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## CHAPTER ONE

# WHAT IS REVELATION TRYING TO DO?

*Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of the prophecy, and  
blessed are those who hear and who keep what is written.*

REVELATION 1:3

IMAGINE THAT YOU ARE PART of an early Christian gathering in the city of Ephesus in the late first century. You have joined other followers of Christ to hear the public reading of a long letter (see Rev 1:4, 9) addressed to seven Christian assemblies in your region, including your own. You listen intently as this “apocalypse” is read from start to finish. Your imagination surges into overdrive as you hear John, the author, describe a whole series of fantastical visions, which unfold like scenes in a cosmic drama. Here is one Revelation scholar’s brief summary of the action:

The risen Christ appears, eyes of fiery flame, with trumpet voice like mighty waves crashing against the shore, holding seven stars in his right hand. A throne in the heavenly sky appears, the Almighty seated on the throne, the heavenly court—zoological and humanoid—singing eternal praise. A slaughtered Lamb receives a sealed book, opens it, and great terrors strike not only the earth with its fish, animals, and humans, good and evil alike, but also the solar system, the planets, and the stars. Seven-headed beasts emerge, who demand the worship that is due only to the Lord God Almighty. Those who resist are beheaded; their death is called their “conquering.” A beautifully

seductive whore rides one of the beasts, but she is destroyed, as are the beasts and Satan, who empowers them. The world is redeemed, the heavenly city New Jerusalem descends to earth, all God's people celebrate the ultimate happy ending.<sup>1</sup>

What effect would this imaginative drama have on you as a member of a first-century congregation? How would it speak to your world? What would be the effect of hearing it read publicly? How does John want your congregation to respond to what they have heard? And does Revelation ask Christian communities to think and act in similar ways today?

For most of us the answer to such questions is likely "I'm not sure." It's hard for us to put ourselves into the sandals of first-century Christians in Ephesus and grasp how utterly disruptive such a book would have seemed to them. But if we want to read Revelation missionally, we need to try to understand what this book is asking of its readers and how that fits into God's purpose for all people and the whole creation.

This chapter explores three fundamental issues: the *form* in which Revelation comes to us, how Revelation tries to *persuade* its audience, and the *missional context* it addresses. All three help to shape how believing communities then and now read Scripture's grand finale.

## FORM MATTERS

Revelation is strange. It confronts us with a type of communication that seems closer to a fantasy video game than the accounts of Paul's travels in the book of Acts or the closely reasoned arguments of the letter to the Romans. It draws us into a world of angels and earthquakes, locusts and lampstands, beasts and bottomless pits. For many Western Christians, reading Revelation is not unlike the experience of traveling to a foreign country that has a mystifying culture. One reason many Christians react negatively to Revelation or want to avoid it is precisely that it is *so different*. Consequently, in order to grasp the missional *message* of Revelation, we need to understand the *form* in which that message is conveyed. Perhaps

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<sup>1</sup>M. Eugene Boring, *Hearing John's Voice: Insights for Teaching and Preaching* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2019), 9-10. Boring's description, of course, uses modern scientific language that would not have registered with first-century people.

more than any New Testament book, if we confuse the form, we'll misread the content.

Revelation, however, resists being pigeonholed into a single literary type or, to use a more technical term, *genre*. Rather, it represents “a *hybrid* document, a mixed breed.”<sup>2</sup> Indeed, Revelation features at least three interrelated genres: apocalypse, prophecy, and letter.

**Visions and symbols.** Above all, Revelation belongs to a type of ancient writing called an *apocalypse*. Significantly, the first word in the Greek text of Revelation is *apokalypsis*, which means “revelation” or “unveiling.” Although John doesn't use the term *apocalypse* in a technical sense, scholars came to employ the word for a kind of literature that flourished among Jews and Christians in the centuries right before and after Christ. As a result, apocalyptic literature seemed much more familiar and normal to John's readers than it does to most of us today. Like its name, apocalyptic literature is a revelatory form of writing. It runs thick with visions, images, and symbols. Douglas Moo and Jonathan Moo describe this well:

John makes extensive use of symbolism, metaphor, and poetic language to convey the message of his Revelation. Readers are invited into a world of stories and images that are intended to communicate truth about God and his purposes but which are not intended—and in fact make no sense—if they are read as straightforward depictions of physical phenomena.<sup>3</sup>

The final point of this quotation deserves bold letters and an exclamation mark. Apocalyptic symbols and images *are not designed to be read literally*. Ancient people like John and his audience would certainly not have understood them that way. This is perhaps the strongest argument against popular dispensationalist (“Left Behind”) interpretations of Revelation. They fail to let symbols be *symbols*. A “literal” reading of Revelation might, for example, assume that the description of John measuring “the temple of God” (Rev 11:1-3) refers to a literal rebuilt structure on Jerusalem's Temple Mount, that the infamous battle of Armageddon (which does not, in fact, take

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<sup>2</sup>Michael J. Gorman, *Reading Revelation Responsibly: Uncivil Worship and Witness: Following the Lamb into the New Creation* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2011), 13 (italics Gorman's).

<sup>3</sup>Douglas J. Moo and Jonathan A. Moo, *Creation Care: A Biblical Theology of the Natural World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2018), 162.

place—see Rev 16:16) corresponds to an actual clash of armies on a plain in northern Israel, or that the “mark of the beast” (Rev 13:16-18) denotes some kind of physical imprint or implant that allows someone to buy gas or groceries. Such readings force the square peg of an apocalyptic symbol into a round hole of describing historical events.

Nor can we fall into the snare of trying to *explain* John’s apocalyptic symbols as a secret code (think of the Enigma Code from World War II) that might hide what he was *really* saying from the church’s Roman persecutors. When John pictures Rome as the idolatrous harlot Babylon in chapter 17, for example, he makes no effort to give this figure a disguise. Descriptions like “the seven heads are seven mountains on which the woman is seated” (Rome as the city built on seven hills Rev 17:9) and “the woman you saw is the great city that rules over the kings of the earth” (Rev 17:18) would be as obvious to people living in the Roman world of John’s day as a cowboy would be to an American football fan from Dallas today. What’s more, *codes* simply tell us what something refers to. *Symbols* go deeper. The symbol of the harlot Babylon lets us *experience* the arrogance, injustice, and deception of human empires and anti-God powers in a way that straightforward language cannot.<sup>4</sup> Unlike codes, symbols operate at multiple levels. Although Babylon the prostitute represented Rome for John’s first readers, Babylon isn’t confined to Caesar’s empire. As we will see in chapter 8, Babylon is present *anywhere* the powers of greed, injustice, and violence oppose the loving purposes of God.

John’s language, then, functions more like poetry than prose. Eugene Peterson elegantly describes the book of Revelation as “theological poetry.”<sup>5</sup> If we treat John as a news reporter, rather than as a visionary and a poet, we will misinterpret what he says. Reading an apocalyptic text like Revelation requires *imagination*.<sup>6</sup> For many Western Christians, myself included, this kind of reading doesn’t come naturally. Speaking of Revelation’s symbolic,

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<sup>4</sup>See Boring, *Hearing John’s Voice*, 62.

<sup>5</sup>Eugene H. Peterson, *Reversed Thunder: The Revelation of John and the Praying Imagination* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1988), xii.

<sup>6</sup>This is a large reason for including the illustrations you find in this book. Revelation has sparked the imaginations of visual artists over the centuries. Their creations offer us a way of *imagining* Revelation that goes beyond the written page.



**Figure 1.1.** Saint John the Evangelist on Patmos by Pietro Perugino (c. 1448–1523), Monastery of San Benedetto, Italy

pictorial language, Zimbabwean commentator Onesimus Ngundu observes, “This approach can sometimes be difficult to understand, especially for Western people, who tend to think in abstract terms. It is more familiar to Africans and people in Near Eastern cultures, who are used to expressing themselves in proverbial or concrete language.”<sup>7</sup> Perhaps Majority World (non-Western) Christians can help those of us in the West learn to read Revelation more imaginatively—and more faithfully.

We can also talk about an apocalyptic *worldview* and *perspective*. Jewish apocalyptic works usually emerged from a time of crisis or perceived crisis. They addressed people who found their backs against the wall, people who felt threatened by oppressors and hostile powers. An apocalyptic perspective assumed a dramatic conflict between the forces of God and Satan, good and evil. This cosmic clash played out in the daily struggle between God’s people and their oppressors who seemed to hold all the cards. Apocalyptic literature offered hope and assurance to politically powerless people, like the Jews of John’s day who believed that God, against all appearances, holds the reins of history and will utterly triumph in the end. Ultimately God will intervene

<sup>7</sup>Onesimus Ngundu, “Revelation,” in *Africa Bible Commentary*, ed. Tokunboh Adeyemo (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006), 1543.

to judge the wicked and reward the faithful with salvation. This big-picture perspective enabled people to see everyday realities through a different lens—God’s sweeping purpose for all things. At the same time, apocalyptic writings functioned as *protest literature*. They encouraged God’s people to resist the worldview of the dominant culture, which profoundly opposed God’s end game for the world.<sup>8</sup>

In some ways, Revelation differs from Jewish apocalyptic writings, especially in its focus on Christ who has *already* conquered sin, evil, and death (Rev 1:5, 18; 5:5). Nevertheless, John shares much of this apocalyptic perspective. It is a worldview that still resonates with many Majority World Christians, who more easily recognize that unseen cosmic powers lie behind the earthly conflicts and injustices of their world than do many Christians from the West.<sup>9</sup>

How, then, does Revelation’s *apocalyptic* character contribute to a missional reading of the book? *John’s primary goal in Revelation is not to predict the future but to shape faithful, missional communities*—congregations of Jesus followers who worship the one true God and bear witness to what God is doing in the world. To that end, John challenges his readers to reimagine their world. He draws from the familiar apocalyptic symbols and images of their world in order to give them a new way of seeing what is happening around them. Revelation’s theological poetry both uncovers what God is up to in the world (God’s mission) and energizes God’s people to get caught up in what God is doing (the mission of the church). New Testament scholar Richard Bauckham hits the nail on the head:

John (and thereby his readers with him) is taken up into heaven in order to see the world from the heavenly perspective. . . . He is also transported in vision into the final future of the world, so that he can see the present from the perspective of what its final outcome must be, in God’s ultimate purpose for human history.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>Mitchell G. Reddish, *Revelation* (Macon, GA: Smyth and Helwys, 2001), 5.

<sup>9</sup>James Chukwuma Okoye, “Power and Worship: Revelation in African Perspective,” in *From Every People and Nation: The Book of Revelation in Intercultural Perspective*, ed. David Rhoads (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), esp. 120–21; Gorman, *Reading Revelation*, 20.

<sup>10</sup>Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 7.



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*“The task of the apocalyptic imagination is to provide images that show us what is going on in our lives.”<sup>11</sup>*

EUGENE PETERSON

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Revelation, then, is more about unmasking the present than unveiling the future.<sup>12</sup> Its apocalyptic images are disruptive and disorienting not because they are so confusing or scary but because they force us to see the world we live in through a wholly different lens; because they rock our confidence in the political and religious powers that claim to be in control of our world; because they shatter our trust in the American dream or any other illusion that promises meaning through money or salvation through success. John’s apocalyptic visions seek to transform our imaginations, realigning them with God’s great project of making everything new (Rev 21:5), both now and in the future.

**Prophetic words.** John is more than just an apocalyptic visionary. He is also a prophet. He makes that clear from the outset: “Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of the *prophecy*” (Rev 1:3, italics added). Near the end of Revelation, John uses the word *prophecy* four times to describe what he has written (Rev 22:7, 10, 18, 19). Contrary to popular perceptions, prophecy in the Bible has less to do with *foretelling* the future than with *forthtelling* God’s word for the present situation. Prophecy brings God’s message to God’s people in their concrete situation and calls people to act on that message.

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*It is difficult to make predictions, especially about the future.*

DANISH PROVERB

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John, then, sees himself marching in the long parade of Old and New Testament prophets. John’s voice is the voice of a Christian preacher and

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<sup>11</sup>Peterson, *Reversed Thunder*, 145.

<sup>12</sup>Harry O. Maier, “A First-World Reading of Revelation Among Immigrants,” in Rhoads, *From Every People and Nation*, 78.

prophet who announces “a word from the Lord” for the church by the prophetic Spirit. Outside of the community of faith, Revelation makes little sense. Revelation’s prophetic character comes to special prominence in the messages to the churches in Asia Minor in Revelation 2 and 3, but it is by no means limited to those chapters. Like the prophets before him, John at times speaks a word of comfort in dire circumstances (“Do not fear what you are about to suffer,” Rev 2:10) and encourages God’s faithful to persevere (“Here is a call for the endurance of the saints,” Rev 14:12). At other times, John the prophet flashes a warning signal before people who are in danger of getting sucked into the very idolatrous and sinful activities that characterize their oppressors (“Come out of her [wicked Babylon], my people, so that you do not take part in her sins,” Rev 18:4). John’s visions of what God and the Lamb will do in the future are designed to transform the present lives of his readers.

Why is Revelation’s claim to be prophecy important for a missional reading of this book? Like the churches in first-century Asia, we must read Revelation as God’s word to *us* in *our* religious, social, and political circumstances. As prophecy, John’s words challenge us to *act* on the message that we hear; to repent, to persevere, to be changed. On the one hand, they call us to turn our backs on the idols of our age and to prophetically resist those idols. On the other hand, Revelation beckons God’s people to embrace God’s great purposes for God’s creation (God’s mission) and to bear prophetic witness to that redeeming mission, with our lips and with our lives.

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*“People of the third [Majority] world, especially the people of our indigenous cultures, have shown much more sensitivity [than modern theologians] to the historical, this-worldly dimensions of the myths, symbols, and visions of the Apocalypse.”<sup>13</sup>*

PABLO RICHARD

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<sup>13</sup>Pablo Richard, “Reading the Apocalypse: Resistance, Hope, and Liberation in Central America,” trans. C. M. Rodriguez and J. Rodriguez, in Rhoads, *From Every People and Nation*, 149.

**Words on target.** “John to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come” (Rev 1:4; see also Rev 1:9).

What do those words recall? If you are reasonably familiar with the New Testament, they probably remind you of the way that New Testament letters, like the writings of Paul, begin (e.g., 1 Thess 1:1). Revelation may be an apocalyptic prophecy, but it is framed like a *letter*. More specifically, it comprises a *circular* letter, written to seven real churches in Asia Minor. The order of those churches, listed in Revelation 1:11 and duplicated in chapters 2 and 3, follows a clockwise circuit from Ephesus to Laodicea.

This is vital information for the way that we read Revelation. It means that the Apocalypse is not simply a collection of fantastical dreams or coded symbols but a pastoral letter written by John to local congregations he knows well.<sup>14</sup> Revelation represents God’s word on target. John contextualizes his pastoral and prophetic message for real people living in specific circumstances. Once again, this becomes most apparent in Christ’s messages to these churches in chapters 2 and 3 but remains true throughout the book.

A missional reading of Revelation must take seriously John’s choice to place his revelation in the framework of a letter. Addressing threatened churches with concrete needs, John seeks to shape faithful missional communities, churches that must get caught up in God’s great project of making all things new, where they are. What’s more, those churches hear God’s targeted word out of their real-life circumstances. If they hear it well, that message will alter the way they engage the culture in which they live, whether



**Figure 1.2.** The seven churches in Asia

<sup>14</sup>Boring, *Hearing John’s Voice*, 18.

distancing themselves from ordinary cultural practices like eating food offered to idols (Rev 2:14-16, 20-21) or launching into a costly witness of word and life that will ultimately lead others to worship God (Rev 11:13).

What about churches today? Revelation may not be written *to* us in the same sense that it was the churches in western Asia Minor in the first century, but it is surely written *for* us. Like all Scripture, this text holds the Spirit-energized capacity to transcend its historical circumstances and to address communities of faith of every generation and culture *within their concrete settings*. The good news must have a GPS location. No less than John's hearers in Sardis and Smyrna, this hybrid apocalyptic, prophetic, liturgical letter continues to address *us* in the high-rises of Manhattan and the barrios of Manila. Revelation still calls local Christian communities to hear and live by its transforming message.

### THE POWER OF PERSUASION

Everything we have seen about Revelation's character as apocalyptic, prophecy, and letter affirms that Revelation was intended not simply to inform but to *persuade* those who encountered it. Like all New Testament texts, Revelation was intended to be delivered or "performed" out loud in a house church setting.<sup>15</sup> John was an accomplished oral communicator living in a primarily oral culture. He composed a work designed above all to be heard with the ears rather than read with the eyes. John fashioned Revelation to carry maximum effect on his listening audience and to bring about transformation in their lives.

For John, hearing rightly entails responding faithfully. At the outset he announces: "Blessed is the one who *reads aloud* the words of the prophecy, and blessed are those who *hear* and who *keep* what is written in it" (Rev 1:3 italics added; cf. Rev 22:17, 18). Seven times, John calls Christians in Asia "to hear, listen to *and follow* what the Spirit proclaims to all the churches" (Rev 2:7; cf. Rev 2:11, 17, The Voice). Throughout Revelation, John draws on strategies that would make his Apocalypse memorable and persuasive for a listening congregation. This begins, of course, with striking visual images,

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<sup>15</sup>See Boring, *Hearing John's Voice*, 17-18.

like a heavenly throne encircled with multiple rings of worshipers (chapters 4–5) or a pregnant woman clothed with the sun and standing on the moon (Rev 12:1). But it involves other strategies as well, like repeating key words or phrases. For example, the phrase “every tribe and language and people and nation” (in different orders) surfaces on multiple occasions. It signifies *both* the multinational character of God’s people (Rev 5:9; 7:9) *and* the universal sweep of those who oppose God (Rev 10:11; 11:9; 13:7; 14:6; 17:15).

We discover persuasive strategies as well in the way the drama of Revelation unfolds. Chapters 6–20 narrate a long sequence of judgment scenes, which grow in intensity until God says a final, “Enough!” to evil and ushers in the new creation (Rev 21–22). But these disasters don’t pile up without any relief. Eugene Boring explains that John, as a skilled oral communicator, doesn’t ask his hearers to wait until he describes every last woe before offering them any hope. Instead, he sprinkles visions of salvation and victory throughout the cycle of judgments, like sneak previews of the triumph to come (e.g., Rev 7:1-17; 11:15-19; 15:2-4; 19:1-10).<sup>16</sup> These alternating visions of judgment and salvation remind the listeners that they will not only experience God’s victory in the future; they can already share in that salvation, in the midst of their present trials, anticipating the fullness of God’s saving work that is to come.<sup>17</sup>

In addition, John makes use of the various forms of *rhetoric* (the art of persuasion) that would help convince an audience in his world of the truth of what he said and the need to act on it.<sup>18</sup> For example, Revelation especially seeks to persuade Christian listeners by stirring their emotions (what the ancients called *pathos*). So in chapter 17, John taps into the revulsion associated with the wicked Old Testament city of Babylon and cranks up the volume when he links Babylon with the bloodthirsty character of “the great whore” (Rev 17:1). By connecting both of these nauseating images with Rome, John asks Christians to *feel* the evil associated with the empire and break from its ways (Rev 18:4). In a different way, when the martyrs under

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<sup>16</sup>M. Eugene Boring, *Revelation* (Louisville, KY: John Knox, 1989), 33.

<sup>17</sup>Boring, *Revelation*, 33.

<sup>18</sup>For John’s use of Greco-Roman rhetoric, see David deSilva, *An Introduction to the New Testament: Contexts, Methods and Ministry Formation*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2018), 806-11.

the altar desperately cry out to God, in effect, “How long will you wait to vindicate us?” (see Rev 6:9-10), John arouses his readers’ emotions, assuring them that their suffering is not in vain. God won’t forget them.

John’s effort to persuade and convict his audience aligns closely with a missional interpretation of this book. Revelation challenges missional communities, then and now, to see the world around them with new eyes and to allow that alternative vision to shape their mission in the world.

### EXPERIENCING REVELATION

Revelation’s character as an event that is spoken and heard reminds us that it is designed to be *experienced* as a whole, not simply read in bite-sized chunks.<sup>19</sup> John’s Apocalypse unfolds like a magnificent cosmic drama or story. We meet a parade of characters, some good—God, the Lamb, the prophetic Spirit, and those who worship God, like angels, the twenty-four elders, and God’s people—others evil, including Satan, the beasts, and the prostitute, along with their minions, like the kings and dwellers of the earth. As the drama progresses, settings change between the churches on earth and the throne room in heaven. Scenes shift, for example, from the utter devastation of Babylon to the victory of Christ, the heavenly warrior (Rev 18–19). Conflict ratchets up and resolves.<sup>20</sup> We cannot begin to do justice to Revelation if we approach it as a passive observer. John invites us to *enter* Revelation’s story of God’s now and coming triumph. He asks us to let that story disrupt and transform our vision of the world.

Perhaps it’s not surprising that the most powerful rendering of Revelation I can remember involved an aged preacher who dramatically performed the Apocalypse from memory on stage, complete with costumes and musical accompaniment. I’ve never gotten over it. My own experience of quoting Scripture portions like Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount publicly has convinced me that *hearing* the voice of God through the dramatically spoken word has the potential to change the hearers. Just as Revelation’s stunning symbols and persuasive voice enabled Christians in Asia to experience

<sup>19</sup>Mark B. Stephens, *Annihilation or Renewal? The Meaning and Function of New Creation in the Book of Revelation*, WUNT 2.307 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 239.18.

<sup>20</sup>On Revelation’s character as a drama, see Gorman, *Reading Revelation*, 37-38, 116-37.

the power of this text in their setting, so churches today must open themselves to the bottled energy in this book. To grasp Revelation, we must let it grasp us.

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*“Like a good movie, and about the same length (1 hour and 20 minutes of reading/hearing time), Revelation’s effect is the way it works as a unit. The power of any individual text depends on its mediating the whole.”<sup>21</sup>*

EUGENE BORING

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### WHAT’S THE BACKSTORY?

A missional reading of Scripture can’t avoid the issue of *context*. Specifically, how did Revelation speak into the circumstances of communities of worship and witness in John’s world and how might it continue to address a variety of global contexts today?

Revelation’s call to get caught up in God’s missional purpose addressed local churches in the Roman province of Asia (western Turkey today), likely during the late first century when emperor Domitian dominated the Roman world. It wasn’t an easy time to serve Christ in Asia Minor. The empire’s propaganda boasted that Rome’s destiny was to “bring the whole world under law’s dominion.”<sup>22</sup> Caesar was acclaimed as “lord of all the world.”<sup>23</sup> A second-century Christian named Minucius Felix wrote of Rome that “it has propagated its empire beyond the paths of the sun, and the bounds of the ocean itself.”<sup>24</sup> Inhabitants of the empire indeed perceived Rome as “the great city that rules over the kings of the earth” (Rev 17:18). When John and the Christians in Asia claimed that God, not Caesar, sits on the universal throne, they launched a frontal assault on the prevailing ideology in the Roman world.

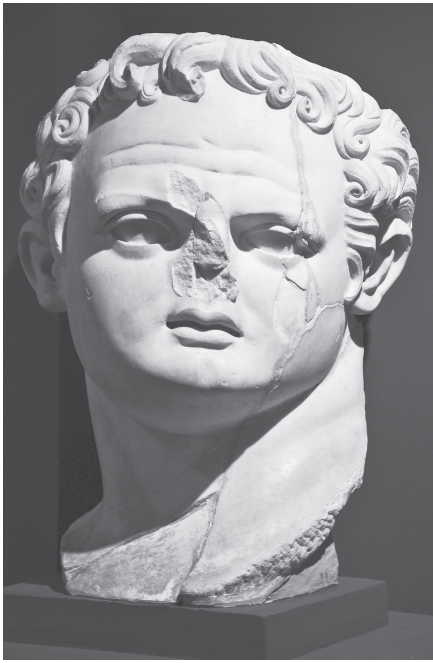
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<sup>21</sup>Boring, *Hearing John’s Voice*, 71.

<sup>22</sup>Virgil, *Aeneid* 4.232.

<sup>23</sup>Peter Oakes, *Philippians: From People to Letter*, SNTSMS 110 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), esp. 149-50, 171-72.

<sup>24</sup>*Octavius* 6. Cited in deSilva, *Introduction to the New Testament*, 799.



**Figure 1.3.** Bust of emperor Domitian (81–96) from the Ephesus Museum, Selçuk, Turkey

Specifically, Rome’s power and control over the empire was embodied in the emperor cult, which involved the worship of Caesar and of Rome itself. For the cities of Roman Asia, the imperial cult wasn’t imposed from the top down but represented a grassroots movement. Cities in Asia Minor competed with one another for the status of “first of the province,” normally by excelling in imperial worship and loyalty to Rome.<sup>25</sup>

The emperor cult touched all arenas of life. For many Westerners (like me), it’s hard to grasp the seamless connection that existed between religion, politics, economics, and kinship ties in John’s

world. Citywide festivals, trade guild meetings (the labor unions of the day), private meals, and social gatherings like birthday parties all signaled occasions to honor the emperor and the local gods that sustained his reign. When Christians refused to participate in such occasions, as well as the meals that almost inevitably accompanied them, they came under suspicion for being dangerously disloyal and unpatriotic.

How did Rome push back against Christian dissenters? Christian communities in Asia almost certainly did not face a program of organized, state-sponsored persecution as often has been assumed. Nevertheless, sporadic, local oppression of Christians remained a constant possibility.<sup>26</sup> Antipas of Pergamum had already been martyred (Rev 2:13), John himself languished

<sup>25</sup>Laszlo Gallusz, *The Throne Motif in the Book of Revelation*, LNTS 487 (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2014), 278-79.

<sup>26</sup>David deSilva, “The Social Setting of the Revelation to John: Conflicts Within, Fears Without,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 54 (1992): 274.



in exile (Rev 1:9), and Christians contended with the pressure to deny Christ's name (Rev 2:3, 13; 3:8). At the very least, refusing to join in practices like sacrificial meals carried a steep *social* and *economic* price. As a Christian, you might find yourself alienated from your friends and family members. If you were a shopkeeper, you might lose your customers, your business associates, even your livelihood itself. Your community might brand you as being subversive, antisocial, and "atheistic." The pressure to relieve these stresses by accommodating to Rome's ways would have been monumental.

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*“Like the Christians in John’s day, Christians in South Asia are a minority. Adherents of other faiths surround them. Governments actively support some of these other faiths, which often results in Christians being persecuted as John’s readers were. So we need to hear Revelation’s answer to the questions, ‘Who really rules the world—the political authorities or God?’”<sup>27</sup>*

RAMESH KHATRY

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### CONTEXTUALIZING THE MESSAGE

How did the congregations in Asia respond to such pressures? It depends. For most of those churches the greatest threat was not persecution as such but rather the temptation to cozy up to the ways of the dominant Roman culture, perhaps to avoid persecution. This challenges a popular way of reading Revelation essentially as a book designed to offer hope to oppressed Christians by assuring them that God would defeat their persecutors in the end. That's too simplistic. To be sure, some of John's audience needed a word of encouragement to persevere in the midst of trial (see Rev 2:9-10; 3:8-11). But for other churches, John's messages sounded more like, "Wake up! Stop compromising! Turn around, or you risk facing God's judgment!"

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<sup>27</sup>Ramesh Khatri, "Revelation," in *South Asia Bible Commentary*, ed. Brian Wintle (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2015), 1770.

As we will see in chapter four, John tailors each of his messages in Revelation 2 and 3 to that church's concrete needs and failures. For example, Christ's word confronts Thyatira about dabbling in idolatry by eating food sacrificed to the gods (Rev 2:20), and it calls out Laodicea for blending in with the materialism of the surrounding culture (Rev 3:17-18). Today we might call this *contextualization*.<sup>28</sup> John not only speaks in ways that are *relevant* to each church's life situation but he also *challenges* that context in light of the gospel. Each missional community, then, must read the whole of Revelation out of their dust-on-the-sandals circumstances, even as they allow its visions to "shake up the dust" and transform how they live in the world.

For now, I will focus more broadly on how John used the cultural materials of his world, enabling Christians in Asia to see that world through a different lens. Sometimes John taps into popular cultural myths that would have resonated with his audience and reimagines them in light of what God is doing in Christ. The story of the pregnant woman and the dragon in chapter 12 provides a fascinating example.<sup>29</sup> Various ancient cultures told similar stories, including the Greco-Roman tradition. In that version of the tale, the great dragon Python pursues the pregnant goddess Leto, plotting to murder both Leto and her child. But the god Poseidon foils the scheme, rescuing Leto and hiding her below water on a remote island. There she gives birth to Apollo, who quickly avenges his mother by killing the dragon. Roman propaganda exploited the myth, picturing Leto as the goddess Roma, the deified representation of Rome, and Apollo as the divine emperor (particularly Domitian), the savior of the world.

John reworks the myth, drawing on elements from the Old Testament and Jewish tradition.<sup>30</sup> But he gives the story a distinctively Christian meaning. One writer explains the transformation this way:

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<sup>28</sup>For a fuller treatment of contextualization in Revelation, see Dean Flemming, *Contextualization in the New Testament: Patterns for Theology and Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2005), esp. 266-95.

<sup>29</sup>The following paragraph draws extensively from Flemming, *Contextualization*, 275.

<sup>30</sup>See G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 624-25.

In [John's] version the woman in labor is not a Greek goddess, but the people of God; the child is not the emperor but Christ; and the dragon represents the forces that oppose Christ and threaten his church. In the end, a story that was used to celebrate the popular culture is now transformed in a way that helps readers resist being assimilated to that culture.<sup>31</sup>

For John, the cultural myth finds its historic fulfillment in Jesus, who rules “all the nations with a rod of iron” (Rev 12:5; cf. Ps 2:9). Christ, not Caesar, stands as the true victor over evil, the one and only Savior of the world. John knows his culture well, and he uses that knowledge both to connect with his Asian audience and to turn the worldview of the empire on its head.

Above all, John dips deeply into the well of Old Testament images to speak a fresh word to his audience where they are. It's striking that John *never cites Scripture explicitly*. Rather, he wallpapers Revelation with biblical echoes and allusions, some five hundred in all.<sup>32</sup> John's use of Scripture seems closer to the many uncited allusions to the Bible in the sermons of John Wesley than to the explicit quotations of Matthew's Gospel or the book of Hebrews.<sup>33</sup> John weaves these images so tightly into the fabric of Revelation that without them, the book would unravel.

In general, Revelation does not present Old Testament images or language simply as the fulfillment of prophecy. Instead, he recontextualizes them and adapts them for the new situation of his audience. Old Testament figures who opposed God like Balaam and Jezebel come to symbolize false teachers who threaten the churches in Asia (Rev 2:14, 20). The plagues on Egypt in Exodus are re-presented as God's end-time plagues of judgment on the whole earth (Rev 8:6–9:21; 16:1–21). The biblical ministries of Moses and Elijah foreshadow the church's faithful and prophetic witness in the world (Rev 11:3–13). What is more, major symbols in Revelation—the throne, Lamb,

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<sup>31</sup>Craig R. Koester, *Revelation and the End of All Things*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2018), 118.

<sup>32</sup>Boring, *Hearing John's Voice*, 69. Would John's audience in Asia “get” all these scriptural allusions? Probably not. But John continually invites his readers to enter the biblical story and in the process to learn to recognize the cadences of that story. For a full treatment of John's use of Scripture, see G. K. Beale, *John's Use of the Old Testament in Revelation*, JSNTSS 166 (London: Bloomsbury T & T Clark, 2015).

<sup>33</sup>See *The Sermons of John Wesley: A Collection for the Christian Journey*, ed. Kenneth J. Collins and Jason E. Vickers (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2013).

trumpets, and temple, to name just a few—all sprout from Old Testament roots. As I wrote in another setting, “John repeatedly, under the influence of the Spirit, recycles familiar events and images in ways that transcend the old meaning and frame of reference.”<sup>34</sup> Scripture speaks once again in new circumstances. John subtly invites his readers to enter the biblical story of God’s saving purposes in a way that reshapes their vision of what God is doing now and how he will fulfill his mission in the end.

### CONTEXTUALIZING THE GOOD NEWS TODAY

Can we learn from John? Revelation’s Spirit-energized prophecy uses the language, literary forms, symbols, and persuasive methods of its world even as it summons that world to change. Throughout Revelation John reworks Old Testament images and events, co-opts familiar symbols, and transforms pagan myths from his cultural world. John seizes the language of Rome, not so much to find common ground as to unmask the empire’s lies and idolatry.<sup>35</sup> He speaks in ways that make sense in his culture precisely to give people a new lens through which to see their world. In similar ways, Christians today can draw from all the resources available to them in order to challenge people in their own settings to be transformed. That includes the treasures of Scripture and tradition as well as the images, values, stories, and songs from our various cultures.

For example, New Testament scholar Brian Blount shows how Black slaves used the form of the spiritual to portray a hope-filled vision of the future. That vision enabled them to endure hardship and resist the false narratives of the enslaving powers, not unlike what John was asking of his readers in the first century. Blount believes that the language of resistance through costly witness expressed in the spirituals still resonates:

Because most African Americans in this country still count themselves among the most impoverished and oppressed, John’s message to resist, to refuse to accommodate to the present social, economic, and political way of life, is still a necessary message. His language of resistance, as the slaves rightly understood in their time, must remain a vital part of the African American

<sup>34</sup>Flemming, *Contextualization*, 276-77.

<sup>35</sup>Flemming, *Contextualization*, 292.

language—if African American Christian language is to remain the language of hope for the future in the midst of an unbearable present.<sup>36</sup>

In a different setting, Jackson Wu reflects on how Christians in Chinese communities might draw on the cultural notion of *filial piety* (loyalty to one's parents) in service of the gospel.<sup>37</sup> Within the framework of Chinese culture, Wu explains, children live in debt to their parents, owing them honor and allegiance. Failing to properly respect and obey a parent brings public shame and utter loss of face. Further, since the nation functions like a large family, Chinese people often face the dilemma: Where does my ultimate allegiance lie, with my parents or with the nation or its ruler?

Wu shows how the good news of Christ can both connect with a cultural value like filial piety and transform it. “When we trust Christ,” he writes, “we belong to a new family and enter a new kingdom. Becoming a Christian does not mean rejecting our family and country; rather we enlarge our sense of family and nation.”<sup>38</sup> In this redefined understanding of family, we offer the fundamental debt of filial piety to our true Father. We don't have to choose between loyalty to family or nation because God is both King and Father. Family no longer ends with bloodlines but expands to embrace people from all nations.<sup>39</sup> Even as John urged Christians in first-century Asia to cast their ultimate lot of loyalty with God and the Lamb, and not with Caesar and Rome, Christians in twenty-first-century Asia and elsewhere must decide whether their ultimate allegiance lies with their parents and nation or with the true Lord and Father of all.

## CONCLUSION

What is God doing in the world? And how are we a part of what God is doing where we live? These are the fundamental questions a missional reading asks of any biblical text. Let's summarize how Revelation's *form*, *rhetoric*, and *context* contribute to answering these questions.

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<sup>36</sup>Brian K. Blount, “The Witness of Active Resistance: The Ethics of Revelation in African American Perspective” in Rhoads, *From Every People and Nation*, 43.

<sup>37</sup>Jackson Wu, *One Gospel for All Nations: A Practical Approach to Biblical Contextualization* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey, 2015), 127-71.

<sup>38</sup>Wu, *One Gospel*, 169.

<sup>39</sup>Wu, *One Gospel*, 163, 169.

As an *apocalypse*, Revelation reveals “what must soon take place” (Rev 1:1): God’s sweeping purpose to defeat all adversaries and to restore all things. Drawing on symbols and images from the world of his readers, John seeks to perform spiritual eye surgery on his audience, to give them an entirely new vision of the world in which they live. Such a vision calls them to live as a foretaste of God’s future *now* through their words and their lives.

As *prophecy*, Revelation unleashes the word of God and Christ by the Spirit and directs it to God’s people where they live. They must not only *hear* that word but *act* on it. Revelation’s prophetic word urges them to remain on mission in the face of opposition and to bear prophetic witness to what God is doing in the world.

As a *letter*, Revelation addresses real churches in their concrete life circumstances, seeking to shape them into faithful missional communities.

As *rhetoric*, Revelation seeks to *persuade* those who hear its words. This moves beyond merely understanding what it says. John’s visions are designed to *convince* them that God, not Satan, Caesar, or any other power, is in control of history as well as to *convict* them to repent and align themselves with God’s reconciling purpose.

As a *contextual document*, Revelation speaks into the lives of Christian communities living in a specific setting in first-century Asia, one that was dominated by the engines of Rome’s power and idolatry. John contextualizes his message for that world. He recasts both the language of Scripture and the images and myths of Roman culture, enabling Christians to reimagine their world. Revelation doesn’t ask Christians to *leave* their concrete circumstances but rather to bear witness to a different truth *within* those circumstances.

Revelation continues to address us today in similar ways, whatever our culture or life setting. John the visioner, prophet, letter writer, persuader, and contextual theologian continues to call God’s people to embody God’s mission where they live. But what does that mission look like? Let’s find out.

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