycle through the chants of The Heavenly Worship for a solid three minutes, building to a crescendo of adulation. His aim was to make them feel weird, experience a tingle, and that is as it should be because the text is more than a blue-print (his words) and if you see it as that you ‘kinda miss the point.’³⁵ *Revelation* needs to be performed, to be breathed in its entirety, as the all-singing all-dancing extravaganza it is: ‘it really is like a stage show, except the stage is the whole cosmos.’³⁶ It is within this framework of cacophonous symbolism that the beauty of the seventh seal lies: ‘When the Lamb opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour’ (Rev 8:1). Given what has gone before and what is to come here indeed is a dramatic pause that in the reading would not only have allowed participants to catch their breath but creates, aurally, a blissful moment in paradise. ‘The drama of the moment is intensified by the solemn silence in heaven.’³⁷ In such a way the text creates a cathartic effect through use of ‘symbol language that keeps a close link between ideas, images and sense experience’³⁸ and, Collins argues, ‘the emotions of the audience are purged in the sense that their feelings of fear and pity

are intensified and given objective expression. The feelings are thus brought to consciousness and become less threatening.’³⁹

It is not being suggested that *Revelation* was a script but ‘the recognition of formality, fixity, and repetition as strategies which characterise the process of ritualization helps us to recognise the *Apocalypse* as a text which stands betwixt and between orality and textuality.’⁴⁰ Our removal from this world, the world that is more than text, is another example of the barriers that exist between *Revelation* and today’s audience.

Revelation Redux

We are drawn to *Revelation*’s implicit liturgical incarnation and symbolic language even though we are not conscious of it. Caught in the ‘Cocktail Party effect’ (multiple stimuli but only one receiving channel) and given ‘a hybrid genre containing a mixture of conventions [that] offers multiple possibilities to readers who must foreground one set of conventions and background the others.’⁴¹ We find its polyvalent symbols redolent with esoteric and exotic possibilities and we focus on one genre approach or one set of symbols, losing the whole in the detail. ‘Many weird and unconventional readings of *Revelation* have emerged because people have begun with a detail, with which they have become obsessed, before they have appreciated the book as a whole.’⁴²

We seek from it and it is still able to fulfil—through a process of contextualisation, a sense of mystery and glory over-coming fear and pity—the purpose for which it was written in its original context. For ‘revelation yields not the solution to a problem, the answer to a difficult question, but the unveiling of a mystery.’⁴³ In our own context, with our own culture we create art, film and story, just as highly contextual, just as redolent with symbol, and catharsis which tries to recapture that world that *Revelation* is, that is more than text, a world that makes incarnate fear and through symbolic language leads us to a

shadow of a silence. Yet the art, film and story of our society, such as Harry Potter and other texts, while they mimic the form of *Revelation*, can't capture that sense of mystery as they are also driven to provide solution and happy endings.

We must extrapolate what we have discovered here in *Revelation* to the whole of scripture. This initial conversation between revelation and culture must broaden out to a circle of conversation for 'no less serious attention must be given to the content and unity of the

whole of Scripture if the meaning of the sacred texts is to be correctly worked out.'⁴⁴

Revelation is an important text because not only through an engagement with it in its context can we begin to discern its real meaning but such a process brings insight which allows us to begin a continuous process of conversation with both scripture as a whole and most importantly with our world, so that 'The Bible is used in such a way that it can . . . reveal our world as the arena of God's self-communication.'⁴⁵

NOTES

1 Vatican II, Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum*. Pope Paul VI, November 18. 1965: art. 12.

2 Paul Barnett, *Apocalypse Now and Then: Reading Revelation today* (Sydney, Anglican Information Office, 1989), 3.

3 Delbert Burkett, *An Introduction to the New Testament and the Origins of Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 497.

4 Gordon D. Fee, *Revelation: A new covenant commentary* (Eugene, Or.: Cascade Books, 2011), ix

5 Vatican II, *Dei Verbum*, art. 12.

6 Luke T Johnson, *The Writings of the New Testament: An Interpretation* (2nd ed., London: SCM Press, 1999), 573.

7 Adela Yarbro Collins, *The Apocalypse* (Wilmington, Del. : Michael Glazier, 1979), ix.

8 Vatican II, *Dei Verbum*, art. 12.

9 *Ibid.*

10 Fee, *Revelation*, ix.

11 Michael Trainor, 'Scripture: five ways Australian Christians use the Bible' *Reo : a journal of theology and ministry*, 8, (autumn 1998), 7.

12 Ian Paul, 'Ebbing and Flowing : Scholarly Developments in Study of the Book of Revelation.' *Expository Times* 119 (11, 2008), 523.

13 Paul, 'Ebbing', 523.

14 Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament*(New York: Doubleday, 1997), 780.

15 David E. Nantais and Michael Simone, 'Apocalypse When?' *America*, 189 (4 2003), 19.

16 *Ibid.*

17 *Ibid.*

18 Trainor, 'Scripture', 8.

19 *Ibid.*

20 *Ibid.*, 9.

21 Trainor, 'Scripture', 10.

22 *Ibid.*

23 *Ibid.*

24 Vatican II, *Dei Verbum*, art. 12.

25 D. S. Russell, *The method & message of Jewish apocalyptic, 200 BC -AD 100*(London: SCM Press, 1964), 17.

26 Brown, *An Introduction*, 773

27 Gregory L. Linton, 'Reading the Apocalypse as Apocalypse : the limits of genre,' in *The reality of Apocalypse: rhetoric and politics in the book of Revelation*, edited by David L. Barr, (Atlanta, Ga.: Society of Biblical Literature, 2006), 27.

28 Adela Yarbro Collins, *Crisis and catharsis: the power of the Apocalypse* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984), 145.

29 Peter J. Leithart blog, <http://www.leithart.com/archives/001364.php> in reference to the work of Ronald Simkins, sourced on Monday, June 27, 2005 at 06:50 PM

30 Linton, 'Reading the Apocalypse', 21.

31 *Ibid.*, 22.

32 Linton, 'Reading the Apocalypse', 26 .

33 Collins, *Crisis*, 144.

34 *Ibid.*, 145.

35 Dale Martin, Yale lecture 23-*Apocalypse and Resistance*:34:23 <http://academicearth.org/lectures/apocalypse-and-resistance> .

36 *Ibid.*, 34:30.

37 Michael Fallon, *The Apocalypse: An Introductory Commentary* (Kensington, Chevalier Press, 2002), 61.

38 Fallon, *The Apocalypse*, 2.

39 Collins, *Crisis*, 151

40 Jean-Pierre Ruiz, 'Betwixt and between on the Lord's day: Liturgy and the Apocalypse,' edited by David L. Barr, (Atlanta, Ga.: Society of Biblical Literature, 2006), 240.

41 Linton, 'Reading the Apocalypse', 23.

42 Simon Patrick Woodman, *The Book of Revelation* (London: SCM Press, 2008), 7.

43 George Stroup, 'Revelation,' in *Christian Theology: An introduction to its Traditions and Tasks*, ed. P.C. Hodgson & R. King, 138.

44 Vatican II, *Dei Verbum*, art. 12.

45 Trainor, 'Scripture', 15.

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