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“Blessed is he who keeps  
the words of prophecy in this book.”

An intra-textual reading of the Apocalypse as parenesis

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A thesis submitted for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
of the University of Otago, Dunedin  
New Zealand

12<sup>th</sup> December 2006



In honour of my grandparents,

Pfr. Hans Gerhard Theodor Oehler (1917-2006),

Adelheid Dorothea Oehler (1921-2001),

Ernst Frank (1921-2001) and

Anna Maria Frank (\*1924),

true examples in Christian life and witness,

this thesis is dedicated to four churches in

Dunedin,

Kornburg-Katzwang,

Rockenhausen and

Schwabach.

## **Abstract: An Intra-textual reading of the Apocalypse as parenesis**

This thesis seeks to explore the implications of a parenetic reading of the Book of Revelation as a whole, rather than merely of the seven messages in which this is more commonly regarded as the primary purpose of the text. It examines the validity of this approach in relation to the book's claims about its purpose in the original communication event of which its text is a witness and its effectiveness in addressing hermeneutical issues in key passages of the book and argues that attention to the function of parenesis facilitates readings of Revelation which connect more directly with the intention of the book free from the need to decipher obscure coded references to past or future history.

Drawing from the text of the Apocalypse a twofold hermeneutical strategy is developed and exemplified by application to key passages of the book. The first aspect of this reading strategy is focussed on the proposed parenetic nature of the book. In an examination of Revelation's introductory and concluding passages it is argued that as a coherent unity they form a frame around the book. This frame serves to establish the perspective from which the *whole* book may be read. It does so by giving rise to the expectation that the whole book contains parenetic exhortation to faithfulness in light of the imminent parousia. Consequently this thesis proceeds to interpret the Book of Revelation by focussing primarily on how the various images in the book's body (4:1-22:9) as well as the explicit parenesis in the seven messages serve to communicate this parenetic exhortation to the original addressees.

The second aspect of interpretation seeks to facilitate scholarly analysis of the parenesis expected to be contained in Revelation's body with systematic regard for the individual situation of each of the addressees of the book, as documented in the comparatively accessible seven messages. To this end an intra-textual hermeneutic is employed. It builds on an examination of the links between the various parts of Revelation which is part of the examination of both the book's frame and the seven messages. This intra-textual reading utilizes the many links between the seven messages and Revelation's body by allowing them to play a determinative role in the investigation of an image's parenetic implications.

In order to further explore the validity of a parenetic reading, the intra-textual principle is applied to two central parts of Revelation's body, the Babylon vision (Rev 17-19:3) and the seal, trumpet and bowl visions (Rev 6, 8, 9, 11:15-19, 15, 16).

In this reading, the Babylon vision is read not as a general critique of the church's pagan environment but as a divine commentary on the concrete threats and temptations with which

the churches of the seven messages were confronted. In God's judgment of Babylon those who suffer under her violence against Christians are promised vindication and are thus encouraged to maintain their faithful witness as citizens of the New Jerusalem. The citizens of Babylon however are exhorted to repent and leave her behind, becoming citizens of the New Jerusalem and thus escaping Babylon's demise.

The seal, trumpet and bowl visions are interpreted as illustrating the dividing line between what constitutes faithful witness to Christ on the one hand and heed to satanic deception on the other. Faithfulness even to the point of death is expected of the followers of the Lamb; the inhabitants of the earth are exhorted to repent from their affiliation with the beast and give glory to God.

Thus such an intra-textual reading of Revelation as parenesis offers a strategy for reading the book in a way that is relevant for the Christian church beyond the limits of end-time phantasms on the one hand and mere historic interest on the other hand and so might facilitate the emergence of the message of the book from the obscurity in which it appears to be hidden to a significant proportion of its contemporary readers.

## Acknowledgements

Countless people have contributed to make possible the research for this thesis.

Dr. Norbert Schmidt was instrumental for my academic career not only by introducing me to exegetical methodology. In his role as Academic Dean at Tabor Theological Seminary he was responsible for my general theological training. He also was the driving force behind the accreditation of Tabor's academic standards by Middlesex University (London) which gave me the formal qualification to engage in postgraduate research. Finally, his friendship is invaluable in respect to ministry, academic work and personal integrity. Other academic staff at Tabor who also were involved in my research are Dr. Detlef Häußer and Mr Florian Förg who were available for consultation regarding any questions I had about Greek grammar. Διαπράσσομεν αὐτὸν!

Associated with Tabor is my employer, Stiftung Marburger Mission. Harry Wollmann, director of Studien- und Lebensgemeinschaft Tabor, and Dr. Ernst Horn, then director of Stiftung Marburger Mission, initially agreed to fund one year of research at the University of Otago so I could obtain the degree of Master of Theology. I am still amazed that part way through that year everybody involved in the leadership and management of Stiftung Marburger Mission agreed to follow my supervisor's suggestion and extend this time to what has now become 3½ years to allow for research on PhD-level. I am profoundly grateful for the trust invested in me as well as for the financial support. *Danke, dass ihr bereit seid, diesen langen Weg mit uns zu gehen!*

This financial support was possible due to friends and family, particularly in the churches of Kornburg-Katzwang (Landeskirchliche Gemeinschaft), Rockenhausen (Stadtmission) and Schwabach (Landeskirchliche Gemeinschaft). We do not take it for granted that they were ready to support us for years before we even got close to beginning our ministry in Brazil for which the PhD that I hope to earn with this thesis is part of the preparation. The support of these friends and relatives not only in financial terms but in their friendship and prayers has been invaluable. A special note of thanks belongs to the home group that made me read Revelation in the first place. *Danke, dass ihr für uns da seid. Wir freuen uns, euch wiederzusehen!*

At the University of Otago I have received excellent support through the Department of Theology and Religious Studies. My academic supervisors Prof. Paul Trebilco and Dr. James Harding provided helpful assistance whenever it was needed. Prof. Trebilco, however, has

been more than a professional advisor. His sincere friendship extends well beyond academic matters and includes even his family. He also invited me to his church (see below). *How can I ever thank you enough?*

St Stephen's (Leith Valley Presbyterian) church has made myself and my family feel at home in Dunedin. We have received much more from this family of faith than we could ever contribute. Along with the prayers for the thesis, our ministry and our family, particular acts of kindness which stand out were the help we received following the births of our sons, Dr. John Roxborough's private classes in basic missiology and Dr. William Lee's jellybeans and proofreading marathon. *We shall miss you. Can you come and visit?*

Marit, my wife of nine years, and Kilian and Esra, our wonderful sons, have not seen much of me in recent months as I strove to complete this thesis. Thank you for allowing me to concentrate on this project and for coping with all the unknowns that are part of living with me. I am afraid that times ahead will not be much quieter. Thank you for being pilgrims with me. *Gott sei Dank, dass es euch gibt!*

Finally, τῷ ἀγαπῶντι ἡμᾶς καὶ λύσαντι ἡμᾶς ἐκ τῶν ἁμαρτιῶν ἡμῶν ἐν τῷ αἵματι αὐτοῦ, καὶ ἐποίησεν ἡμᾶς βασιλείαν, ἱερεῖς τῷ θεῷ καὶ πατρὶ αὐτοῦ, αὐτῷ ἡ δόξα καὶ τὸ κράτος εἰς τοὺς αἰῶνας τῶν αἰώνων· ἀμήν.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Rev 1:5b-6: “To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father—to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen.”



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# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Objective

In this thesis I seek to explore the implications of a parenetic reading of the Book of Revelation as a whole, rather than merely of the seven messages in which this is more commonly regarded as the primary purpose of the text. I will examine the validity of this approach in relation to the book's claims about its purpose in the original communication event of which its text is a witness and its effectiveness in addressing hermeneutical issues in key passages of the book and I will argue that attention to the function of parenesis facilitates readings of Revelation which connect more directly with the intention of the book free from the need to decipher obscure coded references to past or future history.

Drawing from the text of the Apocalypse a twofold hermeneutical strategy is developed and exemplified by application to key passages of the book. The first mode of this reading strategy is focussed on the proposed parenetic nature of the book. In an examination of Revelation's introductory and concluding passages I will argue that as a coherent unity they form a frame around the book. This frame serves to establish the perspective from which the *whole* book may be read. It does so by giving rise to the expectation that the book is essentially a parenetic exhortation to faithfulness in light of the imminent parousia. I therefore will proceed to interpret the Book of Revelation by focussing primarily on how the various images in the book's body (4:1-22:9) as well as the explicit parenesis in the seven messages serve to communicate this parenetic exhortation to the original addressees.

By suggesting a second mode of interpretation I seek to facilitate scholarly analysis of the parenesis expected to be contained in Revelation's body with systematic regard for the individual situation of each of the addressees of the book, as documented in the comparatively accessible seven messages. To this end I employ an intra-textual hermeneutic which builds on an examination of the links between the various parts of Revelation as part of my examination of both the book's frame and the seven messages. This intra-textual reading utilizes the many links between the seven messages and Revelation's body, allowing them to play a determinative role in the investigation of an image's parenetic implications.

In order to further explore the validity of a parenetic reading, the intra-textual principle is applied to two central parts of Revelation's body, the Babylon vision (Rev 17-19:3) and the seal, trumpet and bowl visions (Rev 6, 8, 9, 11:15-19, 15, 16).

In doing so I read the Babylon vision not as a general critique of the church's pagan environment but as a divine commentary of the concrete threats and temptations with which the churches of the seven messages were confronted. I will suggest that in God's judgment of Babylon those who suffer under her violence against Christians are promised vindication and are thus encouraged to maintain their faithful witness as citizens of the New Jerusalem. Likewise I will argue that the citizens of Babylon are exhorted to repent and leave her behind, becoming citizens of the New Jerusalem and thus escaping Babylon's demise.

I will interpret the seal, trumpet and bowl visions as illustrating the dividing line between what constitutes faithful witness to Christ on the one hand and taking heed to satanic deception on the other. I will demonstrate that faithfulness even to the point of death is expected of the followers of the Lamb, and that the inhabitants of the earth need to repent from their affiliation with the beast and give glory to God.

I thus seek to demonstrate that an intra-textual reading of Revelation as parenesis offers a strategy for reading the book in a way that is relevant for the Christian church beyond the limits of end-time phantasms on the one hand and mere historic interest on the other hand and so might facilitate the emergence of the message of the book from the obscurity in which it appears to be hidden to a significant proportion of its contemporary readers.

## **1.2 Approaching the topic**

My first in depth encounter with the Book of Revelation was in 1992 when I was attending Capernwray New Zealand's short term bible school in Auckland. One afternoon we had a 5- or 6-hour session of reading Revelation, accompanied by slides of relevant paintings visualising the images we were reading about.

Also, at the appropriate times we would listen to songs by NZ-songwriter Jules Ridding with words derived directly from the praise sections throughout Revelation. This experience left quite an impression on me. But I still did not know what to do with the book.

My second memorable encounter with Revelation was during my undergraduate studies in a NT-theology lecture. We were presented with the classical range of interpretative models from preterist via symbolic and historicist to pre- and post-millennial. But to me none of them seemed to make enough sense. Once again I was left wondering what this book would really be good for.

It was in late 2002 when as the minister of a small church near Nürnberg in southeastern Germany I was asked by a homegroup to give them an introduction to the Book of Revelation, the group obviously being as confused about the book's purpose as I was. With hardly any appropriate literature in my bookshelf and the next theological library miles away I had to rely on what sense I myself could make of the book. So I started reading.

In the first three and the last chapter in particular I made some observations which allowed me to view the entire book in a new light. I do not think that I discovered any new details. I merely seem to have seen them from a new perspective of which nobody had ever told me before and which even after more substantial research I have not encountered anywhere else in this form. Two primary observations have lead me to develop a determinative central reading strategy: I read the Apocalypse (a) as parenesis and (b) intra-textually.

The first observation concerns the content and function of what I identified as the book's frame (1:1-8 and 22:6-21, cf. 3 and 5.1). This frame promises as the purpose for the whole book parenetic advice to the churches for them to follow in order to be prepared for the coming of Jesus. It is because of this identification of the whole book's content as parenesis that I decided to explore the implications of reading all of the book primarily as parenetic.

The second observation concerns the second major part of the book (cf. 4): the seven messages (1:9-3:22)<sup>1</sup>. In them the parenetic advice which had been promised in the frame is rather obvious. One thing that also stands out in this part of Revelation are the strong connections to the book's body (4:1-22:9)<sup>2</sup> which according to the frame may be expected to contain the same advice and which is directed to the very same seven churches that the seven messages deal with so explicitly.

From these two observations I concluded (cf. 5.2) that it ought to be a promising reading strategy to approach the body's visions as parenesis and to systematically relate the visions to the seven messages, to read them for parenetic implications and to access this parenesis via the seven messages, to see Revelation's body through the lens of the seven messages.

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1 For the role of 1:9-20 see 3.

2 See 3.2.2 for the double function of 22:6-9.

### 1.2.1 Reading Revelation parenetically

After engaging in more substantial research I have found that neither aspect of this reading strategy as such is necessarily original. Plenty of scholars have commented that Revelation contains parenetic features, in the visionary images of the body as well as in the seven messages.

Schüssler Fiorenza, for example, speaks of Revelation's "theo-ethical rhetoric"<sup>3</sup> which seeks to "elicit a ... theo-ethical response"<sup>4</sup> and it does not appear as though she limits this to any one part of the book. Hays, in his quest for the ethical message of Revelation<sup>5</sup>, embraces this identification of the text as deeply concerned with issues of parenetic relevance.

A number of scholars have noted before me that a parenetic reading presents a viable and promising strategy for accessing the book. Adamsen in his dissertation "Parousia and paraenesis. The parousia motif and its paraenetic use in the Book of Revelation" refers to the Book of Revelation as "parousian paraenesis"<sup>6</sup>. Adamsen's primary emphasis is on the parousia-motif, but he does not hesitate to see its purpose in the parenetic function of the book. He notes that "the connection between the parousia theme and paraenesis *throughout* Revelation corresponds to the peculiar double opening of the prologue with its theme and audience-oriented paraenetic aspects."<sup>7</sup>

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3 Schüssler Fiorenza, *Revelation*, 117-139.

4 Schüssler Fiorenza, *Revelation*, 139.

5 Hays, *The moral vision*, 169-185.

6 Adamsen, *Parousia and paraenesis*, 313.319.

7 Adamsen, *Parousia and paraenesis*, 320. Italics added.

Focussing primarily on German scholarship on apocalyptic in general and the Apocalypse in particular, Kerner examines “die Ethik der Johannes-Apokalypse”<sup>8</sup>. His primary concern is to identify Revelation as apocalyptic and he does so by studying Revelation's ethic in comparison “mit der Ethik des 4 Esr. Es wird sich wahrscheinlichmachen lassen, daß sich auch von der Ethik her die Johannes-Apokalypse als Apokalypse bezeichnen lässt.”<sup>9</sup> Kerner notices that “[d]ie Frage nach dem Zusammenhang von *Apokalyptik und Ethik* ist in der bisherigen Forschung weitgehend einseitig beantwortet worden”<sup>10</sup>. He quotes Zager<sup>11</sup> as saying that German scholarship tends to play off ethics against apocalyptic. He offers a number of examples from German scholarship for the “nicht selten geäußerte Auffassung, in der Apokalyptik gebe es keine Ethik”<sup>12</sup>. However he discovers a different view on the relationship of “Ethik und Apokalyptik” in the works of Münchow<sup>13</sup> and Brandenburger<sup>14</sup>. Kerner writes about Brandenburger's research: “So wird in seiner exegetischen Untersuchung die Ethik (bzw. Paränese) ... als integraler Bestandteil apokalyptischer Theologie begriffen.”<sup>15</sup>

Kerner states that his methodology “basiert auf der Einsicht Schnackenburgs im Blick auf die Johannes-Apokalypse, daß Ethisches nicht nur *in* den visionären Texten zum Ausdruck kommen kann – etwa in Form eines eingestreuten Lasterkatalogs oder Makarismus' –, sondern *durch* die Visionen und Bilder selbst.”<sup>16</sup> Thus Kerner treats the visions and images as of similar parenetic relevance as the other parts of the book whether their form identifies them as parenesis or not.

Whether or not Schnackenburg would have agreed with such a hermeneutic (he writes: “Solche Paraklese tritt am deutlichsten in den Sendschreiben an die sieben Gemeinden hervor”<sup>17</sup>), I certainly agree with Kerner's assessment that formally apocalyptic texts can serve a parenetic function. It might even be worth examining whether parenesis could not generally be the primary intention of apocalyptic literature. This thesis should contribute to such an examination.

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8 Kerner, *Die Ethik der Johannes-Apokalypse im Vergleich*.

9 Kerner, *Die Ethik der Johannes-Apokalypse im Vergleich*, 5.

10 Kerner, *Die Ethik der Johannes-Apokalypse im Vergleich*, 1. Italics in original.

11 Zager, *Begriff und Wertung der Apokalyptik in der neutestamentlichen Forschung*, 256, quoted in: Kerner, *Die Ethik der Johannes-Apokalypse im Vergleich*, 1.

12 Kerner, *Die Ethik der Johannes-Apokalypse im Vergleich*, 2.

13 Münchow, *Ethik und Eschatologie*. Cf. 5.2.2.

14 Brandenburger, *Markus 13 und die Apokalyptik*.

15 Kerner, *Die Ethik der Johannes-Apokalypse im Vergleich*, 3.

16 Kerner, *Die Ethik der Johannes-Apokalypse im Vergleich*, 8. Italics in original. Kerner refers to Schnackenburg, *Die sittliche Botschaft* 2, 259.

17 Schnackenburg, *Die sittliche Botschaft* 2, 262-263.



It appears as though Hellholm effectively suggested an understanding of apocalyptic texts as serving a parenetic function when proposing to define the function of apocalyptic as “intended ... with the purpose of exhortation and/or consolation by means of divine authority.”<sup>18</sup> After making reference to Hellholm's proposal Collins similarly states that “[t]he function of apocalyptic literature is to shape one's imaginative perception of a situation and so lay the basis for whatever course of action it exhorts.”<sup>19</sup> Comments to a similar end can be found in the contributions to Semeia 36 by Yarbrow Collins (“intended to ... influence ... the *behavior* of the audience”<sup>20</sup>) and Aune (“the recipients of the message will be encouraged to modify their cognitive and *behavioral* stance”<sup>21</sup>).

However by no means do these studies identify the function of texts like the Book of Revelation. Not only is this not their primary concern, but current scholarship is far from agreement on the literary genre of Revelation.

Resolving the question of Revelation's literary genre in terms of one single identifiable category appears to me to be less important than identifying the range of ways in which it seeks to function. Pattemore appears to agree when rejecting “a formal genre definition” in favour of “what might be called a pragmatic one”, namely “the identification of a series of contexts, or cognitive environments, within which the rest of the book would have been understood.”<sup>22</sup>

All of the genres suggested do have their valid point of reference, yet none of them captures the reality of Revelation completely. I will argue (3.2.1.1) that Revelation is – among other things – a letter, a (possibly apostolic) epistle. It was written to a specified group of addressees to provide them with spiritual guidance. As with the prophets of the Old Testament, it brings to the people of God God's perspective on their situation. This may partly happen by means of predictive statements about the future. As Johnson puts it: “John ... clearly places himself in the contemporary world of the first century and speaks of the future eschatological consummation in much the same way as Ezekiel and Jeremiah did.”<sup>23</sup> As for these, the primary focus is always on the consequences for the present. Similarly Gilbertson states that Revelation is “concerned with present realities in the light of an imminent future”<sup>24</sup>.

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18 Hellholm, “The problem of apocalyptic genre,” 27.

19 Collins, *The apocalyptic imagination*, 42.

20 Yarbrow Collins, “Introduction: Early Christian apocalypticism,” 7. Italics added.

21 Aune, “The Apocalypse of John and the problem of genre,” 87. Italics added.

22 Pattemore, “Blessed are those who hear”, part 3.1 (p. 7 in my print-out).

23 Johnson, *Revelation*, 5.

24 Gilbertson, *God and History in the Book of Revelation*, 49.

As in the Old Testament, this prophecy is published through a servant (John, whoever he may have been) whom God uses to convey his message. It is therefore appropriate that the book labels itself as prophecy five times (1:3; 22:7.10.18.19<sup>25</sup>). This prophecy is revealed (literally: given, ἔδωκεν) to John by means of a vision which he calls ἀποκάλυψις (“unveiling”<sup>26</sup>). This vision has in common with other “apocalyptic” literature that it claims to reveal things otherwise inaccessible to human knowledge and that an integral part of its message is in figurative speech, using images to symbolize actual figures in both the visible and the invisible realm. What distinguishes it from most of these other apocalyptic texts is the fact that it speaks about Jesus in a way which is consistent with the rest of the New Testament, the fact that it is part of the Christian canon, and that it is not pseudepigraphic. Mounce's comments on “apocalyptic” literature underline this:

This literature is pseudonymous, pseudo-predictive ... and pessimistic. ... It is clear that Revelation has much in common with such Jewish apocalypses as 1 Enoch and 2 Esdras. However, that it is not apocalyptic as opposed to prophetic is established by v. 3 [of chapter 1], which promises a blessing to those who hear “the words of this prophecy”.<sup>27</sup>

Revelation appears to be Christian prophecy in the form of an ἀποκάλυψις that was published as a letter. Beale comments: “Too much distinction has typically been drawn between the apocalyptic and prophetic genres.”<sup>28</sup> Hence Gilbertson writes: “Revelation should be seen not only as an apocalypse, or as a prophecy, or as a letter, but as all three.”<sup>29</sup> To a similar effect Longenecker concludes in his work on the use of “chain-link interlock” that “it is through them that the author creates a new generic hybrid, fusing together both the epistolary and the apocalyptic genres (not to mention prophecy) in tight linkage and wholly unprecedented fashion.”<sup>30</sup>

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25 19:10 could possibly support the same idea.

26 Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 40.

27 Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 40.

28 Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 37.

29 Gilbertson, *God and History in the Book of Revelation*, 45.

30 Longenecker, *Rhetoric at the boundaries*, 117.

What are the consequences of this? That the Book of Revelation claims divine authority. That it was relevant to its first readers, the original addressees. That at least a large portion of its message is expressed in figurative images that need to be interpreted. That it intends to provoke a relevant reaction to its message. That it is “*both* reaching out to ultimate spatial and temporal realities *and* focusing sharply on the earthly present”<sup>31</sup>, “intended to interpret present, earthly circumstances in light of the supernatural world and of the future, and to influence both the understanding and the behavior of the audience by means of divine authority.”<sup>32</sup>

### 1.2.2 Reading Revelation intra-textually

For intra-textuality as the second aspect of my reading strategy a similar scenario applies. Many commentators state that the seven messages and Revelation's body belong together and cannot be understood without each other. Beale is aware “that the themes introduced in the letters ... receive further exposition in the visions in chs. 4-22.”<sup>33</sup> After listing many links between the seven messages and the body Beale then goes on to say that “all these interconnecting parallels show the close relationship of the letters to the visions and that the latter section was intended to be relevant in some vital way to the situation of the churches in ch. 2-3.”<sup>34</sup> Likewise Thomas sees a connection between the messages and the remainder of the book:

Chapters 2-3 are devoted to describing practical standards of behaviour for the seven churches, and chapters 4-22 follow with substantive teaching about future events, which serves as motivation for compliance with the standards upheld in chapters 2-3. The seven messages emphasize practical patterns heavily and in so doing recall that the Apocalypse was written for a distinctly practical purpose. The beatitude of 1:3 notes the blessing of those who hear *and keep by way of obedience* the things written in the book. Chapters 2-3 are devoted to detailing the desired practical impact of the “unveilings” that compose the book from chapter 4 on.<sup>35</sup>

Thompson similarly shows awareness of the relatedness of Revelation's parts. In his introduction to the seven messages he states that

church life in Asia becomes the initial context – the base line – for images and symbols that occur later in the book. In later visions, the dominant imagery rotates to heavenly

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31 Gilbertson, *God and History in the Book of Revelation*, 45.

32 Yarbrow Collins, “Introduction: Early Christian Apocalypticism”, 7. While this is admittedly part of a general definition of the apocalyptic genre, I think this can be seen in Revelation without being specific about genre.

33 Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 132.

34 Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 133.

35 Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 125. Italics on the original.

scenes, demonic powers, cosmic conflicts, and a final transformation and renewal of the earth and the heavens, but Christian life in Asia is the touchstone for those later scenes.<sup>36</sup>

Lilje also ascribes an important role to the seven messages in their relationship to the following chapters. He writes: “Ohne das reinigende Zeugnis dieser beiden Kapitel ist kein heilsamer Umgang mit den folgenden möglich; denn nur Buße und Gehorsam bewahren den Menschen davor, aus den folgenden Kapiteln Spekulationen müßiger eschatologischer Neugier zu machen.”<sup>37</sup> Thus, Lilje contends, the seven messages are to lead the churches into repentance and obedience as prerequisites to appropriately responding to the visions of Revelation's body.

Witherington thinks that the exhortation to listen to what the spirit is saying to the churches which is to be found at the end of each of the seven messages “refers not to what is said within each individual letter but to the contents of the rest of the work beginning with Rev. 4.”<sup>38</sup> This implies that the two sections of the book belong together and are part of the same communication event. Giesen argues along similar lines when he warns of underestimating the

enge Zusammenhang zwischen den Sendschreiben und dem apk Hauptteil ... Die Sendschreiben dürften vielmehr die Funktion haben, die Christen nicht nur auf ihre bedrohliche Situation hinzuweisen und ihnen den Weg zu weisen, wie sie zu bestehen ist, sondern vor allem auf eine geschichtstheologische Orientierung vorzubereiten, die ihnen der Hauptteil bietet. Deshalb steht am Ende eines jeden Sendschreibens ein Weckruf ... und ein Überwinderspruch<sup>39</sup>.

Bauckham similarly emphasises the integrity of the whole. He writes that “the messages are not self-contained. Each is an introduction to the rest of the book.”<sup>40</sup> In dismissing the not uncommon notion of Revelation's purpose being merely “consolation and encouragement” for a persecuted church Bauckham then continues to apply this perspective as he interrelates the seven messages (e.g. Jezebel of Thyatira) and the body (here: worship of the beast)<sup>41</sup>. However even this positive example bears the marks of the problem this thesis seeks to address: It remains limited to general hints of a relationship without exploring it in depth. Hardly ever are any of the links between the messages and the visions in the body discussed in depth, much less are they determinative in the interpretative process.

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36 Thompson, *Revelation*, 63.

37 Lilje, *Das letzte Buch der Bibel*, 79.

38 Witherington, *Revelation*, 15.

39 Giesen, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 51.

40 Bauckham, *The theology of the Book of Revelation*, 14.

41 Bauckham, *The theology of the Book of Revelation*, 15-16.

One major part of the problem appears to be the fact that there is no conscious effort to clarify how the intra-textual connections might affect the interpretative undertaking. Apparently the consequences of the largely acknowledged close connection between body and messages is overlooked. Even Beale in his exploration of “[t]he Relation of the Letters to the Visions”<sup>42</sup> goes barely beyond merely listing the most important links. Likewise Perez’ brief 1911 article on “the seven letters and the rest of the apocalypse” does not provide any more insight than the (important) observation that “[t]he Book of Revelation ... is seen to be one coherent whole, and the Letters an essential part of it, occupying their right place, the only suitable one for them.”<sup>43</sup>

Popkes endeavours to remedy this problem. He opens his 1983 article by asking the very question that is at the heart of this thesis:

Unsere Fragestellung lautet: Welche Funktion üben die sieben Sendschreiben (Apk 2-3) im Gesamtaufriß der Johannes-Offenbarung aus? In welcher Beziehung stehen sie zum Korpus und zum Rahmen dieser Schrift? Die Frage ist selten näher untersucht worden, monographisch m.W. überhaupt nicht.<sup>44</sup>

Unfortunately Popkes makes little progress on this issue and primarily discusses “traditionsgeschichtliche” aspects of the hearing formula, of parables and of apocalyptic in general before declaring to have shown that the seven messages could be called a kind of “Exerzitienkatalog für den Empfang besonderer Erkenntnis”<sup>45</sup>. This amounts to a similar idea to the one Lilje suggested. Popkes states: “Die Sendschreiben wollen der spirituellen Vorbereitung zum Empfang der Offenbarung und besonderer Erkenntnis dienen.” While there may be some merit in this explanation, it ignores almost all links to the book’s body and requires no interpretative influence of one part on the other. According to Popkes then, the seven messages could be completely ignored, were it not for the churches’ need to sanctify themselves before receiving a revelation from God. This is not a satisfactory explanation for the role of the messages in Revelation’s overall discourse, particularly considering the substantial impact which they can have on the interpretation of the body (cf. 5.2.3, 6.1 and 6.2).

Ulland probably is closest to proposing a coherent approach to reading Revelation’s parts in dependency on each other. In the publication of his doctoral thesis he examines “[d]as

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42 Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 132-135.

43 Perez, “The seven letters and the rest of the Apocalypse,” 286.

44 Popkes, “Die Funktion der Sendschreiben,” 90.

45 Popkes, “Die Funktion der Sendschreiben,” 106.

Verhältnis der sieben Sendschreiben zu Apokalypse 12-13”<sup>46</sup>. To do this he also comments on the function of both the seven messages and the “Visionsteil” within Revelation's overall discourse. He writes:

Die Offenheit der Formulierungen [in the seven messages] ermöglicht eine Rezeption auch über die jeweils angesprochenen Gemeinden hinaus. Die in den Sendschreiben noch offenen Formulierungen werden vom Verfasser im Visionsteil der Apk 4-22 in seinem Sinne interpretiert. Dadurch kann das Verständnis der Leser bestätigt oder verändert werden. Die Begründungen der Imperative und die diese unterstützenden angekündigten Handlungen des Erhöhten sind abhängig von der Plausibilität der in den Kapiteln 4-22 dargestellten Sicht der irdischen und der himmlischen Welt.<sup>47</sup>

Thus Ulland allows for the visions in Revelation's body to inform the reading of the messages. He argues for a “reziproken Begründungs- und Plausibilisierungszusammenhang zwischen Sendschreiben und Visionsteil”<sup>48</sup>. Consequently in his discussion of the issues in the seven churches he extensively notes links to the book's body<sup>49</sup>. Likewise his discussion of Rev 12-13 features occasional references to the seven messages<sup>50</sup>. Undoubtedly Ulland makes interpretative use of the interconnectedness of the two parts of Revelation which he examines. However the fact that right from the beginning Ulland limits himself to the “Verhältnis der sieben Sendschreiben zu Apokalypse 12-13” means that he misses the opportunity to clarify the relationship between the messages and the “Visionsteil” as a whole. Consequently he cannot and does not propose a general hermeneutical principle for how this relationship might inform the interpretation of both the messages and the visions in the book's body. That Ulland also never intended to do this may also be indicated by the fact that he hardly ever gives any consideration to Revelation's first and last chapters. His focus is firmly on the “vervielfachte Antipas”<sup>51</sup>, on the question of how issues primarily of persecution in the seven churches are projected as larger-than-life images in Rev 12-13.

There has been a significant interest by doctoral students in the Book of Revelation particularly in the last decade. Like Ulland many of these doctoral students take the unity of Revelation for granted and deal with it accordingly. Like Ulland they trace the themes they investigate through both the messages and the body and thus make a valuable contribution to scholarship on Revelation in general as well as to the understanding of many of the links

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46 Subtitle of Ulland, *Die Vision als Radikalisierung der Wirklichkeit*.

47 Ulland, *Die Vision als Radikalisierung der Wirklichkeit*, 157.

48 Ulland, *Die Vision als Radikalisierung der Wirklichkeit*, 161.

49 Ulland, *Die Vision als Radikalisierung der Wirklichkeit*, 49-162.

50 See for example his comments on the crown of twelve stars on the head of the woman clothed with the sun (12:1) in Ulland, *Die Vision als Radikalisierung der Wirklichkeit*, 181.

51 Ulland, *Die Vision als Radikalisierung der Wirklichkeit*, 163.

between the messages and the body. All of them however concentrate too closely (and rightly so) on their respective issues to deal with the more general concern in which I am interested.

Pattemore, for example, uses Relevance Theory in his exegesis, “tracing connected themes relating to the people of God as actors through the vision narrative, and exploring their impact on the audience and addressees.”<sup>52</sup> He also explicitly points to the interpretative relevance of “how a passage relates not only to the text-external, but also to the text-internal environment, or co-text.”<sup>53</sup> His exegetical work on the text of Revelation displays significant interaction between the text at hand and its counterpart(s) in other parts of the book. Pattemore therefore makes a substantial contribution which is helpful for my own approach, but he does not attempt to propose a general principle of how the body's visions and the seven messages might be interrelated in the interpretative effort.

Similarly Peters traces three important themes through the messages as well as Revelation's body. Worship, witness and repentance all are vital elements in both parts of the book and in examining them throughout the book Peters offers many helpful insights on the importance of all three themes, for example when he links the hearing formula at the end of each of the messages to the repentance motif<sup>54</sup>. However his engagement with the question of this thesis goes only marginally beyond the statement that “[t]he relationship that the letters in chapters 2-3 have with the rest of John's Apocalypse remains controversial.”<sup>55</sup>

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52 Pattemore, *The People of God in the Apocalypse*, 11.

53 Pattemore, *The People of God in the Apocalypse*, 60.

54 Peters, *The Mandate of the Church in the Apocalypse of John*, 119-121.

55 Peters, *The Mandate of the Church in the Apocalypse of John*, 13.

The situation is not much different with four more doctoral theses which have been turned into monographs. They all trace their respective themes through the whole book of Revelation with varying degrees of consideration for the larger hermeneutical question of the interpretative consequences of the fact that these themes are present in every part of the book. Gilbertson seeks out in all parts of the book the temporal and spatial dimensions of Revelation and sets them in dialogue with Pannenberg and Moltmann<sup>56</sup>. Roose follows on from Trites<sup>57</sup> and examines “‘Das Zeugnis Jesu.’ Seine Bedeutung für die Christologie, Eschatologie und Prophetie in der Offenbarung des Johannes”<sup>58</sup>. Revelation's christology is the focus of Liroy's work in which he deals extensively with introductory matters<sup>59</sup> before tracing 5 christological motifs (fulfillment motifs<sup>60</sup>, resurrection motifs<sup>61</sup>, Son of God motif<sup>62</sup>, Son of Man motif<sup>63</sup>, Lamb motif<sup>64</sup>) through every section of the book<sup>65</sup>. Finally Kraybill looks at the role of “imperial cult and commerce in John's Apocalypse”<sup>66</sup>, again seeking out references in the book's body as well as in the seven messages.

Popkes' observation in 1983 still applies: The question of the role of the seven messages in the overall discourse of Revelation and in the interpretative effort regarding the book has often been noted but as of yet has not been the subject of a study in its own right<sup>67</sup>.

### 1.3 Presuppositions

Like any other scholar I approach my subject with a set of presuppositions. I think that such presuppositions need to be stated by scholarly authors and noted by their readers in order to establish the location of the author's contribution in the discourse. Schüssler Fiorenza's words on this issue are worth quoting at some length:

Once biblical scholarship begins to acknowledge its own social locations and interests, whether of race, gender, nation, or class, scholars will be held accountable as to why they privilege one particular interpretation over other possible readings. ... What is appropriate in ... a rhetorical paradigm of biblical scholarship is not detached value-neutrality, but an explicit articulation of one's rhetorical strategies, interested perspectives, ethical criteria,

56 Gilbertson, *God and history in the Book of Revelation*.

57 Trites, *The New Testament concept of witness*; Trites, “Witness and the resurrection”.

58 Roose, *Das Zeugnis Jesu*.

59 Liroy, *The Book of Revelation in christological focus*, 5-111.

60 Liroy, *The Book of Revelation in christological focus*, 114.

61 Liroy, *The Book of Revelation in christological focus*, 114-115.

62 Liroy, *The Book of Revelation in christological focus*, 115-116.

63 Liroy, *The Book of Revelation in christological focus*, 116-118.

64 Liroy, *The Book of Revelation in christological focus*, 118-120.

65 Liroy, *The Book of Revelation in christological focus*, 120-173. Liroy distinguishes 9 sections in revelation: 1:1-8, 1:9-3:22, 4:1-8:1, 8:2-11:18, 11:19-14:20, 15:1-16:17, 16:18-18:24, 19:1-22:5 and 22:6-21.

66 Kraybill, *Imperial cult and commerce in John's Apocalypse*. See also Friesen, *Imperial cults and the Apocalypse of John*.

67 Popkes, “Die Funktion der Sendschreiben,” 90.



theoretical frameworks, religious presuppositions, and sociopolitical locations for critical public discussion.<sup>68</sup>

Theology, I have heard it said, is always biography. My “rhetorical strategies, interested perspectives, ethical criteria, theoretical frameworks, religious presuppositions, and sociopolitical locations” invariably influence my lines of thinking, they will usually be the standard by which I will draw my conclusions. Whoever disagrees with them is asked to accept them as *my* basic convictions, debatable as they may be. To know them is fundamental in understanding my arguments.

First of all I personally do believe in the deity of Jesus Christ, his unsurpassed glory, his oneness with the creator, his redemptive death and resurrection and his eschatological coming to inescapably judge and reign. I believe I share these faith convictions with the author of Revelation. This thesis will therefore not discuss the validity of his comments about the person of Jesus, or the right of the ascended Lord Jesus to address the church in this manner.

The conviction that Christ has the authority to determine how he communicates with the church does not remove the challenge of interpreting the word of God which may well be in contrast to the interpreter's own ideas, theories and life. This contrast may be seen in the scholarship against which Karl Barth exclaimed: “Kritischer müßten mir die Historisch-Kritischen sein!”<sup>69</sup> However this is a challenge not only for such scholarship but for all of us who seek to understand the Word of God in Scripture, this challenge exists for any interpreter who wishes to remain faithful to what he believes to be the word of God: to be more careful about reading his own convictions into the text and failing to recognise what he'd rather not see.

I am also convinced that the eternal Lord who created all things is capable of speaking to his human servants in visions. As the omniscient creator he knows the realities of this world just as well as its future (and past). I therefore accept that John speaks truthfully when he claims to have received an ἀποκάλυψις from Jesus<sup>70</sup> about “what has to happen soon” (1:1). I will therefore treat all of Revelation as a “true and faithful” (22:6) witness of what Jesus has to say to his church as the book claims to be. I acknowledge that not everybody will be prepared to see the book in this manner and ask such readers to see my work as examining (not necessarily the truth but) the author's claim about Revelation and what he would like us to

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68 Schüssler Fiorenza, *Revelation*, 3.

69 Barth, *Der Römerbrief*, XII. Unfortunately the English translation remains strangely tame when compared to this explosive exclamation: “The critical historian needs to be more critical.” (Barth, *The epistle to the Romans*, 8).

70 Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 40: “Had God not taken the initiative, ...”

believe. The purpose of my work is not about exploring questions of the ultimate truth, but what may be understood of the intended purpose of Revelation.

Some clarification, however, may be necessary as to what I understand by a “true and faithful” witness. If we expect Revelation to offer a (technically) exact and complete account of John’s vision, we are in for disappointment. Firstly John (like the evangelists) concentrates on what is needed to follow the story and to bring across its point. For example it is obvious that in 4:8 only some of what the “living creatures” say is recorded, because while “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come” certainly gives glory and honour to God, it lacks the thanks that the “living creatures” are also said to bring to God in 4:9. Secondly John could never have exactly described what he saw, simply because it is inexpressible in human language. One senses his struggle to translate into humanly understandable images and words what is well beyond human understanding and imaginability. See for example 1:13-16, 4:3.6-7, 6:6.12-14, 8:8.10, 9:2.7-10, 10:1, 13:2-3.11, 14:2-3.14, 19:6, 21:11.18.21, where ὁμοιος or ὡς (often a combination of both) are an indication of something that is beyond human imagination and experience. Koester appears to agree:

The repeated use of the words “as” and “like” indicates that John was describing something that did not fit within the confines of ordinary speech. He used analogies from ordinary human experience in order to give readers a sense of something that belongs to the divine realm.<sup>71</sup>

One such example is the great street of the New Jerusalem which is described as “of pure gold, like transparent glass” (21:21). Obviously this is – by human standards – not possible. Gold is not transparent. And yet these words are probably the closest any human language will ever get to what John saw.

If every word in the visions of Revelation is not intended to be taken literally, then it is not so much single words that carry the meaning as the images and impressions they collectively invoke. Revelation is more like a series of paintings than an abstract dogmatic discourse. I will argue (cf. 5.1.2 and 5.2.1) that in Revelation, the bigger picture rather than the details carries the message. This is not to say that details are meaningless, but it does appear as though the author did not intent every single one to be taken literally. The details do have their part in setting the tone for the bigger picture, but this does not mean that they carry a meaning on their own. For example, there may be a way to ascribe each of the twelve stones of 21:19-20 to the tribes of Israel (or to the Apostles for that matter: 21:14) and it may be a fascinating

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<sup>71</sup> Koester, *Revelation and the end of all things*, 53. Similarly Witherington, *Revelation*, 83.

topic to study just what each particular stone could tell the reader about that tribe (or apostle). However it does not help to understand the passage which wants to invoke awe at the beauty of the new city and at the fact that both Israel and the church in their entirety are (at the least) represented in its “architecture”. Also I doubt that it is important whether these twelve stones refer to the twelve tribes, or to the twelve apostles (which I consider more likely). Both are part of the city's splendour and beauty. Note also that the first of these stones (jasper) is used to describe other parts of the city as well: its overall brilliance (21:11) and the material of the wall (21:18). Does that mean that the first apostle (or tribe) stands out among the others, whoever that would be? I doubt it. Rather I think this was simply the first kind of stone that came to John's mind as he saw the crystal-like radiance of a city of gold as pure as glass.

Does this make Revelation any less trustworthy, its account any less faithful and true? I think not. It merely requires readers to keep things in perspective, to maintain the interpretative primacy of the author's intent which will determine to a significant degree about what readers can expect Revelation to say and what the book does not intend to tell. What needs to be understood and seen is to be seen clearly, and one need not (and may not) speculate about the rest.

Since I take all of Revelation as a “true and faithful” (22:6) witness of what Jesus has to say to his church I will (in this thesis) not discuss at length theories about the redaction of Revelation (other than distinguishing between what John claims to have seen or heard and what he writes on his own account). I examine the text in its final form without asking about its possible redactional history.<sup>72</sup> Even if there should ever have been various fragments that were put together to form what we now know as Revelation, I am only interested in the outcome of the final redactor's work.

One of the most important principles of exegesis to me is the consideration of a text's (immediate) context. The passages directly around any given text, as well as the larger context of the (biblical) book both set the perspective from which the text needs to be seen. I want to particularly emphasize the larger context of the book as a vital tool of exegetical work<sup>73</sup>. Without full consideration of the book's intention, that is the author's intention in writing the book (or epistle), we will inevitably misinterpret a high proportion of its content. Since we

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72 Note however the internal evidence of numerous counter-relations between all parts of the book which to me suggests the unity of the whole text. See further in 4.3.2.10.

73 What Barth writes (*The Epistle to the Romans*, viii) about the Epistle to the Romans is just as true for Revelation (though, naturally, the divisions would be between other chapters): “The truth is that it is the Epistle itself which cannot be split up into fragments. Chs. I and II must not be read apart from Ch. III; nor Ch. V apart from Ch. VI; nor Ch. VIII apart from Ch. VII; nor Ch. IX apart from Ch. XI: and above all, Chs. I-XI must not be separated from Chs. XII-XV.”

find an explicit account of the book's objective in Revelation's frame, it is a vital point of access to Revelation.

Pattemore warns us of the dangers of “abandoning all interest in intentionality in favour of an ideologically driven imposition of meaning.”<sup>74</sup> Yarbro Collins likewise cautions: “There is something inhumane at least, even immoral, about using a text without regard for the author's intention in creating it. Even advocates of interpretive freedom and play object when reviewers misunderstand their books.”<sup>75</sup>

I am also convinced that Revelation is not concerned with either human curiosity about future events or primarily with political systems. As I read it, the purpose and intention of the writer is to call the churches back into God's covenant with his people. If the book supplies its reader with “prophetic” information foretelling the future it does so first of all with an intent to invite the original readers to return to the covenant and urge them to stay in it, to accept afresh God's grace, and engage with the ethical and future consequences of life in the covenant. A renewal of that convenantal relationship does raise social and political issues. Both can be found in Revelation, but as I see it they have their place behind the primary purpose of restoring the endangered or even broken relationship between God and his people.

## **1.4 Methodology**

My primary intention is to uncover the internal logic of Revelation, the connections within the book and their hermeneutical relevance and to then propose a reading strategy for reading the book accordingly. I am aware that a thorough and adequate exegesis of Revelation requires much more, for example a close look at the Old Testament background that is evident throughout the book. However, I will have to restrict myself to an internal examination of Revelation. While its connections to the Old and New Testaments as well as its references to the (secular) culture of the period are an important part of any adequate attempt to access it, they shed little light on Revelation's flow of argument. Where they are vital for the book's internal logic, I will discuss them as well.

In order to describe Revelation's internal discourse structure, I will examine most closely two parts of the book, namely its frame (chs 1 and 22) and the seven messages (chs 2-3). Despite their relevance in the overall discourse, I will not systematically examine chapters 4-21 (the body of Revelation), because my point of access is the book's self-declared purpose as

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74 Pattemore, ““Blessed are those who hear””, part 4 (p. 15 in my print-out).

75 Yarbro Collins, *Cosmology and eschatology*, 1.

expressed in the frame and substantiated in the seven messages. This purpose suggests a certain mode of reading which then will be applied to the body of the book.

As for my methods for this task of intra-textual and rhetorical analysis, I predominantly rely on exegesis along the lines of Thomas' definition of exegesis: "Exegesis means the application of generally accepted hermeneutical principles to the original (Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek) biblical text with a view of unfolding (lit. 'leading out,' Gk. *exēgeomai*) its correct, contextual meaning."<sup>76</sup> This includes making my own translation, the extensive use of concordances and commentaries and a systematic reading of the text as well as textual criticism and the analysis of textual structures. With these tools I work to discover intra-textual links, structuring phrases, key words and concepts and consequently the logical flow of the text.

For the format of the thesis' text I have decided to use Greek characters for Greek words. Verses in one chapter are separated by full stop/period (e.g. 1:8.17 for chapter 1, verses 8 and 17).

## 1.5 Outline

I have structured this thesis in five sections: a collection of studies on particular questions in the interpretation of Revelation (2.1-2.4), the study of Revelation's chapters 1 and 22 as the book's frame (chapter 3 of the thesis), the analysis of the seven messages (Rev 2-3: chapter 4 of the thesis), my reading strategy (chapter 5 of the thesis) and a discussion of the consequences of my reading strategy (chapter 6 of the thesis).

The collection of studies in chapter 2 is given in order to avoid lengthy excursions in the middle of the exegetical discussion only to return to these excursions again at some later point in the thesis. The issues discussed in this collection of studies all are important for most other parts of the thesis. I have therefore decided to deal with them first, allowing me to refer back to the conclusions drawn whenever the respective topic becomes relevant. The topics discussed include the identification of the original audience for Revelation (2.1) as well as an exploration into the social situation of these addressees (2.2), including a discussion about the identity of Jezebel of Thyatira and the Nicolaitans (2.2.1) and the question of persecution (2.2.2 and 2.2.3). Also covered here is the question about the supposed hermeneutical relevance of 1:19 (2.3) and studies on three key words in Revelation: *τηρέω* (2.4.1), *ἔργα* (2.4.2) and *μάρτυς* (2.5).

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<sup>76</sup> Thomas, *Revelation* 8-22, xi.

The study of Rev 1 and 22 involves general considerations regarding Revelation's overall structure (3.1), the examination of their internal structure (3.2.1 and 3.2.2), their mutual dependance on each other (3.2.3 and 3.2.4), their relation to the other parts of the book (3.3) and their common message (3.4).

The analysis of the seven messages includes the examination of their structure (4.1) and their message (4.2). It recapitulates the links of the seven messages to the first and last chapter of Revelation (4.3.1) and shows their connectedness to the book's body (4.3.2).

I then present my reading strategy in two steps. In a first step I draw conclusions about the nature, purpose and literary function of Revelation's body from my observations on the frame and the seven messages (5.1). In a second step I develop a proposal for reading the visions accordingly (5.2).

This is then followed by two examples of how my reading strategy can be applied to the study of Revelation (6.1 and 6.2). This is intended to demonstrate both the practical use of the reading strategy and its plausibility.

In a final part I summarize my findings (7.1) and try to give an overview of the implications and consequences of my reading strategy (7.2).

## **2 Introductory issues**

There are a number of issues that are of importance for my exegetical endeavour, but require too much explanation to allow them to be included in the “normal” exegetical discourse. There they would significantly disrupt the flow of the argumentation. I have therefore chosen to deal with them in a separate introductory chapter. These issues concern the identity of Revelation's addressees (2.1) and the situation they found themselves in (2.2), a discussion on Rev 1:19 and its often declared hermeneutical relevance (2.3) and an examination of the precise meaning of three words (or concepts) that are central to my argument (2.4).

### **2.1 The audience: Seven representative churches?**

There is considerable discussion about the reasons for Revelation being addressed to the specifically named churches of Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea. Why these seven when there were many other churches, both in the known world and in the proximity of these seven, among them Colossae, Hierapolis and Troas? Various explanations have been suggested as to why these seven were chosen.

Ramsay<sup>1</sup>, in his influential work on the seven churches of Revelation, claims these were an established group of locally leading churches, each of them the centre of the churches of the surrounding towns and cities. They were, he argues, part of a defined postal route within the Christian community of Asia which was frequently used to circulate letters between the churches. The messengers, according to Ramsay, would stop at “the seven churches of Asia”<sup>2</sup> from where the letters were circulated among the surrounding churches. This way, he concludes, Revelation would have reached its addressees quite easily. However I think it an unlikely coincidence that these leading churches were seven, the number so full of meaning in Revelation. Would the church in Asia Minor have deliberately organized itself in *seven* “dioceses”? This seems an unlikely and somewhat arbitrary suggestion. It is also unlikely that any *predefined group* of churches would, and could, be representative of the church in Asia Minor and of the entire church of Christ without imposing on some churches a reality that would not have been their own. Yet this is exactly what Ramsay claims, that “the seven Asian churches” incidentally were “seven representative churches”<sup>3</sup>, divided in “seven groups of attributes”<sup>4</sup> that together would be “in a way summing up the whole province”<sup>5</sup>. Ramsay argues that “that could only be the case if each was in some way representative of a small group of churches, so that the whole seven taken together represented and summed up the whole province.”<sup>6</sup> However there appears to be no compelling reason why this should be the case.

Similarly Ramsay's explanation for why other churches in cities of Asia (e.g. Troas and Cyzicos), some even on the same route (Magnesia and Tralles, Pisidian Antioch), were not included in Revelation's selection, and why they were not part of the messenger's itinerary, is far from convincing<sup>7</sup>. Probably a different route, including different churches, could have been possible. Could it be that Court's words are true for Ramsay: “there is an obvious danger,

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1 Ramsay, *The letters to the seven churches*, 133-141, supported by Hemer, *The letters to the seven churches*, 14-15.25-26, Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 56 and Osborne, *Revelation*, 85. Beale seems to be at least sympathetic (*The Book of Revelation*, 204).

2 Rev 1:4. Ramsay makes a lot of this phrase in that he insists that it necessarily means the seven were commonly known as “*the seven churches of Asia*” (Italics added): “There is no way of escaping the obvious implication in 1:4 and 1:11 that those seven were already known to the world and established in popular estimation as ‘the seven Asian churches’ before the vision came to John.” (Ramsay, *The letters to the seven churches*, 128). I am not convinced.

3 Ramsay, *The letters to the seven churches*, 128.

4 Ramsay, *The letters to the seven churches*, 128.

5 Ramsay, *The letters to the seven churches*, 127.

6 Ramsay, *The letters to the seven churches*, 127.

7 Ramsay, *The letters to the seven churches*, 133-141. He suggests Magnesia and Tralles belonged to the Ephesus district (which is still arguable), just as Colossae and Hierapolis would have belonged to Laodicea (which still makes sense). To claim Troas and even Cyzicos belonged to Pergamum is daring. Interestingly Ramsay doesn't comment on Antioch.



when the evidence is severely limited, that a researcher with special interests will find what he or she wishes to see”<sup>8</sup>?

Ramsay's idea does not give a satisfactory answer to the question: Why *these* seven? It could explain though the order in which the churches (and their respective messages) are mentioned and addressed: “Perhaps intentionally, the order is also the one that would have been the most convenient for a messenger to deliver the book to the churches.”<sup>9</sup>

Others claim that these seven churches were *the* main churches of the area<sup>10</sup>. Again there is no real evidence for this. If they were all so important, then why is it that “Pergamum, Sardis and Thyatira are referred to only in the Book of Revelation”<sup>11</sup> and not in any other contemporary Christian writings (that we know of)? Others like Colossae (which is quite close to Laodicea), Troas or Hierapolis “were of equal importance”<sup>12</sup> and would have been more likely to be considered as significant. This idea is plainly not convincing at all.

Some have identified them as “Vororte des amtlichen kleinasiatischen Kaiserkultes”<sup>13</sup>, thus declaring the Roman empire as the primary opponent against which John fights in Revelation. This notion will come under close scrutiny in this thesis (cf. 6.1). The identification of these specific cities as being more involved in Caesar worship than others as Lilje implies appears arbitrary at the very least.

Whether they were “the only churches acknowledging John”<sup>14</sup> as Court carefully (“perhaps”) suggests will remain uncertain. This idea would offer an explanation but it is too vague to be convincingly argued. Rightly Court therefore gives no weight to this possibility in his argument.

A similar suggestion is brought forward by Giesen: “Wahrscheinlich hängt die Auswahl der Gemeinden damit zusammen, daß der Verfasser die Verhältnisse in ihnen besonders gut kennt.”<sup>15</sup> This however is understandable only if we assume that John wrote the seven

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8 Court, *Revelation*, 8.

9 Poythress, *The returning King*, 76. See also Farrer (*The Revelation of St. John the Divine*, 65): “The seven churches of verse 11 appear to be named in the order in which a messenger armed with St. John's letter would approach them if he made a circular tour from Ephesus and back.”

10 Probably Ramsay would have agreed to that as well, as can be seen in his argument for Laodicea's dominance over Colossae and Hierapolis (Ramsay, *The letters to the seven churches*, 129).

11 Thompson, *The Book of Revelation. Apocalypse and Empire*, 117.

12 Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 45. In the same way Caird, *The Revelation of Saint John*, 15. He also adds that Magnesia and Tralles could possibly have been potential addressees as well, since “Ignatius wrote to them not more than twenty years later.” (p. 15).

13 Lilje, *Das letzte Buch der Bibel*, 66. Similarly Lohse (*Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 19) who combines this with Ramsay's idea.

14 Court, *Revelation*, 35.

15 Giesen, *Johannes-Apokalypse*, 11.

messages (and indeed all of Revelation) on his own accord and not due to a divine revelation and commission. This assumption is certainly legitimate, but contrary to my understanding of how John came to write the book.

Brooks reports the idea of the seven churches representing seven major eras of church history in consecutive order<sup>16</sup>. In the variant he records (emphasizing that this is just one out of a number of proposed schemes) Ephesus is said to stand for the church of the first century that is seen as “at first flourishing but then beginning to flag in zeal” and Laodicea is seen as representing the “lukewarm” church of the 20<sup>th</sup> (and 21<sup>st</sup>, 22<sup>nd</sup> and 23<sup>rd</sup> ?) century. Brooks' comments on this need no further explanation: “This whole system of interpretation is to be rejected wholesale. If it were true, then – quite apart from other problems it would create – it would severely limit the value of the book for the original first-century congregations.”<sup>17</sup>

A number of scholars suggest that the specific seven churches of Asia Minor were not meant to be the only addressees of Revelation, but that they represent the Christian church as a whole. They were chosen because in all their diversity they combined to represent the Christian church as a whole. While these specific seven churches certainly are the primary addressees in the internal logic of the book, there is support for the view that Revelation could have a broader perspective:

In agreement with Mounce's observation that “the entire scroll including all seven letters was to be read at each church”<sup>18</sup>, I think that all seven messages are sent to all seven churches, all of them receiving all seven messages and not just the one directed to themselves in particular. This could suggest that indeed all of the book's message was deemed important for all the churches, not just the parts that would apply to each church's specific situation. This would mean that the book's message, in some way, would have to be of universal importance to all churches (even beyond the group of the seven).

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16 Brooks, *The Lamb is all the glory*, 27-28. He finds these ideas in Mitchell, Fred, *The Lamb upon his throne*, 46 and in Atkinson, Basil F.C., *The war against Satan*.

17 Brooks, *The Lamb is all the glory*, 28.

18 Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 56.

This is underlined by the fact that at the end of each of the seven messages we find the call to listen to what the Spirit says to the churches (2:7.11.17.29; 3:6.13.22), the plural pointing to the fact that all the churches needed to hear all that God had to say about his church wherever it was. This is underlined by 2:23: “And all the churches shall realize that...” Thompson supports this argument by pointing out the “shift from second to third person, for example, from ‘Yet this is to *your* credit’ to ‘*everyone* who conquers’; ... more than one church is addressed – ‘churches’ (the seven or more)”<sup>19</sup>.

The number seven seems to be purposefully chosen. It fits in well with the general dominance of this number in the whole book. “Seven, being a ‘perfect’ or round number to the biblical mind”<sup>20</sup>, “the number of completeness”<sup>21</sup>, suggests a certain wholeness or “perfection”<sup>22</sup>, that could well represent the whole body of the worldwide church<sup>23</sup>. “By addressing seven churches John indicates that his message is addressed to specific churches as *representative* of *all* the churches.”<sup>24</sup> Caird agrees: “John chooses **seven** of the **churches** to indicate that his message is really addressed to the church at large.”<sup>25</sup> This could apply particularly since the state of the seven churches is described as ranging from pleasing in God's sight (Philadelphia) to plain awful (Laodicea) with various gradations in between. “The sevenfold condition of these churches actually existed at that time. It exists today. It has existed during the entire intervening period.”<sup>26</sup> Mounce agrees that the message of Revelation is “relevant to the church universal, for the strengths and weaknesses of the seven are characteristic of individual churches throughout history.”<sup>27</sup> Similarly Poythress states: “The choice of seven churches ... hints at the wider relevance of the message to all churches in all times.”<sup>28</sup>

Even Ramsay seems to agree<sup>29</sup>, except that he does not refer to the significance of the number seven and insists that the seven churches were a group which was *already established* on other grounds. However there is no external evidence for this suggestion whatsoever.

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19 Thompson, *Revelation*, 65-66.

20 Farrer, *The Revelation of St. John the Divine*, 60.

21 Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, 16.

22 Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 45.

23 Contra Aune (*Revelation 1-5*, 29) who claims that “‘seven’ does not symbolize ‘completeness’ ... Rather, the number seven emphasizes the divine origin and authority of the message of John, since seven is primarily a number with cosmic significance and is therefore associated with heavenly realities.”

24 Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, 16. Italics in the original.

25 Caird, *The Revelation of Saint John*, 15. Bold types in the original.

26 Hendriksen, *More than conquerors*, 79.

27 Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 57.

28 Poythress, *The returning King*, 72.

29 See above in this chapter.

It seems most likely that the seven specific churches stand for the Christian church as a whole (Aune: “the seven individual churches to whom John wrote, when taken together, represent the universal Church”<sup>30</sup>), these seven being purposefully chosen for their various realities that represent just about any situation the church could find itself in. Certainly the real seven churches at the time of Revelation's publication experienced the situations described in the seven messages and needed the specific advice that Revelation had for them, but they received advice that the whole church needed, and still needs, for situations that the whole church experienced and still experiences, sometimes even in combination in one local church.

## **2.2 The situation**

The Christians in the seven churches experienced the general factors of human existence such as love and hate, success and disappointment, times of celebration and times of sorrow, all of them potentially filled with religious meaning or not. These experiences will have impacted on how they lived and what Revelation had to say to them, but are not accessible to the modern reader. However the Christians in the seven churches also experienced some circumstances which were quite unique to their time and place within history. Some of them are accessible to us, albeit in some cases only fragmentarily. Among those things are persons, groups or institutions which challenge or even threaten the churches. Some of them are in the churches themselves (2.2.1), some are part of the gentile society (2.2.2) and some belong to the historic roots of the churches, the Jewish community(2.2.3). Here I will discuss them because of the impact of these issues on the interpretation of the Book of Revelation as a whole (cf. 5.1.1).

### **2.2.1 The Nicolaitans, Balaam and Jezebel**

In the seven messages three origins of false teaching are identified. In the message to Thyatira we encounter “Jezebel who calls herself a prophetess and teaches...” (2:20), the message to Pergamum states that some in the church “hold to the teaching of Balaam” (2:14) while others “hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans” (2:15), a group which apparently was rejected by the church in Ephesus who is said to “hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans” (2:6). So who were these groups or persons and what did they teach?

#### **2.2.1.1 The Nicolaitans**

As mentioned above, the Nicolaitans appear twice in the seven messages. In neither case do we learn much about them. Whether or not the “evil men” and false apostles which the church

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30 Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, lxxii.

in Ephesus faced (2:2) were Nicolaitans or of some other background is not clear. But even if they were Nicolaitans this would not contribute to a clearer picture of them. The Nicolaitans apparently stand for a teaching (2:15) which expresses itself in deeds (2:6). Both are rejected in no uncertain terms as not compatible with Christ's standards, as he hates them (2:6) and expects repentance from them (2:16). It is often argued that we can see from the message to Pergamum that “the teaching of the Nicolaitans” is identical or at least similar to “the teaching of Balaam”<sup>31</sup> (and consequently to what Jezebel teaches in Thyatira). One version or part of this argument is the proposed

similarity of the etymology of their names: νικᾶ λαόν means “he overcomes the people,” and in rabbinic literature “Balaam” (*bil’ām*) was etymologized to *bl’ ’m* or *blh ’m*, “he who consumes the people” (e.g., *b. Sanhedrin* 105a), or it could be construed as “rule over the people” (*b’l ’m*).<sup>32</sup>

However Aune is right in calling this speculation, because, the difference “is decisive: ‘Balaam’ is a pejorative name, while ‘Nicolaus’ is a name of honor like ‘Alexander,’ meaning ‘king of men’”<sup>33</sup>. Note also Witherington's alternative translation of “the Nicolaitans” as “‘Victory people’ (combining *nike* and *laos*).”<sup>34</sup>

But Aune also supports the idea that the Nicolaitans' teachings were the same as Balaam's. This, he argues is indicated by the adverbs οὕτως at the beginning of 2:15 and ὁμοίως at the end of the verse:

The οὕτως, “so, thus, in this way,” coordinates the phrase that it introduces with the statement that immediately precedes in v 15, by way of interpretation or explanation. Thus, “the teaching of Balaam” is the same as “the teaching of the Nicolaitans” ... The καὶ σύ, “you too,” refers to the presence of this influence in Ephesus previously mentioned in 2:6; the concluding ὁμοίως, “as well, likewise, similarly,” also compares the situation in Pergamon with that in Ephesus.<sup>35</sup>

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- 31 Beasley-Murray, *Revelation*, 85-87; Behm, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 21; Boring, *Revelation*, 92-94; Caird, *The Revelation of Saint John*, 31.38-39; Duff, *Who rides the beast?*, 51; Giblin, *The Book of Revelation*, 57; Giesen, *Johannes-Apokalypse*, 44-45; Harrington, *Revelation*, 62; Hendriksen, *More than conquerors*, 62-63; Holtz, “Die ‘Werke’ in der Johannesapokalypse”, 432; Hughes, *The Book of Revelation*, 37; Kiddle, *The Revelation of St. John*, 33-34; Koester, *Revelation and the end of all things*, 58; Kraft, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 74; Ladd, *A commentary on the Revelation of John*, 48; Lilje, *Das letzte Buch der Bibel*, 83, n. 2; Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 81; Poythress, *The returning king*, 85.87; Prigent, *Commentary on the Apocalypse*, 175-176; Roloff, *Revelation*, 51-52; Schüssler Fiorenza, *Revelation*, 55-56; Strelan, *Where earth meets heaven*, 58-59.68; Wikenhauser, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 41.43. Contra Mackay, “Another look at the Nicolaitans”, 111-112.
- 32 Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 251, similarly Bauckham, *The theology of the Book of Revelation*, 124; Johnson, *Revelation*, 45; Kiddle, *The Revelation of St. John*, 34; Michaels, *Revelation*, 76.
- 33 Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 149.
- 34 Witherington, *Revelation*, 96.
- 35 Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 188. Similarly Charles, *A critical and exegetical commentary*, 1:64; Trebilco, *The early Christians in Ephesus*, 310-311.

A slightly different explanation understands both καὶ and ὁμοίως to refer to V. 14 in the same way as οὕτως thus underlining the parallel of the two teachings<sup>36</sup>. However for several reasons neither of these explanations is convincing.

Aune's explanation requires οὕτως to be translated as “thus” or “consequently”. However this is not within the word's field of meaning. οὕτως establishes a comparison, not a consequence, interpretation or explanation<sup>37</sup>. In all cases where it is used in an explanatory way, the explanation is always one of similarity (e.g. Rev 3:16; 11:5). Wallace is quite clear that οὕτως is a comparative adverb, the use of which “suggests an analogy or comparison between the connected ideas or tells how something is done.”<sup>38</sup> He does not mention it with any other adverbial conjunction<sup>39</sup>. In fact Wallace lists “epexegetical conjunctions”<sup>40</sup> (which is how Aune seems to understand οὕτως) as “substantival conjunctions”<sup>41</sup> which do not use adverbs but conjunctions (here referring to the word-group, not the syntactical use).

While in content οὕτως certainly refers to V 14, syntactically in V 15 it belongs to the verb of the clause: ἔχεις ... οὐ. If we also note that this verb (ἔχεις) which οὕτως further explains is used in a parallel way in V 14, it becomes obvious that the point of comparison is not the content of the teaching (of Balaam/the Nicolaitans), but the fact that the church not only has members adhering to the teaching of Balaam, but also has some members adhering to the Nicolaitan teaching.

The καί underlines this very statement: Not only Balaam, but *also* the Nicolaitans had followers in Pergamum. It is rather unlikely that καί refers to the message to the church in Ephesus two messages earlier<sup>42</sup>. Such an explanation is not even necessary because the word makes sense within the message to Pergamum. “The second occurrence of *echeis* (v. 15; cf. v. 14) addressed to the same messenger necessitates that ‘also’ points to a second deficiency in that same church.”<sup>43</sup>

To claim that ὁμοίως refers back to the message to Ephesus ignores the adverb's syntactical use. “As ingenious as it is, this suggestion cannot justify an adverbial comparison with

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36 Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 251; Giesen, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 101-102; Hemer, *The letters to the seven churches*, 88; Hughes, *The Book of Revelation*, 45; Johnson, *Revelation*, 47.

37 BDAG (741-742) lists as a first meaning for οὕτως “referring to what precedes, *in this manner, thus, so*”. However as far as I can see the “thus” in this case does not mean “consequently” or “therefore” (which is how Aune uses it) but rather something like “likewise” or “similarly”.

38 Wallace, *Greek grammar beyond the basics*, 675.

39 Wallace, *Greek grammar beyond the basics*, 674-677.761-762.

40 Wallace, *Greek grammar beyond the basics*, 678.762.

41 Wallace, *Greek grammar beyond the basics*, 677.762.

42 So also Strelan, *Where earth meets heaven*, 68.

43 Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 194.

something as remote as the message to Ephesus.”<sup>44</sup> ὁμοίως quite clearly further explains the verb κρατοῦντας, which has a parallel in the same word used in the same way in the previous verse. ὁμοίως thus underlines that the adherence to the Nicolaitan teaching resembles the other people's adherence to the teaching of Balaam.

It becomes clear then that Thomas' translation of V 15 is correct: “You have also [in addition to those who hold the teaching of Balaam] those who hold in like manner [to the way the Balaamites hold their teaching] the teaching of the Nicolaitans.”<sup>45</sup> The Good News Bible's translation is rather similar: “In the same way you have people among you who follow the teaching of the Nicolaitans.”<sup>46</sup> The German “Hoffnung für Alle” is even clearer: “Außerdem gibt es unter euch Leute, die den Nikolaiten und ihrer Irrlehre folgen.”<sup>47</sup> Therefore the very words that are said to prove that the teaching of the Nicolaitans is the same as the teaching of Balaam, identify them as two different and most likely unrelated teachings which occurred in the one church. Morris observes that “the language shows that they were not identical.”<sup>48</sup> He nevertheless thinks “that the Balaamite error was akin to that of the Nicolaitans.”<sup>49</sup> But we simply are not told what the Nicolaitans taught, whether it was similar to the teaching of Balaam or not<sup>50</sup>. Osborne suggests that the parallel between V 14 and V 15 is meant to tell the church in Pergamum: “In the same way that Balaam subverted the Israelites, these false teachers are trying to subvert you.”<sup>51</sup> This may well be true, but it does not mean that the teaching of Balaam was necessarily identical to that of the Nicolaitans.

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44 Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 193.

45 Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 194, brackets in original.

46 *Good News Bible*, Rev 2:15.

47 *Bibelcard - Hoffnung für alle*, Rev 2:15.

48 Morris, *The Book of Revelation*, 67.

49 Morris, *The Book of Revelation*, 67.

50 Contra Thomas (*Revelation 1-7*, 193) who holds that “there were two different but similar groups”. I remain somewhat puzzled at why (and how) Thomas thinks these two groups were similar since his reasons never clearly emerge in his comments.

51 Osborne, *Revelation*, 145; similarly Beasley-Murray, *Revelation*, 85; Lohse, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 27-28.

Accordingly, in my view there is not a lot that can be concluded with any certainty about the Nicolaitans from the message to Pergamum. We know that they had a following in Pergamum and had been rejected by the church in Ephesus. This further suggests that they most likely taught in other places throughout the province as well, however they do not appear to be a serious threat to any of the other churches of Revelation (but they may well have been influential in some of the Asian churches not mentioned in Revelation). The fact that their teaching does not need to be elaborated on any further, also suggests that the churches were familiar with it. As far as Revelation is concerned we are left with the following three vague proposals:

Mackay observed that in contrast to the OT names Balaam and Jezebel “Nicolas” was a Greek name which to him suggested that “a comparable precedent had not occurred, or more probably could not occur, under the old economy (Old Testament).”<sup>52</sup> Also he observed that the Nicolaitan deeds are mentioned before their teaching and argued that “in any heresy bad doctrine and evil deeds will both be present. Bad doctrine will issue in evil deeds; evil deeds will require the support of bad doctrine. With the Nicolaitans it would appear that bad practices were adopted, resulting in perversion of the truth.”<sup>53</sup> From “the traditional report that Nicolas was one of the seven deacons” Mackay concludes “that the heresy in question appears to have arisen within the church itself, and not to be one dependent on outside influences.”<sup>54</sup> The combination of these three observations and corresponding conclusions leads Mackay to think that the Nicolaitans stood for what he calls “ritualism” and what he explains as “the church setting up a system of shadow practices which smother the underlying truth.”<sup>55</sup> However, why and how this could be concluded from the points he makes, remains somewhat mysterious, not to mention that at least the last two of those points are rather dubious in themselves.

Lilje's proposal is entirely different from Mackay's as he suggests the following:

Die Nikolaiten stellen offensichtlich eine Menschengruppe dar, die den besonderen Versuchungen des religiösen Lebens in Ephesus nicht kraftvoll genug widerstand. Die geistige Luft von Ephesus – Bildungsreligion, Toleranz, Liberalität, Weltförmigkeit und der immer mit diesen Erscheinungen verbundene Menschenkult – war eine einzige Versuchung, es mit der Wahrheit von Jesus Christus als dem alleinigen Heil nicht allzu ernst zu nehmen. So dunkel das Bild der Nikolaiten im einzelnen auch bleibt, so

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52 Mackay, “Another look at the Nicolaitans”, 113.

53 Mackay, “Another look at the Nicolaitans”, 113.

54 Mackay, “Another look at the Nicolaitans”, 114.

55 Mackay, “Another look at the Nicolaitans”, 115.



veranschaulichen sie doch die Tatsache, dass Gott zwischen Fleisch und Geist, gerade auch auf dem Gebiete des Glaubens unerbittlich geschieden hat.<sup>56</sup>

However there are a few weaknesses to this proposal. “Die geistige Luft von Ephesus” is not derived from what Revelation tells us about this city but is probably a construct from other unspecified sources of sometime in antiquity. Lilje may well be right, but the message to the church in Ephesus does not seem greatly interested in the phenomena he lists. Furthermore it is in Ephesus that the Nicolaitans were rejected and in Pergamum that they gained a following. While “die geistige Luft” of Pergamum may have been similar to what Lilje says about Ephesus, he does not even mention Pergamum let alone the nature of the local “geistige Luft”.

This probably leads us further than negative deduction which would build on the fact that it is highly unlikely that the Nicolaitans who had been rejected by the church in Ephesus stood for that for which this church was rebuked. As I shall demonstrate in 2.4.2, the problem in Ephesus was primarily one of faith exchanged for self-reliant religion, of a religiosity which had replaced a living relationship with Jesus as the Lord of the church. As their teaching had been rejected in Ephesus, we can be confident that this was not caused by the heresy of the Nicolaitans.

This seems to be the sum that can be concluded about the group from the text of Revelation, and modern interpreters would therefore have to look elsewhere to find more information on the nature of the Nicolaitan heresy and its practice. Indeed some patristic sources mention a group called the Nicolaitans<sup>57</sup>. However, Trebilco appears to be right in stating “that nothing can be confidently concluded about the Nicolaitans of Revelation from this later evidence.”<sup>58</sup>

Walter<sup>59</sup> argues that the Nicolaitans were one of two Christian groups in Ephesus which he suggests was founded by Nicolaus (cf. Acts 6:5), and with which Paul had later associated. Having adopted the Pauline view on the issue of eating meat sacrificed to idols, John of Revelation in his own judaising view finds them highly objectionable. However this proposal

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<sup>56</sup> Lilje, *Das letzte Buch der Bibel*, 83.

<sup>57</sup> Trebilco (*The early Christians in Ephesus*, 310) gives the following references: Irenaeus (Haer 1.26.3; 3.11.1); Clement of Alexandria (Str. 2.20; 3.4); Hippolytus (7.36.3); The Apostolic Constitutions 6:8; Tertullian (Adv. Marc. 1.29; De praescr. haeret. 33; De Pudic. 19); Eusebius (HE 3.29).

Aune (*Revelation 1-5*, 149, in order of appearance in Aune) refers to the following sources: Irenaeus (*Adv. haer.* 1.26.3; 3.11.1), Hippolytus (*Ref.* 7.36.3; ed. Marcovich, *Hippolytus*), Clement of Alexandria (*Strom.* 3.28.5-26.3), Eusebius (*Hist. eccl.* 3.29.2-4), Tertullian (*Praescr.* 33; *Adv. Marc.* 1.29.2); Epiphanius (*Pan.* 25.1.1-7.3), Ps.-Tertullian (*Adv. Haer.* 1.6), Theodoret (*Haer.* 3.1), Philastrius 33.1, Augustine (*Haer.* 5).

<sup>58</sup> Trebilco, *The early Christians in Ephesus*, 310; similarly Ladd, *A commentary on the Revelation of John*, 40.

<sup>59</sup> Walter, “Nikolaos, und die Nikolaiten in Ephesus und Pergamon”.

has a number of weaknesses: it assumes without any real evidence that Nicolaus was the founder of the main Ephesian church, of any one church in Ephesus for that matter. Secondly it builds on the assumption that the Nicolaitans were in fact identical with the Balaamites in Pergamum. Thirdly it is based on an understanding of εἰδολόθυτον as consuming surplus-meat from pagan cults which was then sold on the general market. However Witherington has convincingly shown this to be wrong<sup>60</sup>. The only (merely theoretical) problem to his view which he sees would be “die Meinung, dass eine Schrift, die schon in dieser Zeit, zumal im Westen, überwiegend als kanonisch angesehen wurde ..., nicht eine frühchristliche Gruppe als ketzerisch bezeichnen konnte, die nicht tatsächlich ketzerisch war.”<sup>61</sup> Walter does not share this opinion and therefore accuses John. However his reconstruction does not stand up to scrutiny, and thus he can not offer any help in identifying the Nicolitans.

This overview leaves us in a position where we have to follow either one of Mackay's or Lilje's vague proposals or simply live with the uncertainty of not knowing what doctrine the Nicolaitans stood for. Mackay objected to such a conclusion: “We cannot agree that our Lord would incorporate in his letters to the churches warnings against movements to whose characteristics no clue is given.”<sup>62</sup> More modern scholars probably would not explicitly agree with him, but it appears that they are equally not prepared to accept the limits of our understanding. However I suspect that we should leave it with Mackay's remarkably clear observation that “in any heresy bad doctrine and evil deeds will both be present. Bad doctrine will issue in evil deeds; evil deeds will require the support of bad doctrine.”<sup>63</sup> Whether the Nicolaitans were “Judaizers”, as Mackay briefly considers<sup>64</sup>, or libertine “gnostics”, they represented a lifestyle and a teaching to which the risen Lord of the church strongly objects. Both the teaching and the deeds were problematic and thus underline that life and doctrine should never be played off against each other.

#### **2.2.1.2 Balaam**

For the nature of “the teaching of Balaam” we are given some clues. However it is difficult to decide whether or not the name Balaam is merely a reference to the Old Testament figure or a nickname for a real person based on this OT figure. There is evidence for either of these options. That it is Revelation's nickname for a real person who promoted this teaching is supported mainly by the parallel of Jezebel in the message to the church in Thyatira (see 2.2.1.3

60 Witherington, “Not so idle thoughts about eidolothuton”. For further details see 2.2.1.2 below.

61 Walter, “Nikolaos und die Nikolaiten in Ephesus und Pergamon”, 202.

62 Mackay, “Another look at the Nicolaitans”, 115.

63 Mackay, “Another look at the Nicolaitans”, 113.

64 Mackay, “Another look at the Nicolaitans”, 114.

below) whose teaching even led to the same undesirable actions. In the Thyatiran message the name of a gentile figure in the Old Testament who led Israel away from their covenant relationship with YHWH is used to ascribe to a real person in that church a decidedly negative name loaded with meaning thus appropriated to this specific woman who otherwise most likely was known by a different name. It seems reasonable to assume a parallel use of the similarly negatively loaded Old Testament character Balaam to denounce an actual person<sup>65</sup>. This person could either be a leader in the church in Pergamum or else be a member of a different church who acts as a leader of the wider “Balaamite” sect. Again the parallel with Jezebel makes the former more likely. Thompson, noting that Balaam also had a positive connotation, suggests: “It is possible that at Pergamum there was a prophetic school associated with the name, Balaam”<sup>66</sup>. Roloff even argues that “the phrase ‘teaching of Balaam’ ... might go back to the opponents [of John] themselves, who understood Balaam positively as archetypal image of the prophet who explored secret divine wisdom”<sup>67</sup>. However the polemical way in which the name is used by John rather suggests a negative perception of the OT figure<sup>68</sup>.

On the other hand, the reference to Balaam in 2:14 is remarkably different from the reference to Jezebel in 2:20-23. Not only is the passage about Jezebel notably longer than the few verses about Balaam, but Jezebel also teaches her followers in the church herself on her own account whereas Balaam is said *to have taught* (note the past tense) the Israelites for, via or through the agency of Balak (see below), thus not directly teaching Israel/the church himself or at least not on his own account. In the Thyatiran message there is no direct reference to the Old Testament story except the name Jezebel as such. In the message to the church in Pergamum, Balaam is said to once have interacted with more figures from the Old Testament story (Balak and the Israelites), thus suggesting that “the teaching of Balaam” rather is the teaching of the historic Balaam which de facto surfaced again in the teaching of some of the Asian churches of the late first century AD<sup>69</sup>. I have argued that the Nicolaitans subscribed to a different teaching which may or may not have been similar (2.2.1.1). Whether Jezebel of Thyatira adheres to it and is (the) one who teaches it in Thyatira or whether her heresy is a different one will be discussed in 2.2.1.3.

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65 Kiddle, *The Revelation of St. John*, 32-33; Koester, *Revelation and the end of all things*, 59; Trebilco, *The early Christians in Ephesus*, 315-317; Witherington, *Revelation*, 102; Yarbro Collins, *Crisis and Catharsis*, 147.

66 Thompson, *Revelation*, 71.

67 Roloff, *The Revelation of John*, 51-52.

68 Giesen, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 102; Holtz, “Die ‘Werke’ in der Johannesapokalypse”, 433, n.41.

69 Hughes, *The Book of Revelation*, 44-45; Wikenhauser, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 41.

What then is the content of this Balaamite teaching, what does it stand for? As I have mentioned before Balaam is not said to have taught the Israelites directly. Beale points to the rather puzzling dative case of τῷ Βαλᾶκ<sup>70</sup>. He suggests that “the dative functions either instrumentally (‘taught by Balak’) or as a dative of advantage (‘for Balak’).”<sup>71</sup> Wallace lists three more options for the dative which I think are possible here (but which he does not assign to this verse): The “dative of association”<sup>72</sup> which would give τῷ Βαλᾶκ the meaning “in association with Balak”, the “dative of agency”<sup>73</sup> which would result in “through (the agency of) Balak” and the “dative of cause”<sup>74</sup> which would mean that Balaam taught “because of Balak”. Most translations have “Balaam, who taught Balak to ...”<sup>75</sup> which would normally require an accusative for Balak, although the dative of agency (or instrument) would probably entail this very chain of action of Balaam teaching Balak who in turn “taught” the Israelites. However, since other options do justice to the OT narrative equally well, we cannot simply disregard them. But there is also no definitive way of identifying the “correct” one and we thus will have to leave open the question of Balak's role. What we can say with some certainty is that Balaam's teaching was rather a matter of rationalized (sexual) seduction than of actual teaching (Num 31:16). Mounce rightly comments that “it is clear from the context that this refers not to a body of doctrine”<sup>76</sup>. However, and this probably is what διδασκῶν Βαλαάμ in Rev 2:14 refers to, there certainly was reasoning that the sexual relations with the Moabite women and the attached sacrifices to their gods (Num 25:1-2) were compatible with the covenant with JHWH. It is not difficult to imagine this kind of problem and the attached reasoning resurfacing in late first century Asia Minor. The parallel of Rev 2:14 (“... Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin by eating food sacrificed to idols and by committing sexual immorality.”) to Num 25:1-2 (“While Israel was staying in Shittim, the men began to indulge in sexual immorality with Moabite women, who invited them to the sacrifices to their gods. The people ate and bowed down before these gods.”) is so striking that it is very unlikely that πορνεῦσαι is to be understood only in a figurative sense as worshipping idols<sup>77</sup>, although this meaning may be implied as well.

70 Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 250. Kraft (*Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 65) suggests that “der Dativ ist am leichtesten als Hebraismus לַמֶּלֶךְ zu erklären.”

71 Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 250. See Wallace, *Greek grammar beyond the basics*, 162-163, for details on the instrumental dative and 142-144 on the dative of advantage.

72 Wallace, *Greek grammar beyond the basics*, 159-161.

73 Wallace, *Greek grammar beyond the basics*, 163-166. Essentially this is identical to Beale's instrumental dative except for emphasizing that the means by which something is done is a person not an object.

74 Wallace, *Greek grammar beyond the basics*, 167-168.

75 Rev 2:14 AV/NIV/RSV. Similarly *Die Multimedia Bibel - Lutherbibel 1984*: “du hast Leute dort, die sich an die Lehre Bileams halten, der den Balak lehrte, die Israeliten zu verführen ...”.

76 Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 80. Contra Ellul, *Apokalypse*, 126.

77 Yarbrow Collins (*The Apocalypse*, 20) writes about πορνεῦσαι: “Literally it means sexual immorality, but it

Caird makes the point that in Num 25:1-2 “the real offence ... was that they were foreign women, who enticed them to eat meat which had been offered in sacrifice to pagan gods.”<sup>78</sup> However sexual laxity was a real part of the Israelites' sin, even if the main offence was idolatry. The prospect of sexual activity lured them into the idolatrous environment. Witherington thus suggests that πορνεία could refer to “the sexual dalliance that went on at dinner parties held in the temple precincts”<sup>79</sup> and convincingly argues that φαγεῖν εἰδωλόθυτα “refers to meat sacrificed and then eaten in the presence of an idol, which is to say within a pagan temple”<sup>80</sup> and thus does not mean the meat bought in the marketplace (which may or may not have come from the temple). Such banquets in the temple dining room, “the restaurant of antiquity”<sup>81</sup>, were of immense social importance, as (business-) friends, trade guilds and other clubs or societies met there. “These banquets and parties expressed social connections and common causes.”<sup>82</sup>

However, non-participation could hardly have resulted in total social and economic isolation, otherwise the wealth of some Jews in the cities of antiquity<sup>83</sup> would not have been possible. This suggests that the issue at stake here was one not so much of absolute necessity or political pressure as some commentators argue<sup>84</sup>, but rather of Christians giving in to the temptation of social and material advantages available through the pleasures of the pagan Roman world<sup>85</sup> and rationalizing it with a theological construction: the teaching of Balaam. Lilje states that “mit der Erwähnung des Bileam ... ist die Hinneigung zu heidnischem Leben und heidnischer Frömmigkeit gemeint, also der Synkretismus, der immer auch zu einer

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is regularly used as a metaphor for idolatry.” Similarly Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 250; Duff, *Who rides the beast?*, 55-57; Giesen, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 103.114; Harrington, *Revelation*, 61; Holtz, “Die ‘Werke’ in der Johannesapokalypse”, 432; Kraft, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 65; Prigent, *Commentary on the Apocalypse*, 175; Trebilco, *The early Christians in Ephesus*, 311-312.

78 Caird, *The Revelation of Saint John*, 39.

79 Witherington, *Revelation*, 103. Similarly Beasley-Murray, *Revelation*, 86-87; Grünzweig, “Die Gemeinde in der Versuchung”, 38; Hughes, *The Book of Revelation*, 44; Johnson, *Revelation*, 45; Ladd, *A commentary on the Revelation of John*, 48; Morris, *Revelation*, 67; Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 81; Osborne, *Revelation*, 145; Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 191-192.

80 Witherington, *Revelation*, 103. More detailed Witherington, “Not so idle thoughts about eidolothuton”. Similarly Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 248; Giblin, *The Book of Revelation*, 57; Giesen, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 102; Grünzweig, “Die Gemeinde in der Versuchung”, 38; Hughes, *The Book of Revelation*, 44; Johnson, *Revelation*, 45; Morris, *Revelation*, 67; Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 81; Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 192; Trebilco, *The early Christians in Ephesus*, 312-314.

Contra Giesen, *Johannes-Apokalypse*, 44; Ellul, *Apokalypse*, 126; Rowland, *Revelation*, 68; Strelan, *Where earth meets heaven*, 68; Yarbrow Collins, *The Apocalypse*, 20.

81 Witherington, “Not so idle thoughts about eidolothuton”, 245.

82 Thompson, *The Book of Revelation*, 122. Similarly Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 249; Schüssler Fiorenza, *Revelation*, 56; Trebilco, *The early Christians in Ephesus*, 319-320, Yarbrow Collins, *The Apocalypse*, 20.

83 Thompson, *The Book of Revelation*, 144-145, Trebilco, *The early Christians in Ephesus*, 51.

84 Harrington, *Revelation*, 61; Hendriksen, *More than conquerors*, 67; Koester, *Revelation and the end of all things*, 60.

85 Poythress, *The returning King*, 87; Reddish, *Revelation*, 66.

Angleichung an die heidnischen Lebensformen führt.”<sup>86</sup> I doubt however that Yarbrow Collins has the emphasis right when she states that “the call to repentance addressed to the Pergamenes (vs. 16) arises out of a theological critique of the contemporary culture.”<sup>87</sup> The point here is not how horrible society is, although an alternative way of life, such as the practiced Christian faith, will always challenge a secular society. The message to Pergamum makes it as clear as Num 25: The people of God are expected not to give in to the temptations of secular society which they can expect to be confronted with.

### 2.2.1.3 Jezebel

The one thing that seems quite clear about Jezebel of Thyatira is that this was not her real name but rather a derogatory “nick-name” employed by Revelation for its implications. It means to compare the Thyatiran prophetess to the wife of king Ahab of Israel. She is said to have had 450 priests of Baal and 400 priests of Asherah (1 Kings 18:19). Her corrupting influence is thus summed up by Jehu in 2 Kings 9:22 as “harlotries and sorceries”. The NIV translates “idolatry and witchcraft”<sup>88</sup>, interpreting fornication as a metaphor for idolatry and thus underlining that the prime evil both Jezebel and Ahab were accused of was idolatry<sup>89</sup>, as can be seen from 1 Kings 21:25-26: “There was never a man like Ahab, who sold himself to do evil in the eyes of the Lord, urged on by Jezebel his wife. He behaved in the vilest manner by going after idols”. However the secondary evil was just as clear: as can be seen from the number of priests (or cultic prostitutes?) of the fertility-goddess Asherah which nearly matched that of the Baal-priests. “Häufig waren die Gottesdienste dieser Göttin mit geschlechtlichen Ausschweifungen verknüpft.”<sup>90</sup> Temple prostitution would therefore have been commonplace under Jezebel's influence. It is very likely that this played a major part in luring the Israelites into idol worship, in analogy to what had taken place under the influence of Balaam centuries before.

In Revelation, Jezebel of Thyatira is accused of misleading Christ's servants into fornicating (πορνείᾱ) and participating in idol worship (see 2.2.1.2 above on the meaning of φαγεῖν εἰδωλόθυτα). Thus her name suggests that Jezebel of Thyatira promoted as compatible with

86 Lilje, *Das letzte Buch der Bibel*, 93-94. Similarly Behm, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 21; Giblin, *The Book of Revelation*, 57.

87 Yarbrow Collins, *The Apocalypse*, 20.

88 Probably following Tg. Ps.-J. (“idols and sorceries”, cf. Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 203).

89 Caird, *The Revelation of Saint John*, 44; Giesen, *Johannes-Apokalypse*, 46; Ladd, *A commentary on the Revelation of John*, 51; Lilje, *Das letzte Buch der Bibel*, 99; Prigent, *Commentary on the Apocalypse*, 184; Reddish, *Revelation*, 64; Roloff, *The Revelation of John*, 54; Thompson, *Revelation*, 75;

90 “Aschera” in *Die Bibel nach der Übersetzung Martin Luthers*, Anhang 7. Similarly Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 250 (about Baal worship), Cahill, *The gifts of the Jews*, 172; Wikenhauser, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 43.

the Christian faith the participation at meals in honour of idols, probably even including promiscuous practices which certainly had not disappeared from Greco-Roman cults by the late first century. There is a remote possibility that she even encouraged her followers to have sexual relations with herself, as Rev 2:22 might suggest when it speaks of “those who commit adultery with her”. There is evidence of a similar teaching later in church history: Eva von Buttlar (1670-1721) founded and led the “Buttlarsche Rotte” which at times had 70 members:

Die Reinigung der Anhänger von der Erbsünde – der “bösen Lust” – war nur durch fortgesetzten Beischlaf mit der “Mutter Eva”, deren Schoß als der “Teich Bethesda” galt ... zu erlangen. Dies sei das einzig vollkommene Sakrament, während die weltliche Ehe nichts als “privilegierte Hurerey” sei.<sup>91</sup>

It is, however, possible to translate μετ’ αὐτῆς as “along with her”, thus implying that they followed her example to commit adultery rather than committing adultery with her. Thus, while actual sexual relations between Jezebel and her followers cannot be proven, they remain a distinct possibility.

It has become evident that the teaching of Jezebel led to very similar practices to that of the Balaamites of Pergamum. While this does not necessarily require her teaching to be identical, it is most likely very similar. She may therefore have been the local leader of the Balaamite sect. That she is the leader of this sect at large as has been suggested<sup>92</sup>, is rather unlikely. Certainly in that case she would have been mentioned in the message to Pergamum, probably instead of “Balaam”. Rather she seems to be the local prophet-leader of this otherwise unnamed section of the church. One of its characteristics seems to have been an emphasis on knowledge of “deeper truths”, to which John refers as “Satan’s so-called deep secrets” (2:24). These probably served to rationalize participation in pagan temple festivities. There also is a distinct possibility of her being a leading figure, not only in the Thyatiran church, but in the city's pagan cult as well (cf. 6.1.4.15).

### **2.2.2 Real persecution or perceived crisis?**

One of the questions about the situation into which Revelation was originally meant to speak is the question of whether the churches faced any actual persecution. What was the hardship John mentions himself and the churches enduring in Rev 1:9? Did they even endure anything at all? While I am convinced that at least some Christians in Asia Minor at the time of Revelation's writing were suffering persecution (see 3.3.3.5), a number of current scholars

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91 Breuer, “Buttlar”, 498.

92 e.g. Duff, *Who rides the beast?*, 40.passim.

argue that this was not the case. Slightly generalizing one could make out two main forms of this argument:

Duff<sup>93</sup>, upon examining Revelation and particularly the seven messages comes to the conclusion that the book is in its entirety about the conflict between John and his opponents within the church (Jezebel and the Nicolaitans)<sup>94</sup> and that there is really no trace of oppression from outside the church to be found in the book. Not surprisingly this can only be the case after the elimination of all references to persecution. This shows in Duff's efforts to rule out persecution in the message to Ephesus<sup>95</sup>, the complete lack of any remark about Thyatira's patient endurance<sup>96</sup>, his attempt to reduce the threat to Smyrna<sup>97</sup> and Philadelphia<sup>98</sup> by restricting it to a distant future and his efforts to reinterpret all allusions to current persecution in Smyrna<sup>99</sup>. That he does not do the same for Sardis and Laodicea<sup>100</sup> is merely due to the fact that they are not really threatened by persecution. Interestingly he does acknowledge that there are no internal tensions in both Smyrna<sup>101</sup> and Philadelphia<sup>102</sup>, but for these churches internal tensions would simply be too hard to construct from the material in 2:8-11 and 3:7-13. Duff also acknowledges that John writes of Antipas' death as the result of his faithful witness: "What seems obvious is that the seer *wants* the reader to believe that Antipas was martyred, and he also *wants* the reader to see Antipas's death as symbolic of the relations between those in the church and those outside."<sup>103</sup> However Duff apparently does not want this to be the case and therefore accuses John of constructing martyrdom and opposition where there had never been any: "Or perhaps he died under other circumstances – in a fight perhaps – and John blamed his death on his pagan adversary."<sup>104</sup> I cannot find such selective and forced interpretation of the text acceptable.

The other form of the argument is brought forward by Leonard Thompson<sup>105</sup> and supported by other scholars such as Heinz Giesen<sup>106</sup> and Adela Yarbro Collins<sup>107</sup>. They do not try to eliminate Revelation's references to persecution but rather reevaluate the historical

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93 Duff, *Who rides the beast?*. See also 4.2.3.

94 Similarly Royalty, *The streets of heaven*, 27-38.

95 Duff, *Who rides the Beast?*, 36.

96 Duff, *Who rides the Beast?*, 39-40.

97 Duff, *Who rides the beast?*, 43.

98 Duff, *Who rides the beast?*, 45.

99 Duff, *Who rides the beast?*, 43-45.

100 Duff, *Who rides the beast?*, 41-43.

101 Duff, *Who rides the beast?*, 43.

102 Duff, *Who rides the beast?*, 45.

103 Duff *Who rides the Beast?*, 38; italics in the original

104 Duff, *Who rides the beast?*, 38.

105 e.g. Thompson, "A sociological analysis of tribulation" and Thompson, *The Book of Revelation*.

106 Giesen, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 25-30.

107 Yarbro Collins, *Crisis and catharsis*.



framework, the setting from which and into which the book speaks. The key aspect of this reevaluation is the rehabilitation of Domitian who is usually assumed as the emperor at the time of Revelation's writing<sup>108</sup>. Thompson closes his "Reassessment of Domitian's Reign"<sup>109</sup> with the following words:

In sum, the standard portrait of Domitian as a megalomaniacal tyrant ... does not accurately describe either Domitian or his reign. That description from post-Domitian sources such as Pliny the Younger, Tacitus, Suetonius, and Dio Cassius reflects certain tendencies and motivations stemming from the Roman writers themselves and their social, historical situation.<sup>110</sup>

Witherington however shows that not only is this claim somewhat arbitrary but, what's more, the sources Thompson then chooses to listen to "do not really support his [Thompson's] case."<sup>111</sup> They are contemporaries with Domitian and it is quite obvious "that some of this positive verbiage is gratuitous, aimed at keeping the authors in the Emperor's good graces."<sup>112</sup> Furthermore, it is doubtful whether Yarbro Collins is right when she claims that "there seems, therefore, to be no reliable evidence supporting the theory that Domitian persecuted Christians as Christians"<sup>113</sup>. Witherington refers to Melito of Sardis who reported "that Domitian, like Nero, was persuaded to slander Christian teaching and to instigate the practice of falsely accusing Christians"<sup>114</sup>, the consequence of which would have been persecution. Witherington concludes: "Thus, even if Domitian did not initiate an empire-wide persecution (and the evidence does not suggest that he did), it is plausible that he created a climate where local persecution not only could, but from time to time did, happen."<sup>115</sup> Merely because we do not have records of empire-wide, emperor-ordered persecution we cannot rule out the emperor approving of and thereby sanctioning local acts of violence against Christians, which apparently occurred, as even Yarbro Collins implies when she talks about "the involvement of Roman officials" and "denunciation of Christians to Roman authorities."<sup>116</sup> Giesen puts it plainly: "Der eigentliche Anklagepunkt ist somit das Christsein als solches. Das bestätigt auch

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108 For a detailed discussion on the date of the Apocalypse, including a discussion of the occurrence of persecution under Domitian, see Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 4-27.

109 Thompson, "A sociological analysis of tribulation", 153-155.

110 Thompson, "A sociological analysis of tribulation", 155.

111 Witherington, *Revelation*, 5.

112 Witherington, *Revelation*, 5.

113 Yarbro Collins, *Crisis and catharsis*, 70 (1984). Note however her earlier (1979) comment on Rev 1:9 (Yarbro Collins, *The Apocalypse*, 11): "A few decades later, execution of any confessing Christian was the rule in that region. The fate of Antipas (2:13) shows that such executions were already carried out in John's time. That John was banished rather than executed may be a sign of his social status, perhaps Roman citizenship."

114 Witherington, *Revelation*, 6.

115 Witherington, *Revelation*, 6. Similarly Koester, *Revelation and the end of all things*, 63; Slater, "On the Social Setting of the Revelation to John", 254-255.

116 Yarbro Collins, *Crisis and catharsis*, 70.

der Statthalter Plinius der Jüngere in seinem Brief an Kaiser Trajan.”<sup>117</sup> In 112, a mere one or two decades after Revelation's most likely date, Pliny the Younger is quite clear about the reason why he ordered Christians to be executed: “their ‘inflexible obstinacy’ should be punished.”<sup>118</sup> They insisted on Christ as the only Lord and would thus bow neither to any other gods nor to the image of the emperor. According to Giesen, Pliny's practice was to either hear Christ cursed or else execute the offender and “geht wahrscheinlich bis in die Zeit des Nero zurück und dürfte deshalb auch für die Zeit der Offb gültig sein”<sup>119</sup>. I am left to wonder how Giesen can then begin the next paragraph by saying that “zur Zeit Domitians werden Christen also nur aufgrund von Denunziation vor Gericht gestellt. Es gibt keine systematische Verfolgung der Christen”<sup>120</sup>. The persecution may not have been systematic, but it nevertheless was real. If the very fact of being a Christian was the offence, it can hardly have been very comforting to know that it took somebody to tell the authorities about a Christian before these authorities persecuted him.

Furthermore, de Villiers' comments are particularly insightful:

The argument is circular: it is assumed that Revelation refers to a Domitianic situation, this situation is reconstructed historically (to reflect no official persecution) and Revelation is then read against the backdrop of this reconstructed history. The text remains a captive of historical reconstruction, as will become clear when one studies the way in which Revelation is reread in terms of its portrayal of the persecution of the faithful.<sup>121</sup>

And indeed with any substantial opposition which the churches were facing explained away (Thompson: “Those verses [1:9] cannot be used as evidence for widespread political persecution of Christians in John's time. *Thlipsis* should not be translated as ‘persecution’, since it has a much broader meaning”<sup>122</sup>) the consequence is to ascribe to John a “perceived crisis”<sup>123</sup>. Thompson declares that “as a visionary, John views as hostile the social world in which the brotherhood lives”, that “he also wishes to sharpen the boundaries between the brotherhood and the social world around it”<sup>124</sup> while “the brotherhood” never really faced serious opposition (except for “the occasional persecution of Christians”<sup>125</sup>). John is effectively declared a fantasizing religious extremist, “a confused author ... belonging to a

117 Giesen, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 28-29.

118 Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 8, citing Pliny the Younger, *Epistles*, 96.

119 Giesen, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 29.

120 Giesen, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 29.

121 de Villiers, “Persecution in the Book of Revelation”, 52.

122 Thompson, *Revelation*, 57.

123 See the respective chapter in Yarbrow Collins, *Crisis and catharsis*, 84-110, under the title: “The Social Situation – Perceived Crisis”.

124 Thompson, *Revelation*, 57.

125 Thompson, *Revelation*, 57.

sectarian minority that set itself on a path of irrevocable withdrawal and isolation from other Christians.”<sup>126</sup> De Villiers sums up this position (which is not his own) like this: “Revelation was essentially the result of psychological stress within a small group.”<sup>127</sup> Yarbrow Collins adds: “In other words, the crucial element is not so much whether one [here: John] is actually oppressed as whether one *feels* oppressed.”<sup>128</sup> Consequently, Thompson suggests that “John may have expected – even hoped for – political persecution in the near future, but there was no widespread persecution during his lifetime, nor for several decades after”<sup>129</sup>.

I disagree with these attempts to ignore and deny the actual suffering John and some of the churches experienced. “Revelation, like the rest of the New Testament, is blunt about the reality of suffering.”<sup>130</sup> Duff, Thompson and others who do not want this to be the case, ultimately have but one option: to claim that John purposefully constructed his own (the exile on Patmos!) and the churches' suffering in order to move the churches into opposition to their environment, either for him to profit in some obscure way (Duff) or because he generally “views as hostile the social world” of the Roman empire (Thompson).

Other commentators<sup>131</sup> acknowledge the suffering Christians endured in Revelation's time. For example DeSilva notes that “[t]here are clearly attempts being made to pressure believers into hiding or denying their association with the unpopular and subversive name of Christian. John envisions such pressure growing in the future, so that in Antipas the martyr one might see the shape of things to come.”<sup>132</sup> As becomes obvious from Pliny's correspondence with Trajan and from Polycarp's fate, John certainly was right in prophesying persecution for the future.

Ramsay also acknowledges that “the imperial power” is one of the “two hostile powers” the churches were faced with, it being “engaged in a determined attempt to annihilate the church”<sup>133</sup>. Unfortunately however he virtually declares it meaningless for the seven messages. It is the struggles with the Nicolaitans which he sees as “determining the character and form of the seven letters. But for them [the Nicolaitans] there would probably be no letters to the

126 De Villiers, “Persecution in the Book of Revelation”, 59. Note however that this is not how de Villiers himself views John.

127 De Villiers, “Persecution in the Book of Revelation”, 56.

128 Yarbrow Collins, *Crisis and catharsis*, 84; italics in the original.

129 Thompson, *Revelation*, 57.

130 Poythress, *The returning King*, 75.

131 e.g. (here I only include newer publication that are aware of the discussion) Backhaus, “Die Vision vom ganz Anderen”, 18-22; Koester, *Revelation and the end of all things*, 63-66; Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 15-21; Osborne, *Revelation*, 7-9; Poythress, *The returning King*, 50-53; Roloff, *Revelation*, 10; Schüssler Fiorenza, *The Book of Revelation*, 192-194; Slater, “On the Social Setting of the Revelation to John” 232-256; Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 22-23; Witherington, *Revelation*, 5-10.

132 DeSilva, *The hope of glory*, 180.

133 Ramsay, *The letters to the seven churches*, 144.

seven churches. The rest of the Apocalypse is occupied with the triumph over the imperial religion.”<sup>134</sup> While it is certainly true that Revelation including the seven messages is not exclusively about persecution but about conflicts within the churches as well, this division fails to do justice to either part of the book, quite apart from the question whether “the rest” can be limited to “the triumph over the imperial religion”.

We can be sure that Christians at the time of Revelation had every reason not to be confident. Persecution, although probably sporadic, did occur and it posed a constant threat to the church. Denunciation, particularly by members of the Jewish community (cf. 2.2.3), appears to have put Christians in danger. Thus persecution is rightly one major theme of Revelation, albeit not the only one.

### 2.2.3 The synagogue of Satan

Apart from the Nicolaitans, Balaam and Jezebel, there is one more group mentioned in the seven messages which poses a threat to the churches, namely “those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.” They are explicitly mentioned twice (2:9; 3:9), we will see however that they are also implied in 2:10 (“the devil”) and possibly in 2:13 (“the throne of Satan”).

2:10 uses a different word (ὁ διάβολος) to name Satan (σατανᾶς: 2:9). However they refer to the same “person”, σατανᾶς (accuser, cf. 12:9-10) being the Greek version of the Hebrew equivalent of ὁ διάβολος<sup>135</sup>. “Almost certainly ὁ διάβολος in verse 10 is not different from τοῦ σατανᾶ in verse 9.”<sup>136</sup> The context of the message to Smyrna underlines this connection. The body of this message (consisting of the two verses of 2:9-10) centres around the one issue of persecution and the need to be faithful even unto death. In both verses θλιψις is used to describe the situation of the church. In V. 9 it is combined with apparent (material) but not actual (spiritual) poverty<sup>137</sup> and real slander (βλασφημία) by the “synagogue of Satan”, both qualifying the cause of the θλιψις. Whether the poverty is due to persecution<sup>138</sup> or not will have to remain unclear, but it certainly is a possibility. Also the meaning of βλασφημία is debated with claims that it only “ist die Lästerung Christi, nicht die Denunziation von

<sup>134</sup> Ramsay, *The letters to the seven churches*, 145.

<sup>135</sup> Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 162.

<sup>136</sup> Harrington, *Revelation*, 59; Lambrecht, “Jewish Slander”, 423; Osborne, *Revelation*, 133. Contra Ulland, *Die Vision als Radikalisierung der Wirklichkeit*, 75.

<sup>137</sup> Note “the sharp contrast to the church in Laodicea which professed to be rich but in fact was poor (3:17)” (Ladd, *A commentary on the Revelation of John*, 42). Similarly Roloff, *Revelation*, 48.

<sup>138</sup> Caird, *The Revelation of Saint John*, 35; Giesen, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 106; Hughes, *The Book of Revelation*, 39; Ladd, *A commentary on the Revelation of John*, 42; Morris, *Revelation*, 63-64; Osborne, *Revelation*, 130.

Christen”<sup>139</sup> as well as the opposing understanding that it exactly refers to denunciation before government authorities<sup>140</sup>. Most likely both meanings are implied<sup>141</sup>. In V. 10 θλιψις is used to describe the suffering which the imminent persecution by “the devil” will bring over the church, including imprisonment and death. It is clear that the church is both experiencing and expecting a continuous increase in the θλιψις they suffer. The ultimate source of this suffering is σατανᾶς, who in Smyrna (and elsewhere, e.g. in Philadelphia) is represented by those “who say that they are Jews and are not, but lie” (3:9)<sup>142</sup>. It is striking that in the message to Smyrna we find the highest density of persecution-vocabulary, all of it related to the “synagogue of Satan”.

The connection is not as obvious in the message to Philadelphia (3:7-13). There the “Pseudo-Jews” are said to bow down before the church, acknowledging Christ's love for the church. This implies some sort of conflict and argument about which is the true faith. What gives us a clue that this conflict was in fact persecution by the “synagogue of Satan” are the verses directly before and after this statement<sup>143</sup>. Both V. 8 and V. 10 acknowledge that the church has “kept my word” (ἐτήρησας μου τὸν λόγον). In V. 10 this word of Christ is further qualified as his word of endurance (ὑπομονή) while in V. 8 we find the addition “and have not denied my name” which suggests that they had faced a situation where they had maintained their testimony in the face of threatening opposition<sup>144</sup>. In contrast to the church in Smyrna, the Philadelphian church is promised to be spared in the future trial, because of their past faithfulness, suggesting that this faithfulness had already been severely tested, supposedly by the “pseudo-Jews”. I make this assumption because the clear reference to them is framed by this persecution-theme and because it implies satisfaction for what the church suffered from them.

Another striking observation is quite easily made: The two messages in which the synagogue of Satan is explicitly mentioned are the ones to the only two churches for which Christ only has praise and which never are rebuked<sup>145</sup>. I suggest there is some connection between the

139 Lichtenberger, “Überlegungen”, 614. Similarly Hughes, *The Book of Revelation*, 40.

140 Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 162.176; Behm, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 19 (“Verleumdungen”); Horn, “Zwischen der Synagoge des Satans und dem neuen Jerusalem”, 149-150; Johnson, *Revelation*, 42; Kiddle, *The Revelation of St John*, 50; Ladd, *A commentary on the Revelation of John*, 43; Lambrecht, “Jewish slander”, 428; Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 75.

141 Harrington, *Revelation*, 58; Koester, “The message to Laodicea”, 64.

142 Contra Ulland, *Die Vision als Radikalisierung der Wirklichkeit*, 75.

143 Giesen, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 133.

144 Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 244-245; Harrington, *Revelation*, 70; Hendriksen, *More than conquerors*, 75; Ladd, *A commentary on the Revelation of John*, 60; Lilje, *Das letzte Buch der Bibel*, 108; Osborne, *Revelation*, 189-190; Prigent, *Commentary on the Apocalypse of St. John*, 204; Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 279-280.

145 Lohse, “Synagoge des Satans und Gemeinde Gottes”, 5-6; Osborne, *Revelation*, 186.

two. Probably the faithfulness of the Christians provoked the opposition of the “pseudo-Jews” which in turn necessitated heightened readiness to suffer on the part of the churches.

This needs to be remembered as we examine the situation in Pergamum. There, Revelation tells us, is the throne of Satan (2:13), there is his home. Many commentators see this as a reference to the imperial cult<sup>146</sup>. However as Aune argues it likely refers to “the *Roman opposition* to early Christianity, which the author or Rev 2-3 perceived as particularly malevolent in that city.”<sup>147</sup> Apparently local Christians faced persecution unto death, as is exemplified in the martyrdom of Antipas. What links this to the messages to Smyrna and Philadelphia is the combination of persecution with a mention of Satan<sup>148</sup>. This could suggest a connection between the “throne of Satan” (2:13) as a place of his presence and the “synagogue of Satan” (2:9; 3:9) as the community of his followers, both of them bringing suffering to the respective churches (unlike, it appears, “the deep things of Satan” mentioned in 2:24). While this does not necessarily mean that they belong to the same social group, we cannot ignore the link and should consider the possibility of them being related.

It is sometimes argued that the “pseudo-Jews” are in fact not-so-strict Christians<sup>149</sup>. However this ignores the textual evidence which strongly suggests the opposite. Other not-so-strict opponents are labeled with names which already have a negative connotation in Jewish thought, as is obvious in the case of Balaam (2.2.1.2) and Jezebel (2.2.1.3). None of that is the case here. Rather it is acknowledged that these opponents call themselves Jews and that they gather in the synagogue. This is not symbolic, these are Jews in the usual sense of the words<sup>150</sup>. Farrer comments on 2:9: “the Jews of [verse] 9 are Judaeans in every ordinary sense; only they are no true spiritual members of Messiah's tribe”<sup>151</sup>.

Michaels suggests that “the *synagogue of Satan* consisted of Gentile Christians who had ‘Judaized,’ that is, who adopted Jewish ways or even converted to Judaism, perhaps in order to avoid persecution by the Romans.”<sup>152</sup> But this can not be the case, particularly since such “Judaizers” would hardly have denounced the other Christians to the Roman authorities.

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146 Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 246; Bousset, *Die Offenbarung Johannis*, 211-212; Caird, *The Revelation of Saint John*, 37; Charles, *A critical and exegetical commentary*, 1:61-62; Hemer, *The letters to the seven churches*, 82-87; Kraft, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 63-64.

147 Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 184. Aune also provides a good overview of the various interpretations suggested for “the throne of Satan” (*Revelation 1-5*, 182-184).

148 Lilje, *Das letzte Buch der Bibel*, 88.

149 Frankfurter, “Jews or not?”, 404.422-425; Kraft, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 61.

150 Giesen, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 133; Horn, “Zwischen der Synagoge des Satans und dem neuen Jerusalem”, 153; Lohse, “Synagoge des Satans und Gemeinde Gottes”, 6; Trebilco, *Jewish communities in Asia Minor*, 27.

151 Farrer, *The Revelation of St. John the Divine*, 72.

152 Michaels, *Revelation*, 74.

Rather, when Christ says that they really are no Jews at all the implication is that the true people of God, the true Israel, would not deny the lordship of Christ, let alone persecute his followers<sup>153</sup>. The message here is that neither circumcision or Torah-observance constitute true Judaism but rather faith in God and his Messiah (cf. Jn 8:44<sup>154</sup>). “This is analogous to Paul's claim that to be a Jew means to be circumcised in heart, which can even apply to those who are not physically circumcised, i.e., non-Jews (Rom 2:28-3:1; cf. his figurative use of ‘Israel’ in Gal 6:16; cf. 1 Cor 10:18).”<sup>155</sup> Such an understanding is supported by the fact that in any other case where Revelation mentions the tribes of Israel they are pictured as followers and worshippers of the lamb (7:4-8; 14:1.3 [on the 144.000]; 21:12), underlining John's otherwise positive view of the people of the Sinai covenant. The term “synagogue of Satan” would then be used to designate the Jewish communities of Smyrna and Philadelphia in their opposition to their true Messiah and his church, this opposition thus being declared of demonic origin. They would have accused the Christians before the local authorities of not being Jewish but distinctly Christian and thus dangerously “atheist” (see 2.2.2)<sup>156</sup>. Even before Revelation “the persecution of Christians by Jews of physical descent is well known in the NT (cf. Acts 13:50; 14:2, 5, 19; 17:5; 26:2; 1 Thess. 2:14, 15)”<sup>157</sup>. The situation did not change much in the following years<sup>158</sup> as evident from both Ignatius' letter to the church in Philadelphia<sup>159</sup> and Polycarp's martyrdom in Smyrna<sup>160</sup>.

A second reason for John's designation of the Jewish community as satanic is sometimes suggested: Jewish syncretism and assimilation to pagan culture and religion. Prigent argues that John opposes the Jews because “they willingly come to terms with the idolatry which dominates all of society.”<sup>161</sup> However, while this may have influenced John's views about the

153 Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 286-287; Johnson, *Revelation*, 57; Koester, *Revelation and the end of all things*, 63-64.

154 Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 164; Hughes, *The Book of Revelation*, 41; Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 75.102; Osborne, *Revelation*, 131; Strelan, *Where earth meets heaven*, 62.

155 Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 162. Similarly Hughes, *The Book of Revelation*, 40; Ladd, *A commentary on the Revelation of John*, 43-44; Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 75.101; Smalley, *The Revelation to John*, 90.

156 Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 240-241; Horn, “Zwischen der Synagoge des Satans und dem neuen Jerusalem”, 149-150; Ladd, *A commentary on the Revelation of John*, 43; Lambrecht, “Jewish slander”, 428; Wikenhauser, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 39; Yarbrow Collins, *The Apocalypse*, 17.

157 Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 165. Similarly Beasley-Murray, *Revelation*, 81-82; Ladd, *A commentary on the Revelation of John*, 43; Lilje, *Das letzte Buch der Bibel*, 87; Witherington, *Revelation*, 98.101 (on Acts 18).

158 Horn, “Zwischen der Synagoge des Satans und dem neuen Jerusalem”, 152.

159 Ign. *Phld.* 6.1-2. See also Harrington, *Revelation*, 72; Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 101; Smalley, *The Revelation to John*, 90.

160 *Mart. Pol.* 12.2; 13.1; 17.2; 18.1.

161 Prigent, *Commentary on the Apocalypse*, 152. Similarly Bredin, “The synagogue of Satan accusation in Revelation 2:9”, 164; Horn, “Zwischen der Synagoge des Satans und dem neuen Jerusalem”, 150-152; McKelvey, “Jews in the Book of Revelation”, 175.192-193.

Jewish communities, the issue associated with the “synagogue of Satan” in the seven messages is quite different.

Could this problem of denunciation before the Roman authorities possibly also underlie 2:13's mention of the “throne of Satan”, referring to Pergamum as the place where Satan lives? Satan, unlike Jezebel, is not a “nick-name” for a historic person. Neither is it associated with a specific action or teaching, like Balaam, although its meaning (accuser) could well be indicative of the denunciations which were so instrumental in the persecution of Christians. Satan primarily stands for the supernatural enemy of God who seeks to deceive and harm the followers of Christ. Therefore reference to Satan's throne and his dwelling place is meant to identify the ultimate source of the hostility towards the church in Pergamum<sup>162</sup>. The mention of the “throne” could then refer to the city being the centre of Roman government in Asia Minor<sup>163</sup>, the centre of persecution of Christians (with *θρόνος* possibly referring to the judge's bench or tribunal)<sup>164</sup>, the centre of emperor worship<sup>165</sup> or of the cult of either Zeus<sup>166</sup> or Asklepios<sup>167</sup> or of Greco-Roman cult in general<sup>168</sup>, maybe by alluding “to the acropolis that towered over the city and on which were located temples to various gods and goddesses.”<sup>169</sup> However I suggest as just as likely that it refers to a possible leading role of the local synagogue in the Jewish-Christian hostility that is evident in the messages to Smyrna and Philadelphia. Maybe Pergamum was the centre of an anti-Christian movement in (some of) the Jewish communities of Asia Minor. I am aware that this is entirely speculative, with no historical evidence to support it, but that hardly proves the opposite.

Aune is right when commenting on the “throne of Satan” that “the author is alluding to a specific throne (either literally or figuratively), which he expects the readers to recognize”<sup>170</sup>. However, in contrast to the first readers, we know far too little about the locally relevant

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162 Koester, “The message to Laodicea”, 59; Strelan, *Where earth meets heaven*, 67.

163 Yarbrow Collins, *The Apocalypse*, 19.

164 Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 184.

165 Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 246; Caird, *The Revelation of Saint John*, 37; Giesen, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 114; Hemer, *The letters to the seven churches*, 85; Kraft, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 64; Ladd, *A commentary on the Revelation of John*, 46; Morris, *Revelation*, 66; Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 78; Osborne, *Revelation*, 141; Poythress, *The returning king*, 87; Prigent, *Commentary on the Apocalypse*, 173; Schüssler Fiorenza, *Revelation*, 54; Smalley, *The Revelation to John*, 68; Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 184-185; Ulland, *Die Vision als Radikalisierung der Wirklichkeit*, 78. Witherington, *Revelation*, 102.

166 Griblin, *The Book of Revelation*, 57.

167 Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 246.

168 Behm, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 20; Giesen, *Johannes-Apokalypse*, 43; Hughes, *The Book of Revelation*, 43; Kiddle, *The Revelation of St. John*, 30; Lilje, *Das letzte Buch der Bibel*, 93; Roloff, *Revelation*, 51.

169 Reddish, *Revelation*, 59. Note that Reddish only mentions this among other options which he does not discuss.

170 Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 182.



issues at the time to make any definitive claim about the reality behind the term. This is reflected in the variety of meanings discussed<sup>171</sup>. In that light, a Jewish background is not only perfectly possible, but also takes into account the common feature of “Satan” and persecution in the three relevant messages<sup>172</sup>.

Whether or not the reference to Satan in the message to Pergamum has anything to do with the Jewish community, it is clear that in both 2:9 and 3:9 the Jewish communities in the respective cities are the source of the churches' trouble. John is not opposed to Judaism as such, as is evident from the positive way in which the tribes of Israel are pictured later in the book<sup>173</sup>, but their fierce opposition towards the churches prompts John to see the (local?) Jews as being under satanic influence. Trebilco states that “through their opposition to the Christians they deserve the title of Satan's agents.”<sup>174</sup>

I wish to clarify (particularly since I am German) that I insist that such language about the Jewish communities may under no circumstances be used outside of its original context<sup>175</sup>. Not only would such language be extremely harmful, it would be untrue. Judaism as such is anything but satanic, and its failure to recognize Jesus as Messiah is reflecting God's grace towards us gentiles rather than anything else (Rom 11:17-32). Whatever else may be said about the Jewish-Christian relationship, as Christians we certainly have no reason to boast and should hold a deep respect and love for our ancestors in the faith in the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

#### **2.2.4 The social world of Revelation**

In summary we might say that the churches of Revelation faced a variety of issues from false teachings of various sorts to persecution at the hands of usually passively-hostile authorities which were alerted by the denunciation of the churches' openly hostile Jewish “cousins”. From within its own ranks, from its closest relatives and from the distant Roman authorities the health of the church was under threat. Especially the internal problems are more varied than what has been discussed here: e.g. the question of Ephesus' first love (cf. 2.4.2), the death and soiled clothes of the church in Sardis or the “money-worship” of the Laodicean

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171 Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 182-184.194; Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 182-185.

172 Although the possibility remains that the link is merely due to seeing Satan as the ultimate source of any persecution of Christians, regardless of the human agents (cf. Michaels, *Revelation*, 75, who argues that “Satan” in 2:13 might be “the label attached to his [Antipas'] persecutors (like ‘Satan’ or ‘the devil’ at Smyrna)”).

173 Böcher, “Israel und die Kirche in der Johannesapokalypse”, 33-49; Schüssler Fiorenza, *Revelation*, 55.

174 Trebilco, *Jewish communities in Asia Minor*, 27. Similarly Caird, *The Revelation of Saint John*, 35; Ellul, *Apokalypse*, 124; Giesen, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 107; Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 101; Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 280.

175 Witherington, *Revelation*, 100. Contra Hendriksen, *More than conquerors*, 65.

congregation. The most obvious conclusion would be that any proposal that wants to limit Revelation's rhetoric to any single issue must be rejected. John appears concerned not merely about the pagan (imperial) cult and its lures or threats, not merely about false teachers or about the Jewish-Christian relationship. Quite simply the situation(s) of the church(es) was far too varied to allow for such limitations. Their survival as part of the New Jerusalem demanded attention to the whole variety of issues that threatened their faithful allegiance and witness to Jesus as their Lord.

### 2.3 The hermeneutic relevance of Revelation 1:19<sup>176</sup>

The often suggested hermeneutic relevance of Rev 1:19 requires attention. This verse is isolated from its immediate context (1:9-20<sup>177</sup>) in many commentaries and many authors ascribe to this verse key relevance for the interpretation of the whole book, thereby advocating an approach to Revelation that is in clear opposition to the reading strategy outlined in this thesis. This makes it necessary for me to at least look at the major positions held about 1:19's interpretative significance.

The meaning of 1:19 is subject to much debate and scholars offer a number of competing interpretations:

There are a number of scholars<sup>178</sup> who suggest that 1:19 is Revelation's hermeneutical key. In their commentaries this verse is assigned special meaning and thus effectively lifted above its immediate context (1:9-20). The argument claims that in the repetition of John's being commissioned to write lies a threefold structure that also applies to the book as a whole: "what you have seen" is thought to refer to the vision of 1:9-20, "what is" is said to mean the seven messages and "what is about to happen after this" is considered to apply to everything from chapter 4 onward.

This idea is supported by one fact: the parallel of ἃ μέλλει γενέσθαι μετὰ ταῦτα in 1:19 with ἃ δεῖ γενέσθαι μετὰ ταῦτα in 4:1. This might suggest that the futurist part announced in 1:19 begins in 4:1. I find this unconvincing. If the intention of 1:19 was to give the structural outline of Revelation and if 4:1 was to introduce its third part then why do we not

<sup>176</sup> Beale discusses this issue at some length and hence in more detail in *The Book of Revelation*, 152-170.

<sup>177</sup> cf 3.2.1.2.

<sup>178</sup> Behm, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 15; Hendriksen, *More than conquerors*, 58; Kraft, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 49; Ladd, *A commentary on the Revelation of John*, 34; Lohse, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 21; Morris, *Revelation*, 56 (though he allows for some reference to the future in the seven messages); Poythress, *The returning King*, 57; Ritt, *Offenbarung des Johannes*, 10; Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 113-116. See also Beale's description and critique of this approach in Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 161-163.

find similar structural markers in the other parts? I would rather suggest that this specific parallel is most likely coincidental and that 4:1 is rather to be understood as “what will happen next” (in this vision rather than in history).

Thus the one argument for this idea is not entirely compelling. Caird even calls it “a grotesque over-simplification”<sup>179</sup>. I now turn to the five reasons why I think it is rather unlikely:

- a The three parts into which Revelation is said to be divided are so extremely unequally proportioned, with the first part comprising just a few verses and the third part nearly the whole book, that it seems unnatural to list them here as equally as is suggested. Also the hermeneutical consequences would be minimal, since it would really only say that the seven messages and Revelation's body each form a different part of the book.
- b As I shall show in 3.3.3, 1:9-20 and the seven messages form an inextricable unity. The suggested interpretation of 1:19 however would require them to be two separate entities, thus breaking up their unity.
- c Even if a different tense is used in 1:19 (“write what you have seen”), it is an obvious parallel to 1:11 (“write into a book what you see”)<sup>180</sup>. Since ὁ βλέπεις in V. 11 refers to the whole book, it would only be natural to conclude that ὁ εἶδες also refers to the whole book and not merely to 1:9-20.
- d It is not correct that the seven messages are restricted to the present and that Revelation's body exclusively deals with future events. Aune is quite clear “that some of the ... visions in chaps. 4-22 deal with the past (e.g., Rev 12), just as sections of chaps. 2-3 focus on the future.”<sup>181</sup> He is right: the scope of Revelation's body cannot be limited to the future and the seven messages certainly contain significant amounts of both, present and future<sup>182</sup>. Even Poythress acknowledges that “the section 2:1-3:22 contains future-oriented promises, and 4:1-22:5 contains much information relevant to the present situation of the churches.”<sup>183</sup>
- e As I shall demonstrate in 4.3.2, the seven messages and Revelation's body are very closely related. Some of their respective persons and events refer to the same situations. Jezebel

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179 Caird, *The Revelation of Saint John*, 26.

180 For this see Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 169.

181 Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 105.

182 In the seven messages the future features strongly in the promises to the overcomers. They are all promised things associated with the final coming of God's kingdom. Other examples of future references in the seven messages include the announcement of judgement on Jezebel of Thyatira (2:22), Jesus' threat to come like a thief (3:3) and “the hour of trial that is about to come over the whole world” (3:10).

183 Poythress, *The returning King*, 57.

of Thyatira (2:20-23) and the city of Babylon (ch. 17-18) are far too similar not be to images of the same person (or institution or event). If this is the case and if Jezebel and Babylon really speak of the same “thing”, then Jezebel is not merely an issue of the present while Babylon will not only be relevant in the future. They both belong to the same period of time, past, present or future. The same is true for a whole range of Revelation's other images as well.

A number of scholars understand ὃ ἐῖδες as referring to the whole book (see also below) rather than just to 1:9-20 thus leaving a twofold structure for Revelation: “The Greek of verse 19 is best translated as referring to two items, not three: ‘Write your visions, both those that picture the present situation (chaps. 2-3) and those that picture the eschatological future that is already dawning (chaps. 4-22).’”<sup>184</sup> However at least the last two of my objections to the three-part hermeneutic key-theory apply to this view as well.

Giesen<sup>185</sup> offers another variant. He understands “what you have seen” as referring to the vision of 1:9-18 and then translates ὃ ἐστὶν (“what is”) as “was es bedeutet”<sup>186</sup>, thus referring it to the explanation of the inaugural vision in 1:20 and thinks that “what is about to happen after this” applies to everything from chapter 2 onward which the seer has obviously not yet seen at this point in the vision. While of all theories which translate ὃ ἐῖδες as “what you have seen” and thus understand it as referring to 1:9-20 this is the most reasonable, I am not convinced that John really needed to be reminded and specifically encouraged to include this first visionary image in his account. However, even if Giesen was right, this interpretation would not change our outlook on the structure of the book since all it says is that John was to record everything.

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184 Boring, *Revelation*, 84; Similarly Hughes, *The Book of Revelation*, 29-30; Wikenhauser, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 34; see also Beale's description and critique of this approach in Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 163.

185 Giesen, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 48-50; similarly Johnson, *Revelation*, 33; see also Beale's description and critique of this approach in Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 163-164.

186 Giesen, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 49. His complete translation of the verse reads: “Schreib also (V. 19a), was du gesehen hast (V. 19b), auch was es bedeutet (V. 19c), und was du danach sehen wirst (V. 19d)!”

Some would rather argue that the three tenses of 1:19 indicate that the message of Revelation refers to the totality of history, that its “truths transcend any one historical time period.”<sup>187</sup> While this is more consistent with Revelation's character, it still ignores the parallel of ἃ εἶδες (V. 19) to ὃ βλέπεις (V. 11) that we mentioned above and which implies that the aorist of ἃ εἶδες cannot be understood as being of the constative *Aktionsart*, (“normal” aorist which would be translated as past tense) but rather must be seen as belonging to a different *Aktionsart*, which would be translated as a comprehensive present or even future tense<sup>188</sup>.

Apart from minor variations of these views there is basically one more perspective that deserves to be mentioned. This view acknowledges the parallel between ὃ βλέπεις (V. 11) and ἃ εἶδες (V. 19) with the later simply being a restatement of the former (the Aorist interpreted as ingressive in its *Aktionsart*). In this view the “what is” and the “what is about to happen” describe “the overall dual nature of the Apocalypse”<sup>189</sup>, the fact that all major parts of the book contain references to present and future (and possibly even past) events. In this view we would best translate V. 19 something like this: “Therefore write what you are about to see, both what is and what is to happen after this.”

Caird offers basically the same idea when he concludes: “It is better therefore to take the words **what you see** to mean the whole of John's vision, which in all its parts is equally concerned with the interpretation of past and present and the anticipation of the future.”<sup>190</sup>

Beale's “New View” effectively does not provide any other solution. He rightly emphasizes the Danielic background of 1:19 (and 1:1, 4:1 and 22:6) concluding “that 1:19 has as much or more to do with the *eschatological* or *chronological* nature of the book than with its literary or historical *structure*.”<sup>191</sup> Thus he sees 1:19 as underlining the eschatological focus of all of Revelation. But he still needs to complement this view with one of the others to understand

187 Beale about W. C. Van Unnik in Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, p. 164; Similarly Roloff, *Revelation*, 38; Witherington, *Revelation*, 82; see also Beale's description and critique of this approach in Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 164-167.

188 For possible *Aktionsarten* and general information about them see Wallace, *Greek grammar beyond the basics*, 554-565, Moulton, *A grammar of New Testament Greek*, 71-74 and Blass, *A Greek grammar of the New Testament*, 171-172. Here the proleptic aorist (“write what you will have seen”) could be possible but is rather unlikely. The most likely *Aktionsart* is the ingressive aorist (“write what you are about to see”), stating the beginning of the vision that needs to be recorded. I wish to thank my former Greek-teacher Dr. Detlef Häußler for his advice in this matter.

189 Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 163.

190 Caird, *The Revelation of Saint John*, 26 (bold in the original); Similarly Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 105-106; Beasley-Murray, *Revelation*, 68; Giesen, *Johannes-Apokalypse*, 38; Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 62; Osborne, *Revelation*, 97; Strelan, *Where earth meets heaven*, 45; see also Beale's description and critique of this approach in Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 163.

191 Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 152.

how 1:19 refers to the rest of the book.<sup>192</sup> Most of the possible options he lists for this are minor variations of what Caird suggested.

Thompson's interpretation is slightly different with regard to both “what you see presently” and “what you will see after this” refer to. According to him, the majority of Revelation is about present things because he thinks it “does not begin describing ‘last things’ until chapter 20, possibly earlier in chapter 18.” But he agrees that the Aorist of ἃ ἐίδες should not be translated as past tense. He suggests 1:19 be translated like this: “Write down what you see, both ...”<sup>193</sup>

I think that this view offers the most adequate interpretation of 1:19, but it leaves no exceptional significance as a hermeneutic key with the verse whatsoever. All it says (as far as hermeneutics is concerned) is that John was told to publish what he saw and that all of Revelation's message is about present and future situations and events.

I therefore think that 1:19 cannot be used as an interpretative key to Revelation any more than any other part of the inaugural vision (cf. Chapter 1:9-20). It helps to bring the message of this vision across and in this it certainly fulfills a role in saying how Revelation ought to be interpreted. But it would simply be drawing too much out of these words to ascribe to them any key relevance on their own.

## 2.4 Key words of Revelation

It is difficult to identify a text's keywords. Much of that decision depends on one's understanding of the text. The title of this section may therefore be slightly misleading. I do not claim to have identified Revelation's keywords, but rather the keywords in my argument about the book. They are central to my understanding of the book's intention and it therefore is necessary that I discuss their meaning, endeavouring to understand them in the sense their author intended them to be understood.

Much has been said about Johannine language in general and the language of Revelation in particular<sup>194</sup>. It has been discussed whether Revelation is Johannine or not<sup>195</sup>. Lilje states that

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192 Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 168. The genre view (see Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 167-168) which he considers as an option also offers nothing essentially new.

193 Thompson, *Revelation*, 60.

194 See, for example, Mussies, *The morphology of Koine Greek*.

195 See, for example, Aune's (short) discussion of the topic: Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, liv-lvi. Jörg Frey gives a detailed analysis in his appendix (“Erwägungen zum Verhältnis der Johannesapokalypse zu den übrigen Schriften im Corpus Johanneum.”) to Martin Hengel's *Die johanneische Frage*, 326-429. Note also Otto Böcher, “Das Verhältnis der Apokalypse des Johannes zum Evangelium des Johannes” (in J. Lambrecht, *L'Apocalypse johannique et l'apocalyptique dans le Nouveau Testament*, 289-301) which contains a brief discussion and long lists of similarities between the two texts.

the reasons to reject the author of the 4<sup>th</sup> Gospel as the author of Revelation “hängen vor allem mit inhaltlichen Bedenken gegen sein Buch zusammen”<sup>196</sup>. In other words, it is often assumed

that because of their great difference in theology the Apoc[alypse] and the 4G [4<sup>th</sup> Gospel] cannot have been written by one and the same author. One and the same person could not have advocated the futuristic eschatology of the Apoc and the realized eschatology of the 4G.<sup>197</sup>

But to play these two off against each other is misleading for a number of reasons. Firstly, the 4<sup>th</sup> Gospel also contains futuristic eschatology (5:24-30; 6:37-40; 14:2-3) and some of Revelation's eschatology describes reality in the present (ch.5, 11:15; 12:10-12). Secondly and more importantly, they certainly do not contradict each other but simply emphasize different aspects which one ought to expect given that they were written for two totally different purposes. Why emphasize realized eschatology if futuristic eschatology serves the purpose much better? Why expand on futuristic eschatology if the situation at hand requires the point that in Jesus history has already reached fulfilment? Different theological emphasis certainly is no proof of a different author.

An important part of the argument about Revelation's author thus revolves around the language of Revelation and the 4<sup>th</sup> Gospel. Again, it is argued that they are too different to be written by the same author. And indeed the words common yet exclusive to Revelation and the 4<sup>th</sup> Gospel (“gemeinsames Sondervokabular”<sup>198</sup>) are rare and unevenly spread among the two books. There may indeed be a common pool of vocabulary of Revelation and the Pauline epistles, as Schüssler Fiorenza suggests<sup>199</sup>, but along with Frey<sup>200</sup> I suspect that this is largely due to content (“Stoff”).

Frey notes:

Daß trotz dieser Indizien [the differences] aus dem Bereich des Vokabulars zwischen dem 4. Evangelium mit den Johannesbriefen und der Apokalypse doch eine engere Beziehung bestehen muß, wird andererseits durch eine auffällige Zahl *phraseologischer Berührungen* nahegelegt.<sup>201</sup>

This is what Schüssler Fiorenza appears to ignore. Yet I argue that the way an author combines his vocabulary and thus gives meaning to the words he uses tells us more about his

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196 Lilje, *Das letzte Buch der Bibel*, 48.

197 Schüssler Fiorenza, “The quest for the Johannine school”, 403.

198 Frey (“Erwägungen”, 341) lists 8 such words (ἀρνίον, δέκατος, ἑβραϊστί, ἐκκεντεῖν, ὄψις, πορφυροῦς, σκηνοῦν, φοῖνιξ) plus one word that only appears in Revelation and in 1 John (σφάζειν).

199 Schüssler Fiorenza, “The quest for the Johannine school”, 411.

200 Frey, “Erwägungen”, 354.

201 Frey, “Erwägungen”, 354; Italics in the original.

identity than the actual words themselves. And here the evidence is quite strongly in favour of Johannine authorship<sup>202</sup> as I shall show later.

After observing at some length that the Corpus Johanneum and Revelation display “sowohl eine Reihe auffälliger phraseologischer Berührungen als auch in zahlreichen theologischen und besonders zentralen christologischen Motiven bemerkenswerte Gemeinsamkeiten” Frey concludes that at least a “*traditionsgeschichtliche Verbindung*” is certain and considers a “*Schulzusammenhang*” as rather likely, despite the “Akzentverschiebungen und Differenzen”<sup>203</sup>. So while we cannot be sure of Johannine authorship, it still is very likely that the authors of the 4<sup>th</sup> Gospel, the Johannine Epistles and of Revelation are at least in some way related (if not identical<sup>204</sup>).

What is clear however is that all Johannine writings (including Revelation) share a common language (despite some difference which may be due to genre<sup>205</sup>). If Pattemore is right (and I cannot see why this should not be the case) that other NT sources (in his case 1 Cor, Gal, 1 Thess, 1 Pet) “represent a currency of language and thought which formed part of a cognitive environment of the hearers of Revelation”<sup>206</sup> then, even if these writings as such should not have been known to John's audience, we can still assume a common language. As we shall see in the discussions of both *τηρέω* and *ἔργον*, all Johannine writings (including Revelation) share the same understanding of at least these words. This underlines their closeness (Frey<sup>207</sup> and Thomas<sup>208</sup> use *τηρέω* – along with a number of other words, though unfortunately they do not discuss *ἔργον* – to demonstrate the closeness of Revelation and the Corpus Johanneum). This gives reason to expect that the use of these two words in the 4<sup>th</sup> Gospel and in the Johannine epistles will shed light on how they might be used in Revelation.

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202 Frey, “Erwägungen”, 354-358.

203 Frey, “Erwägungen”, 415. Italics in the original. Similarly Böcher, “Das Verhältnis der Apokalypse des Johannes zum Evangelium des Johannes”, 294. Contra Schüssler Fiorenza (“The quest for the Johannine school”, 416-418).

204 Contra Frey, “Erwägungen”, 421 (“Dabei ist ... festzuhalten, daß die Johannesapokalypse ... *nicht der Hand des Evangelisten bzw. des Autors der drei Briefe selbst entstammt.*”), yet in line with Osborne, *Revelation*, 5-6 (“the internal evidence supports the external witness of the earliest fathers; and of the options noted above, Johannine authorship makes the best sense.”) and Lilje, *Das letzte Buch der Bibel*, 48 (“... kann man es bei dem abschließenden Satz eines modernen Auslegers belassen, daß wir ‘keinen anderen glaubhaften Namen als den des Apostels Johannes’ wissen.”) who obviously refers to Behm (*Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 5), but unfortunately he doesn't say so.

205 Osborne, *Revelation*, 4.

206 Pattemore, “Blessed are those who hear”, part 3.1 (p. 5 in my print-out).

207 Frey, “Erwägungen”, 354-356. Frey uses *τηρέω* (*τηρεῖν*) as his first example of the phraseological parallels between Revelation and the 4<sup>th</sup> Gospel.

208 Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 11-12.



### 2.4.1 τηρέω

One of key words in the Book of Revelation is τηρέω, particularly so in the frame and the seven messages. The 37 occurrences of the word in Johannine literature (including 11 in Revelation) can be divided into 4 main categories:

The first one only occurs in the Gospel of John, in 2:10 and 12:7<sup>209</sup>. Here it is used in the sense of keeping something for a later time. In Jn 2:10 the bridegroom is accused of trying to give the bad wine first, implying the intention of wanting to keep as much of the good wine to himself for later consumption. In Jn 12:7 Jesus interprets the anointing of his feet as foreshadowing his burial, as happening proleptically for a later time.

The second category appears in all of the New Testament only once in the Gospel of John (17:15), once in 1 John (5:18) and once in Revelation (3:10) where God is asked (Jn 17:15) or promises (Rev 3:10) to τηρεῖν his disciples ἐκ evil (Jn 17:15) or the hour of trial (Rev 3:10). Apparently τηρέω ἐκ means something along the lines of sparing someone from some evil or protecting them from it. The same meaning is implied in 1 John 5:18 where God is said to τηρεῖν the ones born of him so the evil one cannot harm them. The ἐκ is not used here because τηρεῖ has no direct object but rather refers to the context of the whole sentence.

Riesenfeld sees a close connection between this second and the third use of the word, as we find it in John 17:11-12:

Deutlich ist, dass ein Parallelismus besteht zwischen ἐν τῷ ὀνόματί (v 12) und ἐκ τοῦ πονηροῦ (v 15). Deshalb hat ἐν hier wohl keine instrumentale Bedeutung, sondern einen übertragenen örtlichen Sinn und kann etwa wiedergegeben werden mit *im Machtbereich des Glaubens an deinen Namen* als Gegensatz zu der Macht des Bösen, die fernzuhalten ist<sup>210</sup>.

This use of τηρέω is quite unique within the New Testament<sup>211</sup>. It describes the act of God by which he maintains his followers in their faith to him. They are being held in his presence. This third use of τηρέω is, like the second one, something humans experience passively.

The opposite is true for the last way in which τηρέω is used. Apart from the use in Rev 3:10 (see above) this is the only way τηρέω is used in Revelation<sup>212</sup>. Τηρέω occurs eleven times in all of Revelation (3x in the frame, 5x in the seven messages, 3x in the body). When Gilbertson

209 One might like to regard Rev. 16:15 as belonging to this category. That however is only true on a rather superficial level. The clothes (τὰ ἱμάτια) are a symbolic image for a disciple's deeds (ἔργα).

210 Riesenfeld, "τηρέω", 142. Italics in the original.

211 A similar use of τηρέω ἐν is only found in Jude 21.

212 The use of τηρέω in 16:15 at first glance looks non-theological. However the clothes are a symbol of the deeds that need to be complete in order for the believer to be acceptable (i.e. not naked) before God.

notes that it is “always in the context of the need for faithfulness and endurance in the time before the ultimate future”<sup>213</sup>, he ought to mention the exception of 3:10. For the other 10 occurrences however his observation is true. Every single one of them is an exhortation to τηρεῖν the words of prophecy of Revelation (1:3<sup>214</sup>; 22:7<sup>215</sup>.9<sup>216</sup>), God's commandments (12:17<sup>217</sup>; 14:12<sup>218</sup>), the faith of Jesus (14:12<sup>219</sup>), his word (3:8<sup>220</sup>.10<sup>221</sup>) and his deeds (2:26<sup>222</sup>: ἔργα; see 2.4.2) which are also figuratively described as one's clothes (16:15<sup>223</sup>). This use of τηρέω is also very common in both the gospel and epistles of John with the word(s) or commandments of God (both the father and Jesus) as objects<sup>224</sup>. In all of these cases τηρέω describes or encourages human behaviour<sup>225</sup>. Τηρέω in this use, which is Revelation's primary use of the word, is something to be actively pursued by Jesus' followers. It describes how they are expected to respond to the word of God: not just by listening to it but by actually doing it. Consequently Thomas writes about “*tērountes*” in 1:3 that it “is a call to be a doer of the word and not a hearer only (cf. James 1:22). Once again, the practical purpose of the book is in the forefront.”<sup>226</sup>

According to the way τηρέω is used in Revelation's frame, where it refers to the book itself, its author expects the message of his book to be put into practice and to have consequences in his readers' lives. As the use of τηρέω in Revelation's body shows, this means living out faith in Jesus by heeding the word of God, doing the deeds of faith and obeying God's commandments. Frey makes the very helpful comment that in Revelation τηρέω “ebenso wie im Evangelium und im großen Brief nicht die Observanz von Einzelgeboten, sondern das

213 Gilbertson, *God and history in the Book of Revelation*, 112.

214 “Blessed is he who reads aloud the words of the prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who *keep what is written therein*; for the time is near.”

215 “Blessed is he who *keeps the words of the prophecy in this book*.”

216 “I am a fellow-servant with you and with your brothers the prophets and of all who *keep the words of this book*.”

217 “those who *keep God's commandments* and hold to the testimony of Jesus.”

218 “the saints, those who *keep the commandments of God* and the faith of Jesus.”

219 “the saints, those who *keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus*.”

220 “you have *kept my word* and have not denied my name.”

221 “you have *kept my word* of patient endurance”

222 “He who conquers and who *keeps my deeds* until the end, I will give him power over the nations”

223 “Blessed is he who stays awake and *keeps his clothes* with him, so that he may not go naked and be shamefully exposed.”

224 See: Jn 8:51.52.55; 14:15.21.23.24; 15:10.20; 17:6 and 1 Jn 2:3-5; 3:22.24; 5:3.

225 In Jn 8:55 and 15:10 Jesus uses his own τηρεῖν of the father's word as an example of how humans should practice it. As Frey (“Erwägungen”, 355) suggests this also includes a christological dimension. This however is not due to a specific use of the word but rather by making Jesus its subject (which does not occur in Revelation). He keeps/follows the word of the father in the very way that his disciples are expected to keep/follow it. This exemplary character of Jesus' τήρησις is behind both Jn 8:55 and 15:10.

226 Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 60.

Bleiben im Glauben und die eschatologische Bewährung der Gemeinde im Ganzen bezeichnet.”<sup>227</sup>

#### 2.4.1.1 τηρέω and φυλάσσω

The one synonym for τηρέω that is mentioned in a number of dictionaries and lexicons is φυλάσσω<sup>228</sup>. Schütz<sup>229</sup> in particular distinguishes their meaning in approved Christian (τηρέω) and rejected Judaistic/Jewish (φυλάσσω) obedience toward God. As far as Matthew is concerned this may well be the case but the Johannine use of φυλάσσω is certainly positive<sup>230</sup>. It is however only one out of the four Johannine uses of φυλάσσω that has this meaning of following a word of God. The Johannine use of τηρέω as following a word of God is always positive<sup>231</sup>, bearing “einen neu gewonnenen christlichen”<sup>232</sup> sense. That may be the reason why τηρέω has completely replaced φυλάσσω in Revelation which at least can have a negative connotation that is completely absent from τηρέω.

Grimm's suggestion that “τηρ. may mark the result of which φυλ. is the means”<sup>233</sup>, is highly unlikely. His example (Jn 17:12) could just as well be interpreted the other way round. Also it is definitely not the case with the Johannine main use of τηρέω, which is about following a word of God.

#### 2.4.1.2 τηρέω and μένω

“Alle johanneischen Stellen [von τηρέω] ... haben es mit dem Bleiben in der Gemeinde bzw. bei Christus zu tun.”<sup>234</sup> Schütz ought to mention the exception of Jn 2:10 (and 12:7?), but otherwise his observation points to a remarkable parallel that is largely overlooked<sup>235</sup>: that between the Johannine uses of both τηρέω and μένω.

227 Frey, “Erwägungen”, 355.

228 *Exegetisches Wörterbuch zum NT*, vol. III, 850. Grimm, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, 622. *Theologisches Begriffslexikon zum Neuen Testament*, vol. 1, 112-115. *THWNT*, vol. VIII, 139.

229 Schütz, “Bewachen, Bewahren”, 113.

230 This is true for all Johannine occurrences:

Jn 12:25: “whoever hates his life in this world will keep (φυλάξει) if for eternal life.”

Jn 12:47: “Whoever hears my words but does not keep (φυλάξει) them ...” suggests that φυλάσσειν would be expected.

Jn 17:12: “I kept (ἐτήρουν) them in your name ... and guarded (ἐφύλαξα) them ...” is Jesus' own summary about what he did for his disciples.

1 Jn 5:21: “Children, keep (φυλάξατε) yourselves from idols.” shows that they are exhorted to φυλάσσειν.

231 Even John 9:16 is debatable. Jesus never rejects the τήρησις of the Sabbath. Rather he shows the real meaning of observing the Sabbath.

232 Schütz, “Bewachen, Bewahren”, 113.

233 Grimm, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, 622.

234 Schütz, “Bewachen, Bewahren”, 113.

235 Frey obviously doesn't see it even as he writes that τηρεῖν is about “Bleiben im Glauben” (“Erwägungen”, 355) without referring to μένειν at all.

The third Johannine use of τηρέω<sup>236</sup> is echoed in John's use of μένω<sup>237</sup>, especially in John 15 where his disciples are called to μένειν ἐν Jesus, but in other passages as well: In Jn 6:56 whoever eats and drinks of him is promised to μένειν ἐν Jesus, who in turn will μένειν ἐν that person, and in Jn 12:46 he promises to those who believe in him that they will not μένειν ἐν darkness. The spirit is said to μένειν with and be ἐν the disciples (Jn 14:17)<sup>238</sup>. But Jesus also uses these words to describe his relationship with the father, as in Jn 8:35 where he says that he as the son will μένειν ἐν the house (of the father) who in turn is said to μένειν ἐν Jesus (Jn 14:10).

For the most important Johannine use of τηρέω (living the word of God) a nearly parallel use of μένω can also be observed in John. Three times (Jn 5:38; 8:31; 15:7) Jesus' or the father's word(s) are linked to μένω ἐν. In Jn 5:38 and 15:7 they are said to μένειν ἐν the disciples who in turn are said to μένειν ἐν Jesus' word in Jn 8:31. In Jn 15:10 we find a particularly fascinating co-use of τηρέω and μένω: “If you obey (τηρήσητε) my commands, you will remain (μενεῖτε) in my love, just as I have obeyed (τετήρηκα) my father's commands and remain (μένω) in his love.” The parallel to Jn 15:7 is obvious: “If you remain (μείνητε) in me and my words remain (μείνη) in you, ask whatever you wish and it will be given to you.” Since remaining in Jesus equals remaining in his love, then, apparently, “obeying” (τηρέω) the word of God is equivalent to his word(s) remaining in the disciples (and them remaining in his word). This suggests that τηρέω like μένω is the indicator of true discipleship.

Surprisingly, in Revelation μένω is only used once (17:10) to express that a certain king will remain for a certain time. But overall in Johannine language it seems to have a similar connotation to τηρέω which is a similarly Johannine word<sup>239</sup>, that complements μένω in the gospel and epistles and replaces it in Revelation.

#### 2.4.1.3 τηρέω and κρατέω

Κρατέω occurs a total of 10 times in Johannine literature. Four of these occurrences are of no interest for my purposes, among them the only two which are not in Revelation (twice in Jn 20:23). They describe the simple act of holding something (back), e.g. the four angels holding

<sup>236</sup> See 2.4.1 (τηρέω ἐν).

<sup>237</sup> μένω is an astonishingly Johannine word: Of the 118 occurrences in the New Testament only 50 are not Johannine. It occurs 40 times in John, 27 times in the Johannine epistles and once in Revelation. However it is used to express spiritual matters (oneness with god) as well as quite material issues (remaining in a physical location).

<sup>238</sup> Although this is not a direct case of μένω ἐν, the meaning is very much the same and we should view it accordingly.

<sup>239</sup> Of 70 (or 71) occurrences in the New Testament 37 are Johannine.

back the four winds in Rev 7:1<sup>240</sup>. Christ *holding* the seven stars in his right hand (2:1) only belongs to this category on the surface. Within the image he is literally holding the stars, but this has a host of theological implications which are indeed vital to our understanding of Revelation's use of the word. Primarily it expresses the basis of all human holding, of what is expected by the church. The churches are called to hold on to Jesus (see below) because he holds them first<sup>241</sup>. They are in his hand, he cares for them, he brings them into and holds them in his presence. Only on this basis are they in turn expected to remain (!) there. We can suggest that the same word was deliberately used here (2:1) and in κρατέω's other five “interesting” occurrences.

All of these are in the seven messages as well, with the first three in the message to Pergamum. Here they are used to contrast those holding on to Jesus (2:13) to those following a heretic's teaching (2:14-15). Already my “translation” of κρατέω in 2:14-15 (here: κρατοῦντας = following) shows some of the similarity to τηρέω which can be similarly translated by “to follow”. Is there any real difference between following (τηρέω) Jesus' word, being kept in God's name (τηρέω), remaining in his love (μένω) or holding on to him (κρατέω)? Are they not all expressions of the relationship of faith, merely emphasising different aspects of the one “phenomenon”? Does not obedience (τήρησις) toward the word of God exclude the possibility of following (κρατέω) the teachings of the heretics? Probably κρατέω in the case of heresy should be understood in the very way Schütz understands φυλάσσω<sup>242</sup>.

The other two theological uses of κρατέω in Revelation stand out through their proximity to certain occurrences of τηρέω. In both cases the churches (Thyatira (2:25) and Philadelphia (3:11)) are exhorted to hold on to what they have. That in the verse before (3:10) Philadelphia was promised τήρησις ἐκ the hour of trial because it had kept (ἐτήρησας) Jesus' word of endurance can hardly be accidental. The same can be said about the fact that Thyatira's overcomers are identified as those who do (τηρέω) Jesus' deeds in 2:26 (the verse after κρατέω was used). Could it be that doing the deeds of Jesus and keeping his word (of endurance) is what these churches (or their overcomers) have done and what they are encouraged to hold on to, to continue doing and keeping? In other words: I suggest that κρατέω here complements τηρέω in an important way. I think we need to understand its use

240 One could debate whether Jn 20:23 really belongs to this category. What is clear however is that they belong to a different category than the other “theological” uses of the word in Revelation.

241 See 2.4.2 on the meaning of “first love” and “first works”.

242 See 2.4.1.1.

in the seven messages as synonymous to τηρέω, except that it can also be used for the objectionable following (and doing!) of heretical teaching.

#### 2.4.2 ἔργα

The use of the term ἔργα<sup>243</sup> in Revelation receives more attention than is the case for τηρέω. Apart from entries in dictionaries and lexicons, three articles specifically deal with ἔργα in Revelation: Otto Böcher's "Glaube und Werke in der Johannesapokalypse"<sup>244</sup>, Traugott Holtz' "Die 'Werke' in der Johannesapokalypse"<sup>245</sup> and Donal A. McIlraith's "'For the Fine Linen is the Righteous Deeds of the Saints': Works and Wife in Revelation 19:8"<sup>246</sup>.

This higher interest may be due to the fact that ἔργα is more obviously connected to the theology of atonement ("What is the part of works in reconciliation?") than τηρέω, for which this connection seems to be largely overlooked. Not surprisingly then, the most obvious fact about ἔργα in Revelation is that it almost always refers to human deeds. Only once (out of 19 occurrences) is it used of the works of God (15:3). Once it refers to the deeds of Babylon (18:6)<sup>247</sup>. How 2:26 ought to be understood (ὁ τηρῶν ... τὰ ἔργα μου) has to be carefully examined. Obviously the ἔργα are kept or followed (or done?) by the disciples, but they are nevertheless described as Jesus' deeds. We will have to come back to this phrase once we have examined the other occurrences of ἔργα.

Ἔργα as the works of God (Rev 15:3) is quite common in the 4<sup>th</sup> Gospel. In a number of places Jesus speaks about τὸ ἔργον τοῦ θεοῦ (sometimes singular, sometimes plural) which he does (Jn 5:36; 10:25.37-38), completes (Jn 4:34; 17:4), reveals (Jn 9:3) or knows the father is doing (Jn 6:29; 14:10). In any case it is an act of God which he accomplishes through the son Jesus. This may be quite significant for Rev 15:3, where God is praised for the greatness of his deeds. If the same is implied as in the Gospel of John, then these ἔργα of God were accomplished by Jesus the Lamb. It is also noteworthy that some of these uses of ἔργον in the Johannine Gospel are nearly synonymous to σημεῖον (e.g. Jn 5:36; 6:30 (ἐργάζομαι together with σημεῖον); 7:3; 10:25.32-33; 15:24), acts of Jesus that were supposed to hint at his oneness with the father and to prompt those who saw them to believe. The counterpart to the

243 I use the plural because in Revelation ἔργον is only once used in the singular (22:12).

244 In *Die Auslegung Gottes durch Jesus. Festgabe für Herbert Braun*, Schottroff, Luise and Willy, 57-71

245 In *Neues Testament und Ethik. Für Rudolf Schnackenburg*, Merklein, Helmut, 426-441.

246 *CBQ* 61, 3 (1999), 512-529.

247 This may well be counted as referring to the ἔργα of a person who will have to answer for them before God in the same way as is the case with humans and their ἔργα.

248 Not always described by this very phrase. In Jn 4:34 for example it is the ἔργον of him who sent Jesus, in Jn 10:25 the ἔργα he does in his father's name and in Jn 17:4 it is the ἔργον which the father had given to him.

ἔργα of God are τὰ ἔργα τοῦ διαβόλου (1 Jn 3:8) which Jesus has come to destroy. The ἔργα of God are the very work of the father through him (Jn 4:34; 17:4).

On the other hand there are the ἔργα (always in plural except 1 Jn 3:18 and Rev 22:12) of humans (Jn 3:19-21; 1 Jn 3:12,18; 2 Jn 11; 3 Jn 10 and most of ἔργα's occurrences in Revelation). This describes human conduct, normally giving an overall evaluation<sup>249</sup>, but at times also referring to specific negative acts (a different teaching: 2 Jn 11; the selfish and destructive behaviour of Diotrephes: 3 Jn 10). The human ἔργα can be evil (Jn 3:19-20), but they can also be done “in God” (Jn 3:21), that is in love (1 Jn 3:18).

The same is true for this use of ἔργα in Revelation. “The word ‘works’ in itself is neutral”, writes McIlraith. He continues, referring to the use of the word in the seven messages (“I know your ἔργα”): “It does not indicate whether ... each church is good or bad.”<sup>250</sup> And indeed the human ἔργα in Revelation can be positive (e.g. 2:5; 14:13) as well as negative (e.g. 2:6,22; 9:20<sup>251</sup>; 16:11; 18:6 (about Babylon)). The word can even include both options at the same time (2:23; 20:12-13; 22:12).

In any case the value of their works determines how a person or church is seen by God and the reward they can expect from him (2:23; 14:13; 18:6; 20:12,13; 22:12<sup>252</sup>). Holtz distinguishes between a “generelle Wertung ihres [the churches'] Gesamthabitus gleichsam über die ‘Werke’” and the “Gesamthabitus” being expressed in the churches' “Tun ..., dass sich freilich als ihr Sein in ihren ‘Werken’ zusammengefaßt dem Urteil des Christus darbietet.”<sup>253</sup> I find it hard to discover any difference at all and think this distinction is artificial. God knows the ἔργα (2:2,19; 3:1,8,15), he judges whether they are fulfilled (3:2, πεπληρωμένα) and he expects his followers to hate the ἔργα he hates (2:6).

McIlraith understands “the first works” as a technical term for the ἔργα Jesus desires: “[i]n 2:19 we find the content of the works sought by Christ ... [which] consist of ‘your love and

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249 According to Heiligenthal (“ἔργον”, 124) when referring to a human, ἔργον means the “*Werk* des Menschen zur Bezeichnung des Tatwirkens in seiner Gesamtheit. Hierbei kann kollektives το ἔ. für den Plur. ἔργα eintreten”.

250 McIlraith, ““For the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints””, 514.

251 While on the surface this refers to the idols as products of human work, these are the result of the general rejection of God which is at the heart of these people's generally unacceptable walk.

252 Holtz highlights the use of ἔργον in the singular in 22:12: It shows “dass die ‘Werke’ als eine Einheit mit einheitlicher Geltung begriffen werden können” (“Die ‘Werke’ in der Johannesapokalypse”, 428). Jesus is not occupied with every single work, rather his main concern is in the overall work of a human (which consists of the single works).

253 Holtz, “Die ‘Werke’ in der Johannesapokalypse”, 427.

faith and service and endurance.’ These are the ‘first works,’ the minimal response to Christ who is ‘the first and the last’ (2:8).”<sup>254</sup>

This is misleading for two reasons: In 2:19 the first works are simply those from the beginning (of the Thyatiran's Christian life) as opposed to the most recent ones. Jesus even commends them for their recent works being greater than these first ones. The second reason is that Ephesus, despite being rebuked for their lack of the first love and works, is commended (2:2) with a list of ἔργα that (at least formally) resembles the list of Thyatira (2:19). While having done these things, Ephesus still is said to have lost its first love and is called to return to the first works!

Similarly unconvincing is McIlraith's view of the noun ἀγάπη as being “used only to describe the church's response of love to Christ, never Christ's love for the church.”<sup>255</sup> Since the verbs ἀγαπάω and φιλέω describe “what takes place between Christ and the church” with Christ as “the subject of the verb” and the community as the object<sup>256</sup>, we should consider this option for the noun as well.

Rather, I think we should follow Hempelmann's<sup>257</sup> lead. He suggests that Ephesus had forgotten (or forsaken) the primacy of Christ's love for them over their own love of Christ which they express in their works of labour (κόπος), perseverance (ὑπομονή) and the right teaching: “Die Gemeinde verläßt sich auf sich, wo sie sich allein auf Christus verlassen müßte, ihm aber nichts mehr zutraut, weil sie nicht aus der Gegenwart seiner Liebe heraus lebt.”<sup>258</sup>

Hempelmann's paraphrase of what the Ephesians were to remember (μνημόνευε, 2:5) is an insightful illustration of the issues at stake. Jesus asks of the Ephesians a “gedankliches Zurück-Kehren zu dem, was man verlassen hat. Wie war das denn, als man in der Sonne dieser ersten Liebe gelebt hat? ... Wie war das, als er allein vollkommen war und das für mich gereicht hat? Wie war das, als mein Leben die Fülle hatte, weil er im Mittelpunkt stand?”<sup>259</sup>

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254 McIlraith, ““For the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints””, 515. He continues to argue in a strikingly traditional catholic way, discussing love and faith as the “constitutive elements of the relationship [with Christ], ... supplemented by two other works, service and endurance.” (516). He argues that “[i]n an adequate or minimum response to the risen Christ these four elements [N.B. works !] must be present.” (517). He acknowledges however “that faith, along with the other works, are the gift of the risen Christ and find their source in him” (516, see below).

255 McIlraith, ““For the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints””, 515.

256 McIlraith, ““For the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints””, 515.

257 Hempelmann's biblestudy “Aus Liebe geschaffen” is essentially about this very issue. Behm (*Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 18) may have to be understood in a similar way. He refers to 1 Cor 13 (“ohne Liebe nichts nütze”) to discount the Ephesian efforts.

258 Hempelmann, “Aus Liebe geschaffen”, II.d.4 (p. 8 in my print-out).

259 Hempelmann, “Aus Liebe geschaffen”, III.a (p. 14-15 in my print-out).



This does justice to the fact that τὰ πρῶτα ἔργα (2:5) will have to be seen in the context of τὴν ἀγάπην σου τὴν πρώτην (2:4), that indeed the first works depend on the first love. I strongly suggest that doing the first deeds is primarily remaining in the church's first love which is Jesus (1 Jn 4:19<sup>260</sup>) who *first* loved them and *then* called his disciples to remain in him and his love (Jn 15:9-10; 1 Jn 4:16).

While this cannot be concluded from the text alone, but requires the background of either other Johannine sources or else very basic general Christian theology, I cannot see why the first readers of Revelation could not be expected to have a basic understanding of at least one of these.

Other options for what τὴν ἀγάπην σου τὴν πρώτην could mean have also been proposed. They include the church's love for Christ<sup>261</sup>, the love among the members of the church<sup>262</sup> or christian witness as its consequence<sup>263</sup>. However these are really consequences of the one “first” love (1 Jn 4:19) of Christ for his own. It is therefore likely that Ephesus also lacked them (as Hempelmann insists<sup>264</sup>), but I doubt that they were Christ's foremost concern. Faith in him and in *his* love is what he primarily expects of those in the church. Holtz states:

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260 As this verse points out it will necessarily have consequences in the lives of his disciples.

261 Aune (*Revelation 1-5*, 155) will probably have to be interpreted in this way though his remarks remain slightly cryptic.

Holtz (“Die ‘Werke’ in der Johannesapokalypse”, 433) embraces both this and the next option: “Es ist ... zu vermuten, daß sie [die Apokalypse] mit dem Begriff [ἀγάπη] die partizipatorische Hinwendung zum Nächsten und zu Gott insgesamt umfaßt.” However on the penultimate page (p. 440) of his article Holtz characterizes the “paränetische Zuspruch ... zurückzukehren zu dem Ausgangspunkt” (c.f. 2:4-5; 3:3) as a “Ruf zu Christus, der ein Ruf zum Glauben ist”.

Ramsay (*The letters to the seven churches*, 177) insists that the problem was “the cooling of the first Ephesian enthusiasm ... The failing may be corrected, the enthusiasm may be revived ... among themselves by their own strength”. What an act of self-righteousness this requires!

Trebilco, *The early Christians in Ephesus*, 305. However the text (2:6) is clear that the Ephesians “hated” the works of the Nicolaitans, *not* embracing their idolatrous teaching and behaviour. It is therefore highly unlikely that “the first works” consist in loving God by rejecting idolatry.

262 Boring, *Revelation*, 96-97; Lohse: *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 24-25. Caird (*The Revelation of Saint John*, 31), Osborne (*Revelation*, 115-116) and Mounce (*The Book of Revelation*, 69-70) along with others (Mounce quotes Barclay, Robbins, Harrington, Roloff and Moffatt) see this as the result of the Ephesian's emphasis on “sound teaching” (Mounce), of their “zeal for Christian truth” (Caird) or even a “harsh zeal for orthodoxy” (Osborne).

263 Beale: *The Book of Revelation*, p. 230-231. The image of the lampstands (2:1) may indeed refer to the church's role as a light to the world, however the point here is a different one. Ephesus may be expelled from the church universal (and consequently lose its witness), it may face rejection by Christ, should it not return to its first love. Holtz (“Die ‘Werke’ in der Johannesapokalypse”, 430) similarly emphasizes the “Möglichkeit, den Leuchter, der die Gemeinde zu Ephesus darstellt – und damit diese Gemeinde – von dem Ort in seiner [Jesus'] Gemeinschaft zu entfernen”.

Beale is right in seeing a connection to Mt 24:12-13. But the witness in Mt 24:14 is not the alternative to a love grown cold. The gospel will be preached despite the lack of love, witnessing not to human love but to the love of God in the kingdom. Rather Mt 24:13 points us in another direction: he who endures (overcomes?) to the end will be saved. Here (as for Ephesus) the lack of love (here: between the disciples) is not a problem for witness but for salvation. If anywhere, the connection between love and witness is drawn in Jn 17:20-23.

264 Hempelmann, “Aus Liebe geschaffen”, II (p. 4-14 in my print-out).

22:14 läßt mithin das “Werk” des Menschen, das seinen Heils-Lohn begründet, die Annahme der Heilstat Christi sein! Dabei handelt es sich nicht etwa um eine Anschauung, die nur am Rande der Apk ihren Platz hätte. Ihr entspricht die Soteriologie der Schrift [Revelation] in den entscheidenden Zügen.<sup>265</sup>

Holtz points to the fact that in both passages where people are expected to repent (μετανοέω) ἐκ τῶν ἔργων (τῶν χειρῶν) αὐτῶν, “bezeichnenderweise zunächst von einem Irrweg des Glaubens (9,20; 16,9) und dann erst von dem der ‘Werke’ (9,21; 16,11) die Rede [ist].”<sup>267</sup> At the heart of these people's rejection by God is their refusal to glorify him and to stop worshipping idols, the result of which are concrete evil deeds.<sup>268</sup>

However “darf man die Überzeugung, das Heil gründe allein in der Zuwendung Jesu, und das Wissen um die Verantwortung für das Tun ... nicht gegeneinander stellen.”<sup>269</sup> The churches are commended for “good” works which show their dependance on Christ and rebuked for “evil” works which jeopardize their very existence as the church of Christ.

One interesting variation of human ἔργα is when humans do someone else's ἔργα<sup>270</sup>. This occurs in the question of the crowd in Jn 6:28 (“What must we do to work the works of God?”) to which Jesus replies with a surprising “Your faith in me is the work of God”<sup>271</sup>. This once more suggests that the works Jesus expects are primarily a matter of faith in him which is accomplished by God but has to be embraced by the person.

A similar emphasis is found in Jn 8:37-42 where the Jews claim to be children of Abraham, which Jesus dismisses by claiming that they do not do Abraham's works (again understood as faith in him). Rather, he says, they do the works of their real father whom he explicitly identifies as τοῦ διαβόλου in Jn 8:44. Upon their reply that to the contrary God is their father, Jesus claims that in this case they would love him (and believe in him) which apparently they did not<sup>272</sup>.

Rev 2:26 is a more difficult case. The fact that the Thyatirans are supposed to τηρεῖν “τὰ ἔργα μου” could mean several things<sup>273</sup>. On the one hand it could mean “keeping ... the

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265 Holtz, “Die ‘Werke’ in der Johannesapokalypse”, 428.

266 9:20 (incl. τῶν χειρῶν) and 16:11.

267 Holtz, “Die ‘Werke’ in der Johannesapokalypse”, 429-430.

268 Cf. Rom 1:21-32: Because “they neither glorified him [God] as God nor gave thanks to him, ... God gave them over to a depraved mind, to do what ought not to be done”.

269 Holtz, “Die ‘Werke’ in der Johannesapokalypse”, 430.

270 Whether Jn 9:4 (“we must do the works of him who sent me”) belongs here, is not so clear. I prefer to see it as referring to Jesus doing the work of God (see above).

271 My paraphrase of Jn 6:29.

272 Despite Jn 8:31 which identifies his audience as “the Jews who had believed in him”.

273 It is quite surprising how many commentators seem to simply ignore it.

works of Christ rather than those of Jezebel”<sup>274</sup> (idolatry in any form), referring back to 2:22. While this contrast and antithesis of Christ's and Jezebel's works is certainly deliberate, I think the emphasis needs to be the other way round. Jezebel's works can never be a model for the works of Christ. That she is seen as imitating him however is more than likely. In that case the works of Christ of 2:26 would explain the parallel to V. 22 and would themselves require a different explanation .

Τὰ ἔργα μου have also been interpreted as the works which Christ expects<sup>275</sup>, regardless of whether they refer to the ones associated with Jezebel or vice versa. While this is certainly true, it nevertheless leaves us with the question of what they are, what it is that Jesus expects of his disciples.

Again Hempelmann's comments provide some very helpful insights:

Die Rückkehr und Einkehr in die erste Liebe bringt organisch nicht irgendwelche Werke, sondern die “ersten Werke” (Off 2,5) hervor. Die “ersten Werke” werden sie genannt, weil *sie allein* der ersten Liebe entsprechen und weil *sie allein* der ersten Liebe entspringen. Diese Werke sind es, von denen der Erhöhte Herr sagt, es sind “meine Werke”. Die ersten Werke sind seine Werke, weil es die Werke sind, die er selber tut in uns und durch uns, wo wir uns ihm und seiner Liebe aussetzen.<sup>276</sup>

Τὰ ἔργα μου would thus refer to the consequences of living in the “first love”, of remaining in the love of Christ for his own, of trusting in the primacy of the love of him who first loved. This continues on the use of the phrase in the 4<sup>th</sup> Gospel and forms an interesting counterpart to the fivefold σου τὰ ἔργα<sup>277</sup> of Rev 2:2.19 and 3:1.8.15. Christ sees the works of the churches, their labour of love and faith, and they are the basis of his current evaluation of each church. To overcome, however, they must stick to his works, his love for them, his ultimate achievement for them. Their works matter, but they take second place after his works, in which they need to believe.

### 2.4.3 Synthesis: τηρέω τὰ ἔργα

It is clear that both John as the scribe of Revelation and Jesus as the author expect its words to be followed. The churches are to do as Revelation tells them, keeping the commandments of Jesus and thereby fulfilling their works. Revelation expects its readers to put its message into practice, to live the word of God revealed to them. They need to do so because they will be

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274 Hemer: *The letters to the seven churches*, 124. Similarly Behm (*Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 24) and Lohse (*Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 30).

275 i.e. Mounce (*The Book of Revelation*, 90).

276 Hempelmann, “Aus Liebe geschaffen”, III.c (p. 16 in my print-out). Italics in the original.

277 It is τὰ ἔργα σου in 2:2.

judged according to their deeds, whether they are good or evil. Their deeds are the basis of Jesus' evaluation of their walk with him, he knows them and will give everyone their reward according to their deeds.

The climax of this message is reached in the middle of the seven messages: “In Apk 2, 26 ist die Wendung ὁ τηρέων . . . τὰ ἔργα μου als stilistisch zugespitzter Ausdruck zu verstehen, in dem die Begriffe τηρέω τὰς ἐντολάς und ποιέω τὰ ἔργα (vgl J 8, 39ff; 6, 28) verschmolzen sind.”<sup>278</sup> While Revelation knows both phrases independently, their combination here highlights the central truth about the ἔργα Jesus expects his disciples to τηρεῖν. At heart these works are the mere faith and exclusive trust in God, the acceptance of him as the one and only Lord who has done everything for his own.

“[F]aith, along with the other works, are the gift of the risen Christ and find their source in him”, writes McIlraith<sup>279</sup>. The works he expects are indeed the work of Christ himself, only waiting to be embraced by the church. Thus Revelation does not teach redemption by works but together with Paul (and the rest of the New Testament) testifies to the redeeming love of Christ (1:5) that inevitably will bear fruit in those who remain in him.

## 2.5 The concept of witness in Revelation

The μάρτυς-family of words is quite prominent in Revelation. In its simple form it is also frequently used in the fourth gospel and in Luke-Acts. If one includes composite forms the occurrences in the Pauline and Pastoral epistles, in Hebrews, Luke-Acts and the other synoptic gospels is noteworthy, but Revelation only uses the simple form without prefixes: μαρτυρέω (4x), μαρτυρία (9x), μαρτύριον (1x), μάρτυς (5x).

The verb μαρτυρέω appears only in the frame of the book, once in the book's second verse and three times in the last 6 verses of the book. While in two cases (1:2 and 22:20) it is John who witnesses rather than Jesus (22:18) or his angel (22:16) as in the other two cases, the word is used similarly in all four cases: to describe their respective roles in the process of revealing the book's message as described in 1:1 (not so obvious but still detectable in 22:18) and to emphasise the truthfulness of this revealed message. As 1:2 highlights (John testifying to the testimony of Jesus) μαρτυρέω was used deliberately to describe this action.

This is particularly important since the expression μαρτυρία Ἰησοῦ is so prominent in the book (6 out of the nine occurrences of μαρτυρία). The meaning of that phrase can thus be

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278 Riesenfeld, “τηρέω”, 145.

279 McIlraith, ““For the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints””, 516. See 2.4.2 on the “first works”.

expected to be critical for a correct understanding of Revelation's witness concept. In at least 4 instances (all except the two in 19:10) μαρτυρία Ἰησοῦ is mentioned together with τὸν λόγον τοῦ θεοῦ or with τὰς ἐντολὰς τοῦ θεοῦ<sup>280</sup>, suggesting that τὴν μαρτυρίαν Ἰησοῦ in fact denotes the gospel of Jesus<sup>281</sup>, the faith-message that proclaims him as Lord and redeemer (cf. 1 Jn 5:11: “And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son.”). Some scholar's<sup>282</sup> distinction between the two grammatical options of “testimony to Jesus” and “testimony from Jesus” are thus far from exclusive, rather it appears as though both options are possible at the same time<sup>283</sup>. The μαρτυρία Ἰησοῦ is essentially Christ's word about himself<sup>284</sup>. This is implied in both occurrences in 19:10 as well. This leads us to an understanding of μαρτυρία as an inviting statement of faith, intended to both declare the speaker's (or writer's, actor's) allegiance and to attract the hearer (or reader, observer) to join in the same. This meaning does make sense in all the occurrences of both μαρτυρία and μάρτυς. The invitational character of the two witnesses in ch. 11 is rather urging and pressing than luring, but their witness nevertheless has the purpose of restoring people to God<sup>285</sup>. Strathmann's term “werbendes Bekenntnis”<sup>286</sup> seems to best capture how both μαρτυρία and μάρτυς are used in Revelation.

However there is another aspect to τὴν μαρτυρίαν Ἰησοῦ which surfaces explicitly in 20:4 and not quite so obviously in 1:9 and 12:17: it is a witness in the face of persecution or even death. This is supported by the fact that all other occurrences of μαρτυρίαν indicate the violent death of those who held it (6:9; 11:7; 12:11). Furthermore in Revelation the substantive μάρτυς exclusively refers to either the crucified Lord himself (1:5; 3:14) or to those of his followers who die for their witness (2:13; 11:3; 17:6). This suggests that to John (unlike Luke<sup>287</sup>) the honorary title μάρτυς was reserved for such believers who were at least ready to die for their faith if not for those who had already died<sup>288</sup>. However it is not the technical term “martyr”<sup>289</sup>. In 17:6 John mentions the (shed) blood of the saints (ἀγίων) as equal to that of τῶν μαρτύρων Ἰησοῦ. Clearly these saints are just as much martyrs in that

280 Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 19.

281 Luke, “The biblical idea of marturia (witness)”, 63; Strelan, *Where earth meets heaven*, 25.

282 Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 19; Blount, “The witness of active resistance”, 38; Johnson, *Revelation*, 21; Osborne, *Revelation*, 57; Trites, “Witness and the Resurrection”, 276-278.

283 Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 184; Strelan, *Where earth meets heaven*, 25.

284 Trites, “Witness and the Resurrection”, 277-278.

285 Similarly many of the OT prophets (i.e. Amos), not to mention Revelation as a whole, preach God's judgement in order to bring home to their hearers the urgency of being restored to God. Note that the witnesses “prophesy” (11:3.6.10)!

286 Strathmann, “μάρτυς”, 508.

287 cf. Lohse, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 12.

288 Lohse, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 13. Contra Giesen, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 59.

289 Contra Lilje, *Das letzte Buch der Bibel*, 53-54.

they died for their faith as the witnesses. Strathmann thus concludes about the use of the μάρτυς family in Revelation: “hier bedeutet μαρτυρία nicht die Blutzugeschenschaft ... Aber der Ausdruck wird angewandt auf ein Bekenntnis, das in der Hingabe des Lebens gipfelt.”<sup>290</sup> Similarly Roose who unambiguously states that “[e]ine martyrologische Interpretation” needs to be rejected “als nicht sachgemäß”<sup>291</sup> declares “die Verfolgung der Christen eine Folge des Sieges über den Drachen. ... Deshalb dürfen gerade die Christen, die infolge ihrer Zeugenschaft den Tod erlitten haben (2,13; 11,3.7; 17,6) eine Bezeichnung tragen, die auch dem Erhöhten zukommt: Sie sind (treue) Zeugen.”<sup>292</sup>

Μαρτύριον is used only in 15:5 as part of the Septuagint-term τῆς σκηνῆς τοῦ μαρτυρίου (the LXX always translates “the tent of meeting” as ἡ σκηνή τοῦ μαρτυρίου, “the tent of the testimony”<sup>293</sup>). This occurrence may be because it is the Greek technical term for “the tent of meeting”, but it nevertheless is fitting, considering the way Revelation uses the related words. Morris observes that John here “introduces once more the thought of witness which means so much to him and to the churches to which he writes with their ‘martyrs’ (‘witnesses’).”<sup>294</sup> Note however that 15:5 is the only time Revelation uses μαρτύριον and it “does not carry overtones of death”<sup>295</sup>. Caird goes too far when he states that “it is not the ark but the **Testimony** which occupies his [John's] attention. The time of mercy is over, and God's law must now take its course.”<sup>296</sup> This conflicts with the concept of witness as outlined above, particularly if Beale is right that “[t]he ‘testimony’ in 15:5 includes not only the Law but ‘the testimony of Jesus’”<sup>297</sup>. While the term “testimony” in ἡ σκηνή τοῦ μαρτυρίου certainly refers to the covenant<sup>298</sup> (a term I prefer over “law” here), it is highly questionable to generally equate the law or covenant with the end of mercy. Rather the reference to it may serve as a reminder to God's grace in the midst of the outpouring of his wrath (θυμός, 15:1.7; 16:1) which has begun before this passage (14:10.19<sup>299</sup>) and even continues after it (16:19; 19:15).

There is another word which needs to be taken account of when considering NT concepts of witnessing. Rev 3:5 is the only occurrence of ὁμολογέω in Revelation. There Christ promises

290 Strathmann, “μάρτυς”, 508. Similarly Coenen, “Zeugnis”, 1485; Roloff, *Revelation*, 20-21.

291 Roose, *Das Zeugnis Jesu*, 140.

292 Roose, *Das Zeugnis Jesu*, 10.

293 Morris, *The Book of Revelation*, 184; Aune, *Revelation 6-16*, 877 (“frequently”).

294 Morris, *The Book of Revelation*, 184. Similarly Smalley, *The Revelation to John*, 390.

295 Witherington, *Revelation*, 67.

296 Caird, *The Revelation of Saint John*, 200 (bold in original). Similarly Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 802; Beasley-Murray, *The Book of Revelation*, 237; Thomas, *Revelation 8-22*, 241-242.

297 Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 802.

298 Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 801; Osborne, *Revelation*, 569.

299 See also 6:16-17 and 11:18 where ὁργή seems to be used in a similar sense, especially considering how it is combined with θυμός in 16:16 and 19:15.

to “confess” the names of the overcomers before his fathers and the angels. This would be a rather straightforward matter and hardly of interest in this context were it not for its implications for what it means to overcome. The analogy<sup>300</sup> to Mt 10:32-33 (father) and Lk 12:8-9 (angels) warrants a reading that demands ὁμολογέω from the church. I think that at least in that specific case ὁμολογέω is very close to μαρτυρέω, except for the readiness to die which is implied by the latter.

It is noteworthy that while the negative part of the synoptic background to the promise to the overcomers in Sardis (Mt 10:33<sup>301</sup>: “But whoever disowns [ἀρνήσῃταί] me before men, I will disown him before my Father in heaven.”) is not repeated in Revelation, two churches are commended for not disowning (ἡρνήσω) Christ: Pergamum in 2:13 and Philadelphia in 3:8<sup>302</sup>. As both Mt 10:32-33 and Lk 12:8-9 link ὁμολογέω and ἀρνέομαι we can be confident that Pergamum and Philadelphia are commended for what is expected from Sardis. Incidentally this helps to clarify that ὁμολογέω (and μαρτυρέω) certainly do not include the option of denying. The link with ὁ μάρτυς μου ὁ πιστὸς μου in 2:13 particularly points back to μαρτυρέω and provides a first indication of the similarity of ὁμολογέω and μαρτυρέω. Not surprisingly then, Trites refers to 3:5 in the message to Sardis as an example of the witness-theme in the seven messages<sup>303</sup>.

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300 Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 280-281; Vos, *The synoptic traditions in the Apocalypse*, 85-94. Also Roloff, *Revelation*, 59.

301 Similarly in Lk 12:9.

302 Trites, “Witness and the Resurrection”, 275.

303 Trites, “Witness and the Resurrection”, 275.

Strathmann<sup>304</sup> explicitly raises and discusses the issue of difference or similarity between μαρτυρέω and ὁμολογέω. This underlines that ὁμολογέω requires close attention when discussing the witness theme in Revelation. Strathmann claims that the difference is mainly the purpose of the witness or confession. Μαρτυρέω, he rightly argues, intends to be “missionarische Werbung”, thus emphasizing the missionary effect of the witness on others whereas ὁμολογέω supposedly is not interested in the results and “confesses” regardless, particularly before a judge in court<sup>305</sup>. Such an understanding would mean that the church in Sardis is rebuked for disowning Christ when confronted with opposition rather than confessing and consequently suffering. The witness requested of Sardis would thus only be the confession of their being Christian without any missionary intentions. Seen in this way the problem would be their lack of courage to admit their faith and consequently suffer for it. Christ on the other hand requests allegiance even to the point of death as integral to overcoming. This perspective could be supported by the fact that for missionary witness Revelation indeed otherwise uses a different word.

However there are explanations for the use of ὁμολογέω in 3:5 which are more plausible. First the synoptic background needs to be accounted for. A few things are noteworthy about this. For the reference to be detectable and obvious John had to use the same word as the tradition from which Matthew and Luke also drew. Also it needs to be noted that in Revelation 3:5 it is only Jesus “confessing” about his disciples before the divine court, never about the disciples confessing (ὁμολογέω) to Jesus before other humans. But for this specific “confession” by Jesus μαρτυρέω simply would not have been the right word to use. Furthermore the message to Sardis contains no single reference to persecution let alone to the (violent) death of a Christian. Most likely this was not an issue in Sardis, reasons for which could only be speculated on. Rather the message conveys a sense of spiritual indifference on behalf of the church. Since the church does not face any opposition, no readiness to die for their testimony is required, thus making μαρτυρέω too strong a word with its clear implication of readiness to face death. In their current situation they are not asked to lay down their lives. To just state their allegiance and openly invite others into the faith community is all that is asked of them at this time. That ὁμολογέω can have strong missionary implications is obvious in 1 Tim 6:13, a passage Strathmann<sup>306</sup> interestingly also refers to: Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ τοῦ μαρτυρήσαντος ... τὴν καλὴν ὁμολογίαν. There Jesus is said to have witnessed the good “confession”. Here ὁμολογία means more than just a juridical statement, even if the

304 Strathmann, “μάρτυς”, 502, n 63.

305 Strathmann, “μάρτυς”, 502, n 63.

306 Strathmann, “μάρτυς”, 502, n 63.



scene may be that of a court in judgment. The case is even more obvious in the previous verse (1 Tim 6:12) where Timothy is said to have confessed (ὡμολόγησας) the good confession (ὁμολογίαν) before many witnesses (μαρτύρων). If, in this situation, one can make out any missionary intention, it certainly is not the witnesses (μαρτύρων) who display it but the confession (ὁμολογίαν) confessed (ὡμολόγησας) before them. The major difference between ὁμολογέω and μαρτυρέω then is not that ὁμολογέω lacks the missionary intention of μαρτυρέω but that the latter implies the death of the witness as the consequence of their witnessing.

Applying this insight to the situation in Sardis, we can identify the lack of witness of any kind as the reason why the church is proclaimed dead (3:1-2; cf. 3:5), incomplete in its deeds (3:1) and with dirty clothes<sup>307</sup> (3:4; cf. 3:5). Obviously then the witness theme is linked with both the life/death-theme and, more importantly, with the clothes-theme. This suggests that in Revelation clean or white garments (3:18; 4:4; 19:14) are used as a symbol of faithful witness<sup>308</sup>, often unto death (6:11<sup>309</sup>; 7:9.13-14<sup>310</sup>), whereas soiled or missing garments (3:17-18; 16:15; 17:16) seem to indicate a severe lack of witnessing. Incidentally this helps us to identify part of Laodicea's problem (3:17-18) as a similar lack of witness to that in Sardis.

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307 Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 276.

308 Contra Pattemore (*The People of God in the Apocalypse*, 87) who argues that “the state of the garments clearly reflect the behaviour and ethical state of the wearers.”

309 Note that the ones who are dressed in white in 6:11 are the ones who had died for their witness (6:9).

310 7:14 emphasizes that ultimately the white clothes are due to Christ's faithfulness unto death (his ultimate witness!) and only secondarily to his disciple's faithfulness. This underlines that Revelation is not about salvation through works (cf. 2.4.3, 3.4.5).

### 3 A frame around Revelation's body

#### 3.1 The overall structure of Revelation

Regarding the literary structure of Revelation there seems to be rather widespread agreement on exactly one point: It is hard to discern. An essential part of the problem is that in order to disclose the book's structure at least western biblical scholars with their (our!) cultural background of mathematical logic and analysis tend to dissect the book which really can only be understood as an integrated whole. I feel that one cannot determine the meaning of Revelation from independent analysis of its different sections. Rather interpreters need to become aware of what connects any and every word of the book to everything else in the rest of Revelation. Discerning a structure in Revelation will therefore not so much be an exercise in identifying the various bits it is made of, but rather the way they are related to one another.

This is not to claim that there are no different sections to the book, that all is just one great mix-up of ideas and images. The seven messages for example are deliberately structured according to one common pattern. Some images have a clear beginning and a clear end and it is obvious that the first few verses serve as an introduction to the book's main part. It is very helpful to see these transitions and to follow the structure the author imposed on the book. However never are they more than a subtle shift in focus or perspective. Most of the introduction, for example, is inextricably linked to the book's body. One cannot be understood without the other.

Rather than separating one part of the book from another one, many transitions actually seek to connect them to each other. Often this happens by introducing the first thoughts of the following situation or image before the previous one has reached its conclusion. At times it even is difficult to say which statement belongs to which part. As various scholars show (each in their own way and with their own conclusions<sup>1</sup>) this type of transitional structure is to be found throughout the whole book (e.g. in chapter 8, where the seven trumpets are introduced in 8:2, with the seventh seal continuing until 8:5, before the trumpet vision really starts in 8:6).

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1 Schüssler Fiorenza (*The Book of Revelation*, 172-173) for example speaks of “intercalation”. Bauckham (*The climax of prophecy*, 8-9) rejects the term “intercalation” and prefers “overlapping” and “interweaving” while Yarbrow Collins (Yarbrow Collins, *The combat myth in the Book of Revelation*, 16-18) uses the term “interlocking”. Possibly the most sophisticated analysis of this phenomenon – which he labels “chain-link interlock” – is offered by Longenecker (“Chain-link interlock and the structure of the Apocalypse”, in: *Rhetoric at the boundaries*, 103-120; cf. 1.2.1).

Given the complexity of Revelation it is not surprising that a number of suggestions have been made as to how it is structured. Yet most of these arguments focus on what one might like to call the body of Revelation: The visions from chapter 4 to 22:5/9/10<sup>2</sup>.

The situation seems less difficult for the remainder of the book. There is some disagreement as to where single sections begin or end, but it is most commonly agreed that they are there: Epistolary prescript and introduction (ch. 1:1-8/20), letters to the seven churches (ch. 1:8/2:1-3:22) and conclusion (22:6/10/11-21).

I have a view on how the “body” might be viewed in terms of structure and composition<sup>3</sup> and this will be relevant when discussing concrete passages of the book's body. However I believe that it is worthwhile setting the insight about the internal structure in perspective regarding the nature and purpose of the text and thus hopefully facilitating a reading more in accordance with the text's original intention.

I expect this perspective to be discernible in the book itself, to be derivable from what it says about its own intentions and purpose. In the case of Revelation I find this information to be offered most obviously in the “frame” around the “body”. Therefore the first part of this thesis is a study of ch. 1-3 and 22 seeking to understand their structure and thereby also their message. This will provide the perspective from which I endeavour to interpret Revelation's body. The last part of this thesis will utilize these observations, as well as other information from beyond the book of Revelation, to interpret specific passages of Revelation's body.

It is obvious that ch. 2-3 play a special role in the whole of the book, both for the “frame” and the “body”. Some would argue that they are neither part of the frame nor of the body but rather a separate part that for some reason has been inserted between the introduction and the actual message of the book<sup>4</sup>. It will become obvious that this can hardly be the case and that these chapters are indeed a key part of Revelation's composition. Yet despite their importance for all of the book, they form a distinct unity. They will therefore be examined separately from ch. 1 and 22, even though (as we will see) the second half of ch. 1 is very closely related to these seven messages.

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2 Various positions are held as to exactly where Revelation's body ends. But there is general consent that a new section begins somewhere between Verses 6 and 11 of chapter 22, the difficulty being exactly that a precise division between the body and the conclusion is non-existent. However some include the conclusion in the body as a separate section (e.g. Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 46). For a good overview of the suggested structures of Revelation's visionary part see: Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 108-151.

3 The outline proposed by Richard Bauckham is rather close to my view. Apart from minor adjustments here and there I am convinced by what he suggests in *The climax of prophecy*, 1-31.

4 Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, cv-cxxxiv; Charles, *A critical and exegetical commentary*, 1:xciv.43-47.

## 3.2 Structure of Revelation's frame

### 3.2.1 Chapter 1

There is general agreement<sup>5</sup> that Rev. 1 is divided in two major parts, 1:1-8 which could be described as the author's foreword to the book and 1:9-20 which are the account of the book's inaugural vision.

#### 3.2.1.1 Chapter 1:1-8

Verses 1-8 are the author's own words introducing the whole book. Most of it is typical of an opening to a New Testament epistle<sup>6</sup>. Structurally this introduction needs to be seen as being made up of four parts:

- a The author's claim regarding the heavenly origin of his message and the blessings for those who follow its advice (1:1-3). This first part is not typical of an opening to a New Testament letter. A similar “prologue” cannot be found in any other New Testament epistle<sup>7</sup>. However this is mainly due to the fact that Paul in particular tends to express his apostolic authority in the letter formula (“Grace and peace...”) rather than before it. The prescripts of his letters therefore typically are longer than Revelation's, including a more detailed identification of both the sender and the recipient(s)<sup>8</sup>.
- b An epistolary prescript mentioning a sender and recipients and including a trinitarian greeting formula (1:4-5a).

Revelation's epistolary prescript is strongly in line with most other New Testament letters: “the basic ‘Grace to you and peace’ has the same form as that of Paul”<sup>9</sup>. Even though it is notably longer in most letters, the basic contents remain the same: introduction of sender, identification of recipient and a greeting which almost always includes the promise of χάρις and εἰρήνη. It is worth noting however that Revelation's epistolary prescript differs from the other New Testament epistles' prescripts by including the Spirit as the co-giver of χάρις and εἰρήνη alongside the Father and the Son.

- c Two-piece doxological hymn (1:5b-7).

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5 Witherington (*Revelation*, 73) sees V. 1-3 and V. 4-20 as the two parts of Revelation 1, an idea not supported by other interpreters.

6 Lieu, “Grace to you and peace”, 170-173.

7 The only exception may be in 1 John where John similarly claims that his message consists not of his own thoughts but is an account of a faithful witness to God's revelation. However 1 John lacks the letter formula and mentions neither the sender nor the recipients.

8 For example see: Rom 1:1.5; 1 Cor 1:1; Eph 1:1; Tit 1:1-3. In Galatians Paul continues discussing his authority for the first two chapters.

9 Lieu, “Grace to you and peace”, 172.

This two-piece hymn is about Jesus Christ. This is also suggested by the way it is linked to the doxological introduction of Jesus in the prescript. He is described in the first verse by what he has accomplished for his disciples in the past, elevating them to a kingdom of priests who worship him in the present while the second verse describes him with regard to what they expect him to do in the future. Both verses end with an “Amen”, thus structuring the song in its two parts.

- d The chorus (1:8) which repeats from 1:4 the designation of God as the one “who is, and who was, and who is to come”.

Interestingly this is in the form of an Ἐγὼ εἰμι-saying by “the Lord”. The reference back to 1:4 at first glance might suggest that it is about the father (see also 21:6). However when compared to 1:17 and 22:13 it seems to emphasise the oneness of father and son<sup>10</sup>. This is given greater emphasis by the fact that in both 1:4 and 1:8 the word ἐρχόμενος is used which points to what is said about Jesus in 1:7.

As one would expect, other identifications of these verses' structure have been suggested. A few scholars<sup>11</sup> treat 1:3 as a separate part. I concede that formally it is a makarism which is different from the statement in 1:1-2. It is the second sub-division of these first verses. However, there is no need for a separation. Aune shows that 1:1-3 form a unity made up of these two parts<sup>12</sup>. While seeing the links between the two units, Aune also detects two aspects of a literary tension the first of which he describes as this:

In vv 1-2 the “revelation from Jesus Christ” is dynamically described as ἔδωκεν, “given” to him by God; δεῖξαι, “shown” to his (Jesus Christ's) servants; and ἐσήμανεν, “made known” to John by an angelic intermediary, which is described as having been εἶδεν, “seen” by John, while in v 3 the “prophetic words” are suddenly regarded not only as a written product but also as the book for which vv 1-3 provide the first introduction.<sup>13</sup>

I cannot see the problem here. What is so problematic about John saying that the book his audience reads or hears came to them in the very way Aune outlines? But it is obvious that both refer to the same thing: the vision as it is recorded in the following chapters.

The situation is similar for the second tension Aune imagines. He claims that the “*dramatis personae*” of 1:1-2 including God, Jesus Christ, the servants, the angel and John have “no obvious connection to the “*dramatis personae*” of 1:3 “unless ‘his servants’ are assumed to be

10 Bauckham, *The theology of the Book of Revelation*, 54-58.

11 Thompson, *Revelation*, 48; Yarbrow Collins, *The Apocalypse*, 4-5.

12 Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 8-9.

13 Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 8.

identical with ‘those who hear and obey’<sup>14</sup>. However this not only needs to be assumed but is a rather obvious fact. With regard to “his servants” in 1:1 Pattemore argues convincingly “that it is the concept of God as king and his people as those who owe him allegiance and obedient service that is evoked by the phrase in Rev. 1:1 [τοῖς δούλοις αὐτοῦ].”<sup>15</sup>

Both 1:1-2 and 1:3 are clear statements about the nature and purpose of the book. The beatitude is the necessary continuation of the emphasis in 1:1-2 on the divine origin of the visions in this book: a prophetic word from God typically brings a blessing to those who live accordingly. This introduces the strong parenetic intention of the book. If the words of its prophecy can be followed by God's servants this strongly suggests that the book as a whole is supposed to be read as an exhortation, a parenthesis advising the servants of their master's will or commands.

Also for 1:4-8 other structures have been suggested usually making out two, three (different) or even four parts<sup>16</sup>: the epistolary prescript (1:4-5a) including or followed by the doxology (1:5b-6), a prophetic pronouncement<sup>17</sup> (1:7) including or emphasised by a divine self-proclamation (1:8). However I find it more likely that 1:5b-7 is a two-part hymn with 1:8 as a chorus which is repeated from 1:4-5a.

Giblin<sup>18</sup> promotes Vanni's view<sup>19</sup> of all of 1:1-8 as a “liturgical dialogue” but this is far from convincing. Not only do they have to introduce some extra characters (“a speaker (who seems to function as a kind of ‘president of the assembly’)” and a separate “lector”), but they ignore that the passage is typical for a letter opening (while at the same time acknowledging that Revelation is a letter). The passage does give us the clue that Revelation will have been read in the assembly (1:3: he who reads, but those that listen) and the congregation may even have joined in the hymn of 1:5b-7 when it was read (or sung?), but to make up a specific liturgical setting is entirely unnecessary even if Aune seems to favour it<sup>20</sup>.

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14 Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 8.

15 Pattemore, “Blessed are those who hear”, part 3.2 (p. 9 in my print-out).

16 Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, c; Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 186.196; Giblin, *The Book of Revelation*, 37 (see below); Ladd, *A commentary on the Revelation of John*, 15; Osborne, *Revelation*, 50; Schüssler Fiorenza, *Revelation*, 35; Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 44; Thompson, *Revelation*, 47.

17 Boring, *Revelation*, 79.

18 Giblin, *The Book of Revelation*, 37.

19 Vanni, “Liturgical dialogue as a literary form”.

20 Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 28.

An alternative would be to see all of 1:4-8 as one part<sup>21</sup>, namely the letter opening incorporating the traditional letter formula and the doxology (and the prophetic pronouncements of 1:7-8, if one insists they are not part of the doxology). I agree that indeed the doxology (including the prophetic pronouncements) is part of the letter opening. A doxology can be found quite frequently in the beginning of other New Testament epistles as well, even in this particular position after the greeting<sup>22</sup>. Poythress notes that “John praises God in a way that is similar to the beginning of most Pauline letters.”<sup>23</sup> I suggest however that 1:1-3 is part of the letter opening as well and that if we discern a microstructure of this passage it is as outlined above. However Pattemore shows very convincingly that these divisions are primarily of academic interest and probably irrelevant for the original communicative event in which they formed a multifaceted whole (including 1:1-3). He concludes very appropriately:

What we have found in moving from the title (1-3) through the closely cohesive epistolary opening (4-6) and on to the two apparently isolated prophetic oracles (7-8) is a network of connections, verbal, formal, semantic and intertextual, which strongly suggest that their optimal relevance is obtained only when they are heard together. Disjunctures and surprises there certainly are, but all the parts work together to bring the audience to an expectation of hearing a communication from John, a visionary prophetic message. The framework of this message is already laid out. It involves the sovereignty and saving purposes of God, exercised through Jesus Christ, whose imminent coming will climax and vindicate the witness of his people. There is no need, on the basis of the structure of the prologue itself, to have recourse to theories involving several editions of the text.<sup>24</sup>

So from the structure of Revelation's first eight verses we can conclude that it was written as a letter like any other NT epistle, claiming the same authority as these would have claimed, if not an even higher one. Yet, as we shall see, the way in which Revelation communicates its message is very different from all other NT epistles. Its body is the account of a vision rather than an expression of an author's (inspired/own) thoughts. “Revelation is unique in combining the letter with vision-reports.”<sup>25</sup>

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21 Behm, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 7; Caird, *The Revelation of Saint John*, 14; Giesen, *Johannes-Apokalypse*, 31; Johnson, *Revelation*, 23; Lohse, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 14; Michaels, *Revelation*, 54; Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 44; Wikenhauser, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 28.

Boring (*Revelation*, 74), Morris (*Revelation*, 48) and Yarbrow Collins (*The Apocalypse*, 6) seem to see it this way as well.

22 It tends to take various forms, the “Ἐγὼ εἶμι”-saying however is unique to Revelation.

23 Poythress, *The returning King*, 73.

His outline (p. 58-59) of Revelation's structure is quite peculiar: I. Prologue (1:1-3), II. Introduction of the letter (1:4-5a), III. Body of the letter (1:5b-22:20), IV. Conclusion (22:21).

24 Pattemore, ““Blessed are those who hear””, part 3.3 (p. 14 in my print-out). He structures 1:4-8 slightly differently than I do, but the effect of this is extremely limited, especially when compared to his otherwise highly compelling work.

25 Thompson, *Revelation*, 49.

### 3.2.1.2 Chapter 1:9-20

Verses 9-20 are the author's account of the first introductory image of his vision. After a brief description of the situation in which he received it (V. 9+10a) he tells the reader what he experienced in his vision<sup>26</sup>:

The commission to write down what he was about to see and to send it to seven specific churches in Asia Minor (1:11), a scene of seven lampstands and “someone like a son of man” in majestic splendour (1:12-16), his inability to remain standing in view of this person (1:17a), Christ's comforting (1:17a: “Do not be afraid.”) self-identification: Ἐγὼ εἰμι! (1:17b-18), the renewed commission (1:19) as well as an explanation about the meaning of this image (1:20).

Some interpreters<sup>27</sup> see the two parts of this passage differently. They see 1:9-11 as the commission of John and 1:12-20 as a vision of Christ (some divide 1:12-20 into two parts: 1:12-16 – “Vision of the exalted Christ” and 1:17-20 – “Commission expanded”<sup>28</sup>). However this idea overlooks the important fact that 1:11-20 are one vision in which Christ commissions the prophet. This is obvious from a few facts: John hears the commission to write twice, in 1:11 and in 1:19. In both cases it is Christ who speaks. The commission in 1:19 is embedded in the vision through the explanation of the seven stars and lamps in 1:20.

Aune is not consistent: while in the outline of the passage<sup>29</sup> he introduces three main parts of this passage (1:9, 1:10-11 and 1:12-20) only two pages later he writes: “In the vision of 1:9-20, vv 9-10a provide the setting of the vision, while vv 10b-20 constitute the vision proper.”<sup>30</sup>

Most scholars treat 1:9-11 as one single structural unit<sup>31</sup>. I agree, but think that an outline as offered above helps to understand the passage which informs us of the situation in which the visions of Revelation, including that of 1:11-20, were given to John before describing the vision's actual content.

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26 Similarly Aune (*Revelation 1-5*, 71).

27 Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 200; Caird, *The Revelation of Saint John*, 19; Johnson, *Revelation*, 27; Morris, *Revelation*, 51; Thompson, *Revelation*, 54.

28 Osborne, *Revelation*, 78. Similarly Behm, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 11; Michaels, *Revelation*, 59; Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 83.96.108.

29 Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 69.

30 Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 71.

31 Boring, *Revelation*, 80; Giblin, *The Book of Revelation*, 44; Giesen, *Johannes-Apokalypse*, 35; Ladd, *A commentary on the Revelation of John*, 29; Lohse, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 17; Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 52; Roloff, *The Revelation of John*, 30; Wikenhauser, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 30; Yarbrough Collins, *The Apocalypse*, 10. Schüssler Fiorenza (*Revelation*, 50) only treats 1:9 separately but she seems to see V. 9-20 as a unity.



### 3.2.1.3 *The relationship of 1:1-8 and 1:9-20*

There is a clear transition from John's introductory words to the account of his vision. However the two parts of Rev. 1 have enough in common to support the idea of their unity rather than discontinuity:

Throughout the body of Revelation the seven churches are never mentioned<sup>32</sup>, but we find them mentioned several times in chapter 1: once in the epistolary prescript (1:4), once in the first commission to write (1:11) and twice in the explanation of the vision (1:20).

The self-declaration of Christ by an Ἐγὼ εἰμι-saying appears in both 1:8 and 1:17b-18. Interestingly, they both are rather similar in their message, though they express it in different words: “The ἄλφα and ὦ” says basically the same as “the First and the Last”<sup>33</sup>, “who was and is and is to come” is similar to “I am alive for ever and ever” and him being “the Almighty” is expressed in him having “the keys of death and hades.”

The statement that this book is “the revelation of *Christ*” (1:1) is underlined by *Christ* commissioning John to write and publish what he would see (1:11+19).

Therefore we must acknowledge that the two parts of Rev 1 are closely related. Their distinctness is mainly due to the difference of their rhetorical function, not their message. Whereas 1:1-8 is the letter opening, 1:9-20 is the first part of the vision reported in this epistle.

Each part's role in the whole of the book will have to be clarified when analyzing their relationships with the rest of the book, ch. 22 and 2-3 in particular.

### 3.2.2 **Chapter 22**

The structure of Rev 22 at the conclusion of the book is more difficult to discern. This however does not require us to question “whether this section can be understood as a unity in its present form” and to claim that “some form of rearrangement or surgery (minor or major) is required to make sense of the present state of the text”, as Aune reports of a number of

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32 22:16 does not belong to the body. It is part of the closing section of Revelation, which, as we shall see, is closely related to ch. 1.

33 See for example 22:13, where these two are combined together with “the beginning and the end”. In the light of this obvious parallel Farrer's speculations (*The revelation of St. John the Divine*, 63) are exposed as such, his argument about the Α and Ω being a Greek version of JHWH or even of the “Greco-Oriental deity” Eternity being rather artificially built up in the first place. His only comprehensible suggestion is that it might be related to a rabbinic speculation that “saw a figure of God's action through all from first to last, in the redundant Hebrew particle AT [I assume Farrer means אַתָּה] which appears in Genesis i.1: ‘In the beginning God created AT heaven and earth.’”

scholars<sup>34</sup>. He is right to say that “all such proposals are based on the dubious assumption that an originally coherent text was somehow thrown into violent disarray.”<sup>35</sup>

What is relatively obvious is a transition in content from 22:5 to 22:6, the first being the last verse of the description of the New Jerusalem, the final image of John's vision. Yet this does not necessarily mean that V. 6 belongs to a different section of the book. Rather R. Bauckham suggests that it actually is the closing formula for the description of the heavenly Jerusalem<sup>36</sup>. I agree, particularly because of the parallel between 22:8f and 19:10 which is striking. With 19:10 being the conclusion of the Babylon scene, it is quite appropriate to consider 22:8-9 as concluding the Jerusalem vision.

Also 22:6a (οἱ λόγοι πιστοὶ καὶ ἀληθινοὶ) is a reflection not only of 19:9<sup>37</sup>, but of 21:5 as well, each occurrence either marking a transition from one major section to another or rather highlighting a section about the glory of God and thereby concluding it<sup>38</sup>. This also would suggest that 22:6-9 still belong to the body of the book.

On the other hand one has to deliberately “create” some sort of discontinuity in order to find a clear transition after 22:6. Despite the frequent change in the person speaking, 22:6-21 belong together, proclaiming their one message (Bewes: “The concluding message is simple – *I am coming soon!*”<sup>39</sup>) in perfect agreement using a variety of ways to bring it across: Blessed is he who follows (τηρῶν)<sup>40</sup> the words of prophecy of this book (22:7).

With this message clearly stated right in between the two closing formulas of the book's body (22:6a and 8-9), we must acknowledge a literary concept of a flowing interwoven transition rather than clear-cut structures<sup>41</sup>. We will therefore have to conclude that 22:6-21 form the closing part of the whole of Revelation with 22:6a and 22:8-9 also being the closing verses to the section immediately before. 22:7 on the other hand is a rather strongly emphasized statement introducing the theme of all of 22:6-21. Its position in between the interweaving Verses 22:6 and 22:8-9 gives it a rather exposed stand that supports its high relevance for all of 22:6-21.

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34 Aune, *Revelation 17-22*, 1204. The scholars he mentions are Charles, Könnicke, Gaechter and Boismard.

35 Aune, *Revelation 17-22*, 1205.

36 Bauckham, *The climax of prophecy*, 4.

37 Bauckham, *The climax of prophecy*, 4. Here “πιστοὶ” is missing.

38 19:6-9a; 21:3-5a; 22:3-5.

39 Bewes, *The Lamb wins*, 152. Italics in the original.

40 See 2.4.1 for a more detailed study of τηρέω.

41 See 3.1 and, in particular, Longenecker, *Rhetoric at the boundaries*, 103-112.

Bauckham writes: “That we have identified 22:6-9 both as the conclusion to the major section 21:9-22:9 and as the beginning of the epilogue is no problem.”<sup>42</sup> Aune seems to agree: “The structural problem of whether the preceding section ends with 22:5 or 22:10 can be solved satisfactorily when it is recognized that 22:6-9 functions as a transitional section that provides both a conclusion to 21:9-22:5 and an introduction to 22:10-20.”<sup>43</sup> However Aune nevertheless insists “that the ‘epilogue’ begins in 22:10”<sup>44</sup>, apparently overlooking the dual function of the passage.

One of the reasons why a structure in 22:6-21 is difficult to discern is that for some verses the speaker cannot be clearly identified. V. 10-11 are most likely spoken by the angel of 21:9 who also speaks in V. 6 and 9, but they could also be words of Jesus, particularly because only V. 8-9 parallel 19:10. Also V. 11 names reasons for the judgement that Jesus announces in V. 12. Possibly one might argue for V. 10 still belonging to the angel's saying while V. 11 would be spoken by Christ.

Possible words of Christ are also to be found in V. 17-20b. Whereas V. 17 could come from John or the angel just as well as from Jesus, this is not the case for V. 18-19. These verses are closely connected to V. 20a, particularly through the word μαρτυρῶν (μαρτυρῶ in V. 18) which in V. 20a is said about Jesus<sup>45</sup>. I therefore suggest that V. 17-20b are indeed words of Jesus, with V. 20c-21 John's closing words.

Probably the most appropriate proposition for the chapter's outline would be as follows: The closing formula for both 21:1-22:5 and the whole book emphasizes Revelation's trustworthiness (22:6). This is followed by Christ's announcement of his coming and of the blessing for those who act upon (τηρῶν) the prophecy of Revelation (22:7). In the closing episode of vision of the new Jerusalem the angel once more commissions John to publish what he had seen (22:8-10). This is followed by a “speech” of Jesus (22:11-20b), announcing the judgement that will come soon (22:11-12.14-15), revealing his identity in two ἐγὼ εἰμὶ-sayings (22:13<sup>46</sup>.16b), inviting the needy to come (22:17) and testifying to the reliability and urgency of the message of Revelation (22:16a.18-20a). Finally, John adds his closing remarks (22:20c-21).

42 Bauckham, *The climax of prophecy*, 5.

43 Aune, *Revelation 17-22*, 1203.

44 Aune, *Revelation 17-22*, 1204.

45 In 22:16 μαρτυρῆσαι is said about the angel through whom John receives his vision. Yet this is dependent on the past tense of ἔπεμψα, distinguishing it from the verb's use in 22:18 and 22:20.

46 The εἰμι is missing here, yet we ought to understand it belonging here.

Other structures have also been suggested. Thompson (“The conclusion to Revelation takes the form of a dialogue”<sup>47</sup>) differs mainly in that he ascribes 22:11 and 22:17 to the angel rather than to Jesus and he considers 22:20c (22:20b in his terms) as coming from the “congregants”<sup>48</sup>.

Thomas presents a fourfold outline: “Testimony of the angel”<sup>49</sup> (22:6-7), “Testimony of John”<sup>50</sup> (22:8-11), “Testimony of Jesus and John's response”<sup>51</sup> (22:12-20) and “Benediction”<sup>52</sup> (22:21). This however is far from convincing. For example 22:7 is not a statement by an angel but of Christ himself. 22:9-10 (or 22:9-11 for that matter) report what John is told (as does, in a way, the whole book), but it is actually an angel who speaks. “John's response” is limited to 22:20c, even if Thomas insists that the third person of λέγει indicates that all of 22:20 are John's words<sup>53</sup>. Therefore 22:20c is better understood as part of John's closing words.

Wikenhauser goes even further than Thomas in ascribing all of 22:18-21 to John. But this is not convincing. That he ascribes 22:10 to Jesus on the other hand is an arguable idea although I prefer to think these are still words of the angel.

### **3.2.3 The Unity of Rev. 1:1-8 and 22:6-21**

One of the striking features of Revelation is how closely its various sections are related to each other. The book as a whole displays a strong unity from the first to the last chapter. Everything seems to be related to just about everything else. This general observation is one of the many facts supporting the role of chapters 2 and 3 within my reading strategy for the whole of Revelation<sup>54</sup>, namely their strong connectedness with all other parts of the book.

One of the obvious manifestations of unity is to be seen in chapters 1 and 22. There are too many similarities to be accidental.

Probably John wrote Rev. 1:1-8 either after having experienced what he later records in 22:6-21 or even after having written these verses. This is more likely than 22:6-21 being inspired by 1:1-8 because in ch. 22 John records what he experienced whereas in ch. 1 he writes a few opening words to the letter on his own account. Also in 1:4 John addresses his letter to “the

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47 Thompson, *Revelation*, 186.

48 Thompson, *Revelation*, 186-187.

49 Thomas, *Revelation 8-22*, 493.

50 Thomas, *Revelation 8-22*, 498.

51 Thomas, *Revelation 8-22*, 504.

52 Thomas, *Revelation 8-22*, 521.

53 Thomas, *Revelation 8-22*, 519.

54 See 1.2.2 and 5.2.3.

seven churches in Asia” to which he is only told to write in 1:11. Mounce also suggests that 1:1-8 was written after the rest of the book<sup>55</sup>.

Thompson, while acknowledging the close connection between Revelation's first and last verses, seems to see this differently: “The conclusion to the visions (22:6-21) *returns* to much the same language as that in the introduction (1:1-8,9)”<sup>56</sup>. Farrer suggests that John started out with 1:4 intending to write a letter and later added 1:1-3 after realising that it had turned out as an apocalypse<sup>57</sup>. I do not find this convincing. Likewise Aune's view that “[t]hese parallels suggest that the entire section was part of the Second Edition of Revelation”<sup>58</sup> is questionable.

In any case the closeness of 1:1-8 to 22:6-21 is obvious:

In both 1:1 and 22:6 we find the phrase δείξαι τοῖς δούλοις αὐτοῦ ἃ δεῖ γενέσθαι ἐν τάχει. In 22:6 this is the purpose in God's sending his angel. In 1:1 it is the reason for God giving the ἀποκάλυψις to Jesus and making it known through his angel.

There also is a close parallel between 1:3 (μακάριος ... οἱ ἀκούοντες τοὺς λόγους τῆς προφητείας καὶ τηροῦντες τὰ ἐν αὐτῇ γεγραμμένα) and 22:7 (μακάριος ὁ τηρῶν τοὺς λόγους τῆς προφητείας τοῦ βιβλίου τούτου). A shorter version of this is also found in 22:9 (τῶν τηρούντων τοὺς λόγους τοῦ βιβλίου τούτου). This obvious parallel<sup>59</sup> is underlined by the urgency expressed in both 1:3 and 22:7: “the time is near” (1:3), “I am coming *soon*” (22:7). This motive is found throughout both sections: 1:1, 22:6.10.12.20. Thompson suggests that these two beatitudes “ring the entire book”<sup>60</sup> and deSilva notes that

[t]hese frame the whole of the book, pointing to the acceptance of the view of the world disclosed therein and the call to remain exclusively loyal to the Lamb and separate from the idolatry and luxury of the dominant culture as the way to stand honored in God's sight and to remain within God's favor.<sup>61</sup>

It is here that my quest for a parenetic reading strategy for all of Revelation originates. The parenetic intent of these makarisms points beyond themselves to the remaining text of Revelation, both of the seven messages and of the body. They do not in themselves contain concrete parenetic exhortations but point to the exhortative purpose of “the words of prophecy in this book”, implying that not just sections of the book contain words of prophecy but that the whole book is indeed the prophetic word of God into the lives of the addressees.

55 Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 39.

56 Thompson, *Revelation*, 189. Italics added.

57 Farrer, *The Revelation of St. John the Divine*, 60.

58 Aune, *Revelation 17-22*, 1205, similarly *Revelation 17-22*, 1146.

59 See also Luke 11:28 and John 12:47.

60 Thompson, *Revelation*, 187.

61 DeSilva, *The hope of glory*, 195.

Also noteworthy is the verb in these sentences: τηρέω is a key word not only for 1:1-8 and 22:6-21 but for the seven messages as well (see 2.4.1).

The (seven) churches for whom these things have been testified are addressed in the epistolary prescript (1:4(.11)) and mentioned in the closing passage of the book (22:16).

Jesus' “ἐγὼ εἰμι”-sayings (1:8.17 and 22:13<sup>62</sup>.16b), three of them in the first or last chapters, forming a unity<sup>63</sup> together with a fourth one in the body (21:6). Yet this fourth “ἐγὼ εἰμι”-saying occurs at a rather exposed position<sup>64</sup> with close links especially to Revelation's last chapter:

1:8a: Ἐγὼ εἰμι τὸ ἄλφα καὶ τὸ ὦ.<sup>65</sup>

1:17: ἐγὼ εἰμι ὁ πρῶτος καὶ ὁ ἔσχατος.

21:6: ἐγὼ [εἰμι] τὸ ἄλφα καὶ τὸ ὦ, ἡ ἀρχὴ καὶ τὸ τέλος.

22:13: ἐγὼ τὸ ἄλφα καὶ τὸ ὦ, ὁ πρῶτος καὶ ὁ ἔσχατος, ἡ ἀρχὴ καὶ τὸ τέλος.

22:16: ἐγὼ εἰμι ἡ ρίζα καὶ τὸ γένος Δαυίδ, ὁ ἀστὴρ ὁ λαμπρὸς ὁ πρωϊνός.

These parallels (and possibly a few minor ones could still be found<sup>66</sup>) together with the common thrust of their messages (see 3.4) suggest that 1:1-8 and 22:6-21 form a unity around the whole book. They belong together. I will call them the frame around the picture of Revelation.

### 3.2.4 1:9-20 and 22:6-21

As for the inaugural vision of 1:9-20, the connections to ch. 22 are essentially the same as those which tied it to the verses preceding it (1:1-8):

Apart from the seven messages the seven churches are only mentioned in Revelation's first and last chapters, two of the four times in 1:9-20 (1:11.20, 22:16 and 1:4).

The ἐγὼ εἰμι-saying of 1:17 is paralleled in 1:8 (21:6) and 22:13, with Revelation's only other ἐγὼ εἰμι-saying in 22:16. Obviously the first and last chapter of Revelation have a strong

62 εἰμι is missing here, yet the rest of the sentence makes it necessary to assume it belonging here.

63 Bauckham *The climax of prophecy*, 33-34. The textual variant of 1:11 (ἐγὼ εἰμι τὸ Α καὶ τὸ Ω. ὁ πρῶτος καὶ ὁ ἔσχατος) is far too weak to be considered but would also belong here.

64 As I have shown in 3.2.2 Rev 21:5 is a clear parallel to 19:9 and 22:6, all three marking major transitions in the book's structure. 21:6 is directly related to 22:17. Also 21:7 refers to the seven messages' promises to those who overcome.

65 Note the (minor) textual variant that inserts “ἀρχὴ καὶ τέλος” (see Aune, *Revelation* 1-5, 51).

66 e.g.: They both consciously see Revelation's message being testified (μαρτυρέω, μαρτυρία: 1:2(.5) and 22:16.20). See Thomas (*Revelation* 8-22, 494) for a similar list. Aune lists the literal parallels (*Revelation* 17-22, 1205f).

focus on what Jesus has to say about himself. While christology continues to be a main feature in all of Revelation, here the special focus is on Jesus' self-declarations.

Jesus as the one to commission John to write down his visions (1:11.19) also stands behind the urge in 22:10 not to seal up this message but to publish it, and we also note that in 22:16 he sent the angel to testify to “these things”. He is the one who made them known through John (1:1).

One more aspect links the first to the last vision: the very fact that they are the first and last visions, that they form a frame around the book, that they both are not part of the book's body, but rather set the perspective from which Revelation's body ought to be seen. They set the scene for the vision as such, since they are its introduction and conclusion.

### **3.2.5 A proposed structure for Rev 1 and 22**

This leaves us with a rather complex picture of how the different parts of Revelation relate to each other. I propose the following from the observations made so far:

1:9-20 is the account of Jesus introducing himself as the main character of Revelation. Included in this is the commission for John to write down his visions.

In 22:6-21 both Jesus' self-introduction and the commission to publish the visions are repeated in a varied form. In this closing passage two further aspects are added: the imminence of Jesus' coming and the call to follow Revelation's advice in order to be blessed.

In 1:1-8 this closing visionary message is restated as an introduction to the whole book<sup>67</sup>. John partly uses his own words to express the same message, including his introductory words to Revelation in the epistolary prescript which he uses to send (or publish) Revelation's message in the form of a letter.

This leaves us with two introductory parts, both of them related to the book's concluding passage in some way. While there are some links between 1:9-20 on the one hand and 1:1-8 and 22:6-21 on the other hand, they are certainly not as strong as those between the latter two. These latter two form a carefully crafted whole, Revelation's frame. 1:9-20 is related to it, but, as we shall see, it has much stronger connections still to other parts of Revelation, the seven messages of ch. 2-3 in particular.

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<sup>67</sup> As I have mentioned in 3.2.3 I think that the inspiration of 1:1-8 by 22:6-21 is highly likely and I therefore concluded that John wrote Rev. 1:1-8 either after having experienced what he later records in 22:6-21 or even after having written these verses.

### 3.3 Connections between chapters 1 and 22 and the rest of Revelation

As I said before (3.1), understanding Revelation's structure is not so much about identifying its different parts but rather about seeing the links that connect them. Whereas the links between the two parts of Revelation's frame are relatively easy to see, the situation is somewhat more difficult when looking for features that connect the frame to some other parts of the book. However, one would be misled to think that these connections are not there. They exist and are rather important even if some of them may be more subtle. For example some of the links between 1:1-8 and 22:6-21 on the one hand and chapters 2 and 3 on the other hand while being somewhat indirect (3.3.1) still touch on these passages' central issues. On the other hand the relation of 1:9-20 to the seven messages of chapters 2 and 3 (3.3.3) can hardly be overlooked, so clearly are these passages deliberately connected.

#### 3.3.1 The frame (ch. 1:1-8 and 22:6-21) and the seven messages

##### 3.3.1.1 *The explicit exhortation to hear*

Peters in his groundbreaking book on the mandate of the church in Revelation notes that the call in 1:3 to listen and follow the words of Revelation (Peters: “obey its contents”<sup>68</sup>) is effectively repeated in the hearing formula towards the end of each of the seven messages (2:7.11.17.29; 3:6.13.22) and also in its repetition in 13:9<sup>69</sup>. Outlining the links between Revelation's parts Peters footnotes this insight with the following comments:

Obedience is one of the themes that features significantly in the Apocalypse of John: benediction is pronounced on those who obey (1:3; 22:7); the church of Sardis is commanded to obey what she already received and heard (3:3); the church in Philadelphia is commended for her obedience (3:10); several individuals are noted for their obedience to the commandment of God and the words of John's prophecy (12:17; 14:12; 22:9).<sup>70</sup>

This highlights the parenetic emphasis that is common to all parts of Revelation. And it links the seven messages to the book's frame (and the body to both of these; see 3.3.2 and 4.3.2).

##### 3.3.1.2 *The servant- and thief images*

At first sight the classification of the book's addressees<sup>71</sup> as “servants” (1:1 and 22:6)<sup>72</sup> seems to be relatively insignificant. The connection to the seven messages seems to be marginal with only one occurrence of the word in these two chapters (2:20). Some even doubt that the

68 Peters, *The Mandate of the Church in the Apocalypse of John*, 11.

69 Peters, *The Mandate of the Church in the Apocalypse of John*, 10-11.

70 Peters, *The Mandate of the Church in the Apocalypse of John*, 11, n. 7.

71 See 3.4.1.

72 Among others Bauckham (*The climax of prophecy*, 23) points out the “precise verbal agreement” of the servant-phrases in 1:1 and 22:6.



“servants” of 1:1 are the believers in the seven churches. They understand it as referring to (Christian) prophets (c.f. Amos 3:7: “Surely the Sovereign Lord does nothing without revealing his plan to his servants the prophets.”)<sup>73</sup> or to “Christian prophet-martyrs”<sup>74</sup> which would be a smaller group than all the believers in the seven churches. While the connection to Amos 3 cannot be ignored and while 22:6 (“The Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets, sent his angel to show his servants the things that must soon take place.”) can be interpreted to support such an understanding, it is obvious that the message of Revelation is not for some prophets only but for the whole church, for every believer who is expected “to keep the words of this book” (1:3; 22:7)<sup>75</sup>.

Upon closer examination of the servant terminology in the frame and the thief image in the seven messages (seen against the background of the strongly related synoptic servant and thief parables), it becomes obvious that this is indeed a strong connection between these two parts of Revelation, as I will now seek to show.

The idea of servants who do not know the time of their master's return and need to be reminded that his arrival is possible any minute, is the underlying theme of 1:1-8 (and, to some degree, of 22:6-21 as well). The servants are supposed to do the work their master had given them. When he comes back, he wants to find them doing what he told them to do. It is notable that most commentators do not recognize how similar this is to Jesus' teaching according to the synoptic gospels, particularly the servant-parables of Mt 24:45-51, Mk 13:32-37 and Lk 12:35-48<sup>76</sup>. Except for Aune they only mention Lk 11:28<sup>77</sup> as a probable

73 Schüssler Fiorenza, *Revelation*, 40; Wikenhauser, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 26. Mounce (*The Book of Revelation*, 41) argues in the same way, however later in the same book he speaks of “the members of the churches – the servants of 22:6” (*The Book of Revelation*, 403). Thompson (*Revelation*, 48) also seems to favour this interpretation, however he leaves open the possibility of “servants” referring to all Christians.

74 Caird, *The Revelation of Saint John*, 282.

75 Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 13: “the fact that the revelation is intended for those who hear it read aloud suggests that ‘servants’ may rather mean *all* Christians” (italics in the original). Similarly Beale (*The Book of Revelation*, 183) who goes even further in suggesting that “the prophets” could mean all believers since “they, too, have prophetic roles” (*The Book of Revelation*, 1125). Lilje (*Das letzte Buch der Bibel*, 54) also suggests that the church to which this apocalypse is directed is “in eine Reihe mit den alttestamentlichen Gotteszeugen gerückt und damit in die Prophetie einbezogen.”

Also: Bauckham, *The climax of prophecy*, 85-86; Behm, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 6; Boring, *Revelation*, 66; Giesen, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 57; Lohse, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 11; Osborne, *Revelation*, 54.781; Pattemore, “Blessed are those who hear”, part 3.2 (p. 8-10 in my print-out); Roloff, *Revelation*, 19; Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 53.

76 This strong parallel in content does not require Revelation's frame to be dependent upon these synoptic passages (as Johnson claims for all of Revelation's eschatology: *Revelation*, 6). Rather, if we acknowledge Jesus as the “author” of both, then why should he not have used the same image twice? If there is anything to conclude from this parallel it would have to be the fact that Revelation is very much in line with the rest of the NT, that its message is not strangely different from what the rest of the NT says.

77 “Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it.”

Behm, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 6; Ladd, *A commentary on the Revelation of John*, 24; Lilje, *Das letzte Buch der Bibel*, 54; Lohse, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 13; Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 43; Wikenhauser, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 27.

background to the beatitude of Rev 1:3. Aune also mentions other passages which emphasize “*hearing and doing the word of God*”, among them Lk 12:47<sup>78</sup>, however the way he connects the servant theme to Christian leadership is rather dubious: “The term δοῦλος is also used to refer to Christian leaders in the parables of Jesus (Matt 18:23-35 ... ; 21:33-51 ... ; 24:45-51 ... ; Luke 12:41-46 ... ).”<sup>79</sup> Only the latter two (Mt 24 and Lk 12) contain any reference to leadership at all but even then their point is about something entirely different: they are about the master wanting to find his servant ready, doing what he assigned to him, be it leading the household or feeding the animals. This is the same message as in Rev 1:1-8 (and 22:6-21).

The same concept is also found in the seven messages where scholars seem to be more ready to see it. Roloff<sup>80</sup> even sees Rev 3:20 (“I stand at the door and knock...”) as a direct reference to the synoptic parable. However this concept is particularly strong in the message to the church in Sardis, which is told that Christ will come like a thief so that they will not know at what time his coming will take place (3:3). As with the image of the watchful servants, one can hardly avoid being reminded of the numerous other places in the New Testament where the image of a thief is used similarly to bring across the *very same message* of the suddenness and unpredictability of Christ's coming which necessitates readiness at any time: Jesus' parable as told in Mt 24:42-44 and Lk 12:39-40, Paul's call to be ready for Christ's coming in 1 Th 5,1-8, Peter's affirmation that the delay in Jesus' coming was due to God's mercy not failure (2 Peter 3,8-10) and, last but not least, Jesus' warning not to be found naked when he suddenly returns in Revelation 16:15.<sup>81</sup> Both Mt 24:42-44 and Lk 12:39-40 are in the immediate context of these Gospel's watchful servant parables and are told in the same breath, with the same purpose.

Johnson claims that the thief image in Rev 3:3 does not refer to Christ's eschatological coming but rather “to Christ's coming against them (opposing them) in judgement”<sup>82</sup>. This is highly

78 Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 19-20, italics in the original.

79 Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 17.

80 Roloff, *The Revelation of John*, 65. Similarly Schüssler Fiorenza, *Revelation*, 49.

81 See Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 221; Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 275-276; Beasley-Murray, *Revelation*, 96; Behm, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 25; Caird, *The Revelation of Saint John*, 48-49; Giblin, *The Book of Revelation*, 63-64; Giesen, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 127-128; Koester, *Revelation and the end of all things*, 67; Ladd, *A commentary on the Revelation of John*, 57; Lohse, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 31; Morris, *Revelation*, 76; Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 95; Osborne, *Revelation*, 177; Ramsay, *The letters to the seven churches*, 274-275; Roloff, *Revelation*, 58; Schüssler Fiorenza, *Revelation*, 48; Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 253-255; Thompson, *Revelation*, 79; Wikenhauser, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 45; Witherington, *Revelation*, 105.

Again I am in no position to say if any of these has been influenced by any other one. But again what this definitely shows is that Revelation's message is not a singular phenomenon but rather is quite consistent with what the rest of the NT has to say.

82 Johnson, *Revelation*, 53. Similarly Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 198.275-276; Beasley-Murray, *Revelation*, 96-97; Caird, *The Revelation of Saint John*, 49; Giesen, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 128; Ladd, *A commentary on the Revelation of John*, 57; Morris, *Revelation*, 76; Mounce, *The Book of*

speculative, without any background in the text and in clear opposition to both the immediate context of 3:5 (the promise to the overcomers) and the use of the image throughout the rest of the NT<sup>83</sup> (as even many of the idea's supporters say: "This is language usually used of the second coming of Christ ... and emphasizes not the suddenness of the Lord's return but its unexpectedness"<sup>84</sup>). The conditional form of 3:3 that Beale<sup>85</sup> and others refer to is not about the condition under which Christ will come or not but about the way the church will experience his coming. If they do not wake up beforehand, his coming will surprise them like a thief. Bauckham's comments are particularly helpful:

The *parousia* may come either as judgment or as blessing. The conditional clauses in 3:3 and 3:20 do not of course make the *parousia* itself conditional on the repentance or continued unrepentance of Christians; they do make its character as judgment or blessing conditional on the state in which the Christians are then found.<sup>86</sup>

In the same way Aune's suggestion that Christ's "coming in judgement, which has negative connotations (2:5, 16; 3:3), ... is apparently distinct from the return of Christ, which has positive connotations (2:25; 3:11)"<sup>87</sup>, is highly misleading and ignores the fact that the eschatological return of Christ is in judgement as well as in salvation. This is the thrust of the whole book: Those who are ready when their Lord returns will take part in the wedding of the Lamb and enjoy the new Jerusalem, those who are not will experience the coming Christ as their judge before whom nobody can stand. Bauckham rightly points to "the double aspect of the master's return as blessing and judgement"<sup>88</sup> which he finds spelt out in Lk 12:42-48. Jeremias thinks that "the application of the parable [of the thief] to the return of the Son of Man is strange; for if the subject of discourse is a nocturnal burglary, it refers to a disastrous and alarming event, whereas the *Parousia*, at least for the disciples of Jesus, is the great day of joy."<sup>89</sup> However this is adequately refuted by Bauckham's insight that "Rev 3:3 is sufficient evidence that, even for Christians, the *parousia* may be regarded as threat."<sup>90</sup>

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*Revelation*, 95; Osborne, *Revelation*, 178; Witherington, *Revelation*, 105-106.

83 Yarbrow Collins (*The Apocalypse*, 24): "This imagery belongs to the apocalyptic mentality which expects a sudden and violent end of the world."

Also: Bauckham, *The climax of prophecy*, 104; Lilje, *Das letzte Buch der Bibel*, 104; Lohse, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 31; Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 253-255.

84 Ladd, *A commentary on the Revelation of John*, 57.

85 Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 275-276.

86 Bauckham, *The climax of prophecy*, 108. While I am not so sure whether 3:20 belongs here, what Bauckham says certainly is true for 3:3.

87 Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 221.

88 Bauckham, *The climax of prophecy*, 97.

89 Jeremias, *The parables of Jesus*, 49.

90 Bauckham, *The climax of prophecy*, 97, n. 15. In direct reply to Jeremias.

The thief image is important because the deeds (ἔργα) of the church in Sardis had not been found completed in the sight of God (3:2). The advice is to remember what they had received and to follow it (τήρει; 3:3<sup>91</sup>) in order to be prepared for Christ's coming. This has a close parallel in the messages to the other churches: Their ἔργα are a crucial part of Christ's evaluation of each church. Similary τηρέω, which certainly is a keyword in Revelation's frame<sup>92</sup>, is also important in a number of the other messages, even more so together with κρατείν<sup>93</sup>, which seems to partly replace τηρέω in the seven messages and is used there in a very similar way (2:13, 3:11) yet also for the sharp contrast of those following other authorities than Jesus (2:14.15).

It is therefore safe to conclude from the common use of ἔργα, τηρέω, the servant terminology and the thief image and that the frame's urgent call to follow the words of God in Revelation again sounds strongly in the seven messages. This is underlined by Jesus' exclamation in 3:11 "I shall come soon!" which in this form (ἔρχομαι ταχὺ) occurs only in the seven messages (2:16<sup>94</sup>; 3:11)<sup>95</sup> and in the frame (22:7.12.20)<sup>96</sup>.

The same urgency to be prepared also is supported by two similar sentences in 2:23 (καὶ δώσω ὑμῖν ἐκάστῳ κατὰ τὰ ἔργα ὑμῶν) and 22:12 (ἀποδοῦναι ἐκάστῳ ὡς τὸ ἔργον ἐστὶν αὐτοῦ), both focussing on Jesus' rewards for people's deeds. At the parousia Jesus will come in either judgement or blessing, depending on how he finds his servants and whether or not they have washed their clothes (22:14)<sup>97</sup>.

This image in 22:14 of washing the clothes and the blessings promised to those who do so have counterparts in the seven messages' promises to those who overcome, as well as in the book's body: clean clothes (3:5, 7:14), access to the tree of life (2:7, 22:2) and the right to

91 See also the (unlikely) alternative reading of 3:2 (τηρησον τὰ λοιπὰ) which underlines the same concept. But even the more likely στήρισον supports the same thrust.

The alternative reading of 3:3, omitting τηρει, is extremely unlikely.

92 See 2.4.1.

93 See 2.4.1.3.

94 ἔρχομαι σοι ταχὺ.

95 Note the alternative reading of 2:5 (ερχομαι σοι ταχυ) which is too weakly attested to support any argument, but would fit in this picture quite nicely.

96 See Bauckham, *The climax of prophecy*, 93, n. 7.

97 οἱ ποιῶντες τὰς ἐντολὰς αὐτοῦ as an alternative reading for οἱ πλύνοντες τὰς στολὰς αὐτῶν is rightly rejected by most commentators who care to discuss it: Aune, *Revelation 17-22*, 1197-1198; Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 1140; Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 407 n. 22; Osborne, *Revelation*, 799; Thomas, *Revelation 8-22*, 520-521; Witherington, *Revelation*, 281 n. 578.

Still more commentators do not mention it, among them Beasley-Murray, *Revelation*, 339; Behm, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 114; Boring, *Revelation*, 225; Giesen, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 487; Johnson, *Revelation*, 205-206; Koester, *Revelation and the end of all things*, 202; Ladd, *A commentary on the Revelation of John*, 293; Lilje, *Das letzte Buch der Bibel*, 293; Lohse, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 110; Morris, *Revelation*, 253; Roloff, *Revelation*, 251; Thompson, *Revelation*, 187; Wikenhauser, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 163.

enter the new Jerusalem (3:12, 21:27). We can conclude that both the book's frame and the seven messages are related to one another and to Revelation's body.

### 3.3.1.3 *Jesus' self-declarations*

The self-declarations at the beginning of each of the seven messages naturally have a strong emphasis on the person of Christ. Formally these are not Ἐγὼ εἶμι-sayings but rather the NT version of the OT prophetic formula (“The τὰδε λέγει in 2:1, 8, 12, 18; 3:1, 7,14, is customarily used in the LXX to announce a prophetic message.”)<sup>98</sup> and thus underline the prophetic character of the seven messages in particular and Revelation in general. However I suggest that functionally they are one separate set of the same kind of self-designations as the Ἐγὼ εἶμι-sayings and like them contain some of Revelation's highest christology. Referring to the self-designations of Christ Lilje states that “die Christologie der ‘Sendschreiben’ ist fast die fortgeschrittenste im ganzen Neuen Testament”<sup>99</sup>. Boring calls them “christological ascription[s]” or “christological affirmation[s]”<sup>100</sup>, recognizing their strong emphasis on christology. Beale states that the use of the τὰδε λέγει-formula “to introduce the sayings of Christ in the letters emphasizes that Christ assumes the role of Yahweh.”<sup>101</sup> Not surprisingly some of them are the same or at least similar to the frame's Ἐγὼ εἶμι-sayings: The phrase “the first and the last” of 2:8 is related to the same or similar words in the Ἐγὼ εἶμι-sayings of 1:8 (the ἄλφα and the ὦ)<sup>102</sup> and 22:13 (the ἄλφα and the ὦ, the first and the last, the beginning and the end) as well as that in 1:17-18<sup>103</sup> (the First and the Last, the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever). The sevenfold spirit appears not only in 3:1, but in 1:4 as well, with 22:17 another reference to the spirit. In 3:14 we find another one of these parallels, here to 1:5 (ὁ μάρτυς, ὁ πιστός – ὁ μάρτυς ὁ πιστός καὶ ἀληθινός).

### 3.3.1.4 *The seven churches*

The seven churches of Asia Minor feature in both the frame and in the seven messages. In the frame, while not mentioned individually (1:4; 22:16), they are told to follow Revelation's

98 Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 65, n. 9; see also Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 121; Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 229; Beasley-Murray, *The Book of Revelation*, 72; Behm, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 16; Boring, *Revelation*, 87-88; Giesen, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 93; Johnson, *Revelation*, 35; Lohse, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 24; Osborne, *Revelation*, 111; Roloff, *Revelation*, 42; Schüssler Fiorenza, *Revelation*, 46; Thompson, *Revelation*, 62; Wikenhauser, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 36; Yarbrow Collins, *The Apocalypse*, 13-14.

99 Lilje, *Das letzte Buch der Bibel*, 71. Similarly Bousset, *Die Offenbarung Johannis*, 239.

100 Boring, *Revelation*, 88.

101 Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 229.

102 See 3.2.3.

103 1:17-18 is not in the frame, but it supports the point that the τὰδε λέγει-formula is close to an Ἐγὼ εἶμι-saying. That it is a connecting feature of the frame and the seven messages still stands even if this commonality is not exclusive.

advice (1:3; 22:7.12.14), in the seven messages they each receive a specific piece of advice for each of their specific situations. While the connection through the seven churches as a common feature is much stronger between the seven messages and the inaugural vision of 1:9-20 (see 3.3.3.1) than between the frame and the seven messages it still remains a common feature that points to the fact that the frame and the seven messages belong in the one book together.

As we have seen there are some links between Revelation's frame and the seven messages. While they may not be as clear as those between some other parts of the book, they definitely are strong enough to show that Revelation's frame is an introduction to the seven messages at least as much as to the rest of the book.

### 3.3.2 The frame and Revelation's body

A multitude of thoughts, phrases, images and words connect Revelation's frame to the book's body. I therefore restrict myself to the more important ones.

The ἀποκάλυψις Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ was meant to be shown (δείκνυμι) to his servants (1:1; 22:6). It is shown (4:1; 17:1; 21:9.10; 22:1) to John who reports what he sees to the church, the servants of God. He must see (1:2.17.19.20<sup>104</sup>) and hear (1:10; 22:8) quite a lot: in Revelation's body he uses εἶδον 43 times<sup>105</sup> and ἤκουσα 25 times.

As I have mentioned (3.3.1) the concept of God's servants plays a vital role in the frame (1:1; 22:6.9). The same is true for the body where the servants of God appear a number of times (6:11; 7:3; 10:7<sup>106</sup>; 11:18<sup>107</sup>; 19:2.5; 22:3)<sup>108</sup>. Particularly noteworthy among these is 11:18, where the servants are given the reward that Jesus says he is bringing with him in 22:12, which is an important feature in the synoptic servant parables as well. This idea that someone's deeds will determine what will be their reward is strong in the rest of the body as well (9:20; 14:13; 16:11; 18:6; 20:12.13)<sup>109</sup>.

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104 See also various forms of βλέπω which refer to John seeing the visions (1:11.12; 22:8).

105 Plus εἶδες (5 times in 17:8.12.15.16.18) referring to the seer and ὥφθη which appears three times (11:19; 12:1.3) meaning that John could see something.

106 “his [God's] servants the prophets”.

107 “your [God's] servants the prophets and your saints and those who reverence your name”.

108 Pattemore, ““Blessed are those who hear,”” part 3.2 (p. 9-10 in my print-out); Pattemore, *The People of God in the Apocalypse*, 133.

109 This certainly is not unique to the frame and body, yet it is a very strong theme in both of them and therefore connects these parts to each other as well as to the seven messages.

Abir<sup>110</sup> drew my attention to the fact that the parallel macarisms of 1:3 and 22:7<sup>111</sup> have counterparts in Revelation's body (and one more in the frame: 22:14). All of them proclaim those μακάριοι who are faithful and ready to receive their Lord and consequently enjoy his favour when he comes: 14:13, 16:15, 19:9a and 20:6. DeSilva notes that they “are part of John's larger program of outlining for the members of the seven churches the path to honor before God's court.”<sup>112</sup>

One of the phrases that has links to all parts of Revelation is the identification of Jesus as the one who was and who is and who is to come. As such we only find it in the frame (1:4.8) and in the body (4:8; 11:17; 16:5) but not in the seven messages, yet the formulas “the ἄλφα and the ὦ” (1:8; 21:6; 22:13), “the First and the Last” (1:17; 2:8; 22:13) and “the Beginning and the End” (21:6; 22:13) are very closely linked to it. They all emphasize Jesus' everlasting reign from beginning to end.

Jesus as the ruler over the (kings of the) earth (1:5) is a theme of the frame that is strongly reflected in the body (11:15.17; 15:3; 17:14; 19:6.16; 20:4).

Christ's redemptive work is praised not only in 1:5 but in a number of places in the body as well, particularly in the worship of him as the “Lamb, who was slain” (5:9.12; 7:14; 12:11: 13:8<sup>113</sup>).

That through redemption he has made his followers priests of God (1:6), echoes in 5:10 where the very same words are sung, and in 20:6 where those who rise in the first resurrection serve as priests of God.<sup>114</sup>

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110 Abir, *The cosmic conflict of the Church*, 245.

111 See 3.2.3.

112 DeSilva, *The hope of glory*, 196.

113 Some might like 19:13 to be included in this list as well, since Hays (*The moral vision of the New Testament*, 175) suggests that the blood on the rider's robe is actually his own. Similarly: Giesen, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 422 (contra his own earlier words, see below); Johnson, *Revelation*, 178-179; Morris, *Revelation*, 224. Caird (*A commentary on the Revelation of John*, 242-244) argues that it is the blood of the saints and Boring (*Revelation*, 196) claims that “this blood is not the blood of his enemies but his [Christ's] own martyr blood in union with the martyr blood of his followers”. Referring to the parallel in Isaiah 63:1-6 most other scholars argue against both of these ideas and claim that it is the blood of his enemies to which I am inclined to agree: Aune, *Revelation* 17-22, 1057; Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 957-960; Beasley-Murray, *Revelation*, 280; Behm, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 100; Giesen, *Johannes-Apokalypse*, 152; Ladd, *A commentary on the Revelation of John*, 254-255; Lilje, *Das letzte Buch der Bibel*, 260; Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 353-354; Osborne, *Revelation*, 682-683; Poythress, *The returning King*, 174-175; Roloff, *Revelation*, 218; Thomas, *Revelation 8-22*, 386-387; Wikenhauser, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 143; Witherington, *Revelation*, 243.

114 Note Exodus 19:6: “You will be for me a kingdom of priests” (NIV). Cf. Schüssler Fiorenza, *Priester für Gott*, 66-155.

The glory belongs to him so he is worshipped throughout the book, in the frame (1:6) as well as in the body (4:9.11; 5:12-13; 7:12; 12:10; 15:4; 19:1.7)<sup>115</sup>. Worship is expected from the people of the earth (11:13; 14:7; 16:9) yet they are slow to give it.

God is the Lord of the prophets (22:6). They proclaimed God's word (10:7; 19:10), suffered at the hands of his enemies (16:6; 18:24) and are redeemed by their Lord (11:18; 18:20).

The list in 22:15 of those who shall not be admitted to the city of God but face separation from God is quite similar to that of 21:8 (and 9:21).

Jesus as the Morningstar (22:16) is strongly contrasted by the star Wormwood of 8:10-11 which may be identical to the fallen star of 9:1. Beale argues that both are “either an angel executing judgment or, more probably, in line with Isaiah 14, an angel representing sinful people, undergoing judgment along with those people.”<sup>116</sup>

Wikenhauser's suggestion<sup>117</sup> that the star of 9:1 is the angel of 20:1-3 is not convincing. While they both come from heaven/sky and open the abyss, the star falls whereas the angel descends. Also the situations in 9:1 and 20:1-3 are entirely different. While 20:1-3 is about shutting the Dragon which is Satan away, there is no trace of that in 9:1. Rather the context of 9:1 (where the angel of the abyss is called Abaddon in Hebrew and Apollyon in Greek, both meaning destruction or destroyer) and 12:9 suggests that this fallen star(-angel) is Satan himself<sup>118</sup>. Thomas, however, rightly points out that “no angel retains permanent possession of the key of the abyss, so God had to give it to him (ἐδόθη αὐτῷ ... ) for use on this special occasion (cf. 20:1 also)”<sup>119</sup>, thus while the key will have been the same one, the star/angel need not and probably is different.

Water of life for the thirsty is offered for free not only in 22:17, but in 7:17 and 21:6 as well. It flows from the throne of God in a crystal clear stream (22:1). Yet again there also is a sharp contrast in the bitter water of 8:11, the draught (11:6) and the water turned to blood (11:6; 16:4).

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115 The seven messages are his own words and therefore there can hardly be any worship mentioned there.

116 Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 491; contra: Behm, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 51; Morris, *Revelation*, 124; Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 184; Osborne, *Revelation*, 354.

117 Wikenhauser, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 76; similarly Giesen, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 217.

118 Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 491-493.502-504; Boring, *Revelation*, 136-137; Yarbrough Collins, *The Apocalypse*, 60; contra Aune, *Revelation 6-16*, 525.534; Johnson, *Revelation*, 96-97; Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 191; Osborne, *Revelation*, 373.

119 Thomas, *Revelation 8-22*, 27 (on Rev 9:1).



Last, but certainly not least, as shown before (3.2.2) both 22:6 and 22:8-9 not only are a part of both the body and the closing section of Revelation, they also have important parallels in the body (19:9 and 21:5 for 22:6 and 19:10 for 22:8-9) and in the frame (1:1-3).

We can conclude that there are many links between the frame and the body and hence 1:1-8 and 22:6-21 do form a frame, not only around 1:9-3:22 (see 3.3.3), but encompassing Revelation's body as well. This underlines the fact that all of Revelation belongs together, that it is one book, written for one purpose, as one greater whole. The book's body is directed to the seven churches (the addressees of the letter) as much as the seven messages. This is a clear voice of opposition against any tendencies of ascribing a different purpose and message (or even origin) to Revelation's two major parts. As 4.3.2 will show, there are numerous other reasons beyond this to support the singularity of Revelation's message.

### **3.3.3 The inaugural vision (ch. 1:9-20) and the seven messages**

The picture is more complex for the second half of Revelation's first chapter. As we have seen earlier, it is linked to the verses before, but as we shall see now, its connection to the seven messages is even stronger. Often the two parts (1:9-20 and 2:1-3:22) are even seen as one vision with 1:9-20 as the introduction to the seven messages<sup>120</sup>.

#### **3.3.3.1 The seven churches**

It may seem pointless to mention it once again, but it is too important to be left out, and so I reiterate that the whole of Revelation was directed to the seven churches that receive individual messages in chapters 2-3. They are explicitly named exactly two times: in a list in 1:11 where John is commissioned to send the record of his vision to them and individually at the beginning of each individual message, each time with a clear commission to John to write to/for them. They were to receive and read certainly the whole book (which, as we have seen, was actually a letter to them) but especially the seven messages in particular. These messages were what John was to record for the churches in the very first place.

#### **3.3.3.2 Rev. 1:20 and 2:1**

While, as we shall see in 3.3.3.3, most of Jesus' self-declarations at the beginning of each of the seven messages have a clear reference to the inaugural vision of 1:9-20, the connection of the first one to the second half of chapter 1 is particularly obvious. Not only does 2:1 refer

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<sup>120</sup> Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, c.60; Giblin, *The Book of Revelation*, 12.44; Johnson, *Revelation*, 18.27; Osborne, *Revelation*, 30.77; Schüssler Fiorenza, *Revelation*, 35.45; Strelan, *Where earth meets heaven*, 13.34; Thompson, *Revelation*, 54; Yarbrow Collins, *The Apocalypse*, 10.

back to the general image of 1:9-20<sup>121</sup>, it directly picks up from the preceding verse (1:20): The image of Christ walking among the seven lampstands (1:13), holding the seven stars in his right hand (1:16), is explained to John in 1:20 as Christ being among the seven churches of Revelation and holding their “angels”. At least formally the seven messages are directed to these very “angels” of the churches<sup>122</sup>. The continuity from 1:20 to 2:1 is obvious. Thompson notes: “That explanation [in 1:20] functions as a transition to the prophetic pronouncements that follow (chapters 2-3).”<sup>123</sup> The vision of 1:9-20 and the seven messages belong together.

### 3.3.3.3 *Jesus' self-declarations*

This is underlined by the fact that nearly every one of Jesus' self-declarations at the beginning of each of the seven messages repeats an aspect of his that already has been mentioned in 1:9-20<sup>124</sup>.

I have dealt with 2:1's connection to the whole image of 1:9-20 already (3.3.3.2). “This says the First and the Last, the one who was dead and came to life again” (2:8) refers back to 1:18 (“I am the First and the Last and the Living One, I was dead and behold I am alive for ever and ever”).<sup>125</sup> Both 2:12 and 1:16 speak of Jesus as having a/the “sharp two-edged sword”.<sup>126</sup> In 2:18 Jesus describes himself as having eyes like flames of fire and feet like bronze, which is exactly what John observed about him earlier (1:14 – feet; 1:15 – eyes). However in all of Revelation the title “Son of God” is only used here in 2:18.<sup>127</sup> As for 3:1 only half of Jesus' self-declaration is also found in 1:9-20: the fact that he has the seven stars (1:16.20). That he

121 Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 142; Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 229; Giesen, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 97; Hughes, *The Book of Revelation*, 33; Johnson, *Revelation*, 35; Koester, *Revelation and the end of all things*, 57; Kraft, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 55; Ladd, *A commentary on the Revelation of John*, 37-38; Lohse, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 24; Morris, *Revelation*, 59; Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 67-68; Osborne, *Revelation*, 111-112; Strelan, *Where earth meets heaven*, 56; Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 131; Thompson, *Revelation*, 64; Yarbrow Collins, *The Apocalypse*, 15.

122 Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 107-108; Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 217; Behm, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 15; Giesen, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 90.97; Ladd, *A commentary on the Revelation of John*, 35; Lohse, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 22; Morris, *Revelation*, 56-57; Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 63; Osborne, *Revelation*, 98; Roloff, *Revelation*, 38; Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 117.127; Wikenhauser, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 34.

123 Thompson, *Revelation*, 58.

124 Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 121; Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 225; Beasley-Murray, *Revelation*, 72; Behm, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 16; Boring, *Revelation*, 88; Caird, *The Revelation of Saint John*, 27; Ellul, *Apocalypse*, 120-121; Giblin, *The Book of Revelation*, 50-51; Giesen, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 83.94; Gilbertson, *God and History in the Book of Revelation*, 90; Harrington, *Revelation*, 56; Hendriksen, *More than conquerors*, 25; Johnson, *Revelation*, 35; Koester, *Revelation and the end of all things*, 56; Lohse, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 23; Morris, *Revelation*, 53.58; Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 64; Poythress, *The returning King*, 83; Strelan, *Where earth meets heaven*, 53; Thompson, *Revelation*, 62; Wikenhauser, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 36.

125 e.g. Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 160-161.

126 e.g. Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 180-181.

127 e.g. Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 208-210.

also has “the seven spirits of God” itself has a link to 1:4 and 5:6<sup>128</sup>, but admittedly it is not found in 1:9-20.<sup>129</sup>

The situation is similar in 3:7. Neither ὁ ἅγιος nor ὁ ἀληθινός” can be found in 1:9-20, nor in the book's frame<sup>130</sup>. But the key of David, though not identified by this name, probably has a counterpart in the keys of death and Hades of 1:18<sup>131</sup>. Obviously some scribe saw them as identical: we find Δαυίδ replaced by του αδου or even του θανατου και του αδου in part of the textual tradition<sup>132</sup>. Essentially there are two ways in which this connection can be seen<sup>133</sup>.

The first option understands both keys as symbols for the authority to bestow or withhold salvation. The keys of death and Hades enable Christ to free the captives of death, to open up a way out of Hades: “He has power to give life (cf. John 5:26-28) and either to consign to death permanently or to release therefrom ... Because of Christ's victory over death no one can be a prisoner in death and Hades except by His own choice. Christ has the keys.”<sup>134</sup> The key of David draws upon Isaiah 22:22 where Eliakim is promised “the key to the house of David; what he opens no-one can shut, and what he shuts no-one can open.” As Beale shows<sup>135</sup> this is understood prophetically in Rev 3:7, thus implying that, “as the root and offspring of David (cf. Rev. 5:5; 22:16), Christ in the fulfilled sense controls the entrance to David's house, which ultimately refers to the Messianic kingdom.”<sup>136</sup> Both keys portray the same fact of salvation, but from a different angle, either as freeing from death or as granting eternal life. Giesen seems to see it in this way as can be seen in his comments on 1:18:

Es geht ... um die von Gott verliehene Vollmacht Christi, das Totenreich und den Hades zu öffnen, d.h., er ist mächtig, das endgültige Heil zu schenken. Wenn es von Christus in

128 Note also 4:5: “Before the throne, seven lamps were blazing. These are the seven spirits of God.”

129 e.g. Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 244-245.

130 But it is noteworthy that they are used as attributes of God/Christ in other parts of Revelation: in 4:8 κύριος ὁ θεὸς ὁ παντοκράτωρ is hailed ἅγιος, ἅγιος, ἅγιος, in 6:10 God is addressed as ὁ δεσπότης ὁ ἅγιος καὶ ἀληθινός combining the very same attributes as in 3:7. The combination of ἀληθινός and δίκαιος is attributed to God in his deeds (15:3) and judgements (16:7; 19:2) three times.

The combination of ἀληθινός and πιστός in 19:11 as the title of the rider on the white horse is interesting to note, however the parallel is even stronger to 3:14 (see there).

131 contra Thompson, *Revelation*, 81 and Witherington, *Revelation*, 106. Aune (*Revelation 1-5*, 103; on 1:18, italics in the original) seems to take a middle line: “The reference to the exalted Jesus as the possessor of *keys* calls to mind the reference to his possession of the ‘key of David’ in Rev 3:7b, though there is no apparent relationship between the metaphors.”

132 Beale (*The Book of Revelation*, 283-284 n. 191) lists 104\*, 218, 459, 620, 2050, 2067\* for του αδου and 1893 for του θανατου και του αδου.

133 Ellul (*Apocalypse*, 121), Harrington (*Revelation*, 70), Poythress (*The returning King*, 91) and Strelan (*Where earth meets heaven*, 83) offer hardly any explanation as to what this messianic authority of David over death and Hades means, making it hard to categorise their views. But they appear quite confident about the connection.

134 Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 112.

135 Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 284.

136 Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 275. Also Lohse, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 32.

3,7 heißt, daß er den Schlüssel Davids hat, bedeutet das wohl, daß er den Zugang zur Davidsstadt, dem neuen Jerusalem (21,9-22,5), verschafft.<sup>137</sup>

The other option similarly understands the key of David as the messianic authority to give access to the people and kingdom of God. However, the keys of death and Hades are understood differently as not referring to the release of humans into God's life but rather as referring to the binding (and temporary release, 9:1; 20:1-3) of the forces of evil. As in the view outlined above, this is based on Jesus' victory over death on the cross. But not in the sense that death was always confined to the abyss and now has to let go of its victims. Rather, Christ's authority over death means that death is now confined to the abyss and thus no longer able to destroy the life of God's creation. This consequently means that death also has to let go of his grip on humanity, but that is not the primary implication of Jesus having the keys of death and Hades. It refers to death being locked away, locked out, its destructive power thereby nullified, while the key of David opens the doors to the New Jerusalem into which the true Israelites are welcomed. Both however are due to Jesus' messianic authority. Roloff thus comments on 3:7: "The description offers a complementary addition to 1:18: Jesus not only has the keys to death and Hades, that is, he is able not only to destroy the range of influence of the demonic powers, but he also has the power of the key that provides entry into God's kingdom (cf. Matt. 16:19)."<sup>138</sup> Personally I find this explanation more convincing.

In either of these explanations the key of David "could be a polemic against the local synagogue, which claimed that only those worshipping within their doors could be considered God's true people"<sup>139</sup>. The image would thus polemically emphasize that access to the Messianic kingdom was for the true people of God, the followers of Christ and not for those who were Jews by name but were in fact the synagogue of Satan. It is also suggested that this was a reaction to the excommunication of Christians from the Jewish community<sup>140</sup>. Whether polemical or not, it is obvious that "the claims of the Jewish element in Philadelphia were apparently to the contrary. These opponents could not accept that complete authority to admit or exclude from the city of David, the new Jerusalem, was His [Christ's]."<sup>141</sup> However this

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137 Giesen, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 90; similarly: Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 283-284; Beasley-Murray, *Revelation*, 99-100; Behm, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 26; Farrer, *The Revelation of St. John the Divine*, 80; Giblin, *The Book of Revelation*, 63; Giesen, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 131-132; Hughes, *The Book of Revelation*, 58; Kiddle, *The Revelation of St. John*, 49; Lohse, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 32; Sweet, *Revelation*, 101-103; Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 275; Wikenhauser, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 46; Yarbrow Collins, *The Apocalypse*, 27.

138 Roloff, *Revelation*, 61.

139 Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 284.

140 e.g. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 284; Giesen, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 132; Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 100.

141 Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 275.

does not contradict the similarity of the key of David to the keys of death and Hades, even if the latter are without any reference to Jewish opposition.

As for 3:14 the connections are stronger to Revelation's frame than to the inaugural vision. Particularly Jesus' self-identification as "the faithful and true witness" is related to 1:5 (ὁ μάρτυς ὁ πιστός), 19:11 (πιστὸς καὶ ἀληθινός as the name of the rider on the white horse) or 22:20 (Jesus referring to himself as ὁ μαρτυρῶν ταῦτα) rather than to anything in 1:9-20<sup>142</sup>. "Elsewhere the adjectives are reserved for the prophetic message that John has received and transmits: οἱ λόγοι πιστοὶ καὶ ἀληθινοί, the message is trustworthy and true (22:15; 22:6)."<sup>143</sup> The "Amen", like "the faithful and true witness" which it underlines, has no direct counterparts in the inaugural vision<sup>144</sup>. Only "the origin (ἡ ἀρχὴ) of the creation of God" has a link to 1:17-18: "the First and the Last and the Living One". This becomes obvious when comparing both phrases to 22:13: "the A and the Ω, the First and the Last, the Beginning (ἡ ἀρχὴ) and the End." That Jesus was before everything else "necessitates" that he is "the source of creation, not the result of it"<sup>145</sup>, which is reflected in him being the Living One, the source of life rather than a recipient.<sup>146</sup>

It has to be noted however that Beale understands 3:14 as calling Jesus "the sovereign inaugurator of the new creation of God"<sup>147</sup> thus referring back to 1:5 where he is said to be "the firstborn from the dead". Poythress agrees: "By his resurrection, he has inaugurated or begun the new creation."<sup>148</sup> I might be convinced were it not for the obvious need to insert the word "new".

Farrer suggests that John sought "inspiration for messages to the church by going back over the text of the vision he has just written down."<sup>149</sup> Kraft argues similarly: "Der Verfasser hat in der Berufungsvision [1:9-20] keine geeigneten Prädikate mehr gefunden; daher greift er für

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142 e.g. Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 255-256.

Note also 2:13 where the martyr Antipas is called ὁ μάρτυς μου ὁ πιστός μου.

143 Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 256.

144 Hughes (*The Book of Revelation*, 63-64) writes "that we add our 'Amen' in him to the glory of God in our worship (2 Cor. 1:20; cf. the 'Amens' in Rev. 1:6, 7, 18[?]; 5:14; 7:12; 19:4; 22:20, 21)." However this (single) reference to 1:18 is doubtful because it requires a relatively weak variant reading of the Greek text. Note also that the "Amen" in Rev 3:14 is not what we attribute to Christ but how he introduces himself, it is not our response to what he does but how he presents his own identity, it is not an affirming exclamation but divine self-revelation.

145 Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 303.

146 However only some scholars see this link, sometimes together 1:8, 2:8, 21:6 and 22:13: Giesen, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 139; Johnson, *Revelation*, 61; Ladd, *A commentary on the Revelation of John*, 65; Strelan, *Where earth meets heaven*, 88; Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 302-304.

147 Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 298. Italics added.

148 Poythress, *The returning King*, 93, italics in original.

149 Farrer, *The Revelation of St. John the Divine*, 70.

die Selbstbezeichnung Christi auf die Prädikate im Briefpräskript 1,4-6 zurück.”<sup>150</sup> This implies that the seven messages are not the account of a genuine vision but made up by the author, an idea which I strongly oppose. But it is also weakly argued. While, as we have seen, each of the first four messages really refers further back (the first to 1:20 (but also to 1:13.16), the second to 1:18, the third to 1:16 and the fourth to 1:14-15) this is no longer the case for the remaining three messages. As we have seen they have links to all parts of the book, including the two parts of the first chapter as well as Revelation's body and conclusion. This, by the way, applies to Jesus' self predications in the first four messages as well.

The general picture, however, remains clear: Rev. 1:9-20 and the seven messages are inextricably connected, “integrally related”<sup>151</sup>. They belong together.

#### 3.3.3.4 *The command to write*

Osborne provides some important insight: “It is also helpful to realize that the introductory γράψον (*grapson*, write) in each letter reenacts the commission to write in 1:11, 19. In other words, chapters 2 and 3 are part of the introductory vision in 1:9-3:22.”<sup>152</sup> Note however that this does not limit the role of 1:9-20 to introducing the seven messages. They also introduce the visions of Revelation's body as well (cf. 3.3.4).

#### 3.3.3.5 *John's companionship in hardship*

There is (at least) one more aspect linking 1:9-20 to the seven messages. In writing to the seven churches in 1:9 John calls himself their companion in their suffering (θλίψει), in their patient endurance (ὑπομονῇ) and in their witness (μαρτυρίαν). All three of these terms appear again in a number of messages, where Jesus acknowledges the hardship these churches endure because of their faithfulness to him: θλίψις is attested in the case of the church in Smyrna (2:9.10)<sup>153</sup>, ὑπομονή to the churches in Ephesus (2:2.3), Thyatira (2:19) and Philadelphia (3:10)<sup>154</sup>, μαρτύριον to the Church in Pergamum (2:13 – Antipas, ὁ μάρτυς μου ὁ πιστός μου, was killed in your town)<sup>155</sup>. The same hardship is also expressed using other

150 Kraft, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 84.

151 Boring, *Revelation*, 85.

152 Osborne, *Revelation*, 104.

153 Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 201-2; Behm, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 11; Giesen, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 84; Osborne, *Revelation*, 80.

Similarly Thompson (*Revelation*, 55), however he turns suffering into material poverty.

154 Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 76; Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 201-2.230; Behm, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 11; Giesen, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 84; Harrington, *Revelation*, 50; Johnson, *Revelation*, 28; Osborne, *Revelation*, 80; Poythress, *The returning King*, 75; Roloff, *Revelation*, 44.61; Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 85-87.283; Thompson, *Revelation*, 55; Wikenhauser, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 31.

155 Behm, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 11; Poythress, *The returning King*, 75; Yarbrow Collins, *The Apocalypse*, 11.

words in a few of the seven messages, such as the βλασφηημία that the church in Smyrna has to endure (2:9), the “evil men” that the church in Ephesus had to deal with (2:2) and the fact that the church in Pergamum lives “where the throne of Satan is” (2:13). They all point to the fact that the last decade of the first century was no easy time for Christians to live in (see 2.2.2) and that both John himself and the churches experienced a significant amount of struggle with their non-Christian neighbours as is recorded in 1:9 and in the seven messages. It has to be emphasized, however, that this is by no means the only situation Revelation addresses (see 2.2.1, 2.2.3 and 4.2.3).

### **3.3.3.6 One continuous unity: 1:9-3:22**

As we have seen the connections between the inaugural vision and the seven messages are so close that they form one continuous unity. While certainly 1:9-20 introduces the whole of Revelation (3.3.4), the commission to write down and publish what the author was about to see, which concerns not only the seven messages but also all of the following visions, does so in strong conjunction with the seven messages. It cannot be seen separately from them. Boring notes: “The unit of which the ‘letters to the seven churches’ are a part ... should not be interpreted apart from the Christophany of 1:9-20 to which they are integrally related.”<sup>156</sup> If 1:9-20 introduces the book's body, then so do chapters 2-3 in their specific way. As 1:9-20 presents the book's main character, so ch. 2-3 give the core of its message in a condensed form, ready to be developed further in the following chapters: “the express development of the Son of man vision (1:9-20) throughout the letters makes more viable the proposal that the letters function in the same manner in relation to the remainder of the book.”<sup>157</sup> The vision in 1:9-20 is the setting in which the seven messages (and, to the same degree, the rest of Revelation) are given to John. This idea is more clearly developed in chapter 5 of this thesis as a vital part of my hypothesis.

### **3.3.4 The inaugural vision (ch. 1:9-20) and Revelation's body**

As for Revelation's inaugural vision, there is not very much that directly connects it to the book's body. Yet there still is enough evidence to suggest that the two parts belong to the same book, to the same vision.

For example the first verse of the book's body (4:1) refers directly to the first thing John experienced in his vision (1:10)<sup>158</sup>: the voice like a trumpet that addressed him right in the

<sup>156</sup> Boring, *Revelation*, 85.

<sup>157</sup> Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 223.

<sup>158</sup> Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 317; Beasley-Murray, *Revelation*, 111; Behm, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 29; Boring, *Revelation*, 100; Caird, *The Revelation of Saint John*, 60; Giblin, *The Book of*

beginning, commissioning him to write what he would see, addresses him again after the seven messages, inviting him to see what we know as Revelation's body.

The commission to write and publish given in 1:11.19 is repeated in the body (14:13; 19:9; 21:5), but there also is a part of John's vision that is not supposed to become public (10:4). While this consciousness of the need to record what John sees in order for the churches to read it is not a unique link between the inaugural vision and Revelation's body<sup>159</sup>, it certainly is a significant part of 1:9-20 that remains important throughout the book, including the body.

An interesting connection to the vision of the new Jerusalem is that Jesus' face is described as shining like the sun (1:16) which is no longer needed in 21:23 for the very reason that the glory of God in the person of Jesus the Lamb provides all the light<sup>160</sup>.

A few other aspects of the description of Jesus which we find in 1:9-20 seem to be connected to the body via or at least together with the seven messages.

"I am the First and the Last and the Living One, I was dead and behold I am alive" (1:17-18) is repeated in a slightly varied form in 2:8 and is directly linked to 21:6 (as well as to 1:4-5.8 and 22:13 in the frame) which again is linked to 4:8, 11:17 and 16:5<sup>161</sup>. Jesus' two-edged sword (1:16 and 2:12) comes from his mouth again in 19:15.21. His eyes are like flames of fire (1:14; 2:18; 19:12).

The keys of death and Hades (1:18) may or may not be the key of David (3:7)<sup>162</sup>, but they certainly have quite a lot in common with τὴν κλεῖν τῆς ἀβύσσου of 9:1<sup>163</sup> and 20:1.3<sup>164</sup>.

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*Revelation*, 68; Giesen, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 147; Giesen, *Johannes-Apokalypse*, 53; Harrington, *Revelation*, 79; Hughes, *The Book of Revelation*, 71; Johnson, *Revelation*, 65; Koester, *Revelation and the end of all things*, 71; Kraft, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 95; Ladd, *A commentary on the Revelation of John*, 71; Lohse, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 36; Morris, *Revelation*, 84; Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 118; Osborne, *Revelation*, 218.224; Poythress, *The returning King*, 99; Schüssler Fiorenza, *Revelation*, 57; Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 336; Wikenhauser, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 51; against Roloff, *Revelation*, 68.

Aune (*Revelation 1-5*, 282) acknowledges that it is the same voice but insists that "this is a redactional gloss intended to link this section with 1:9-20. ... This is clearly a redactional attempt to unify the textual units of the final edition of Revelation". Apparently he has to resort to this explanation to keep up his claims of originally unrelated sources which were put together in a series of redactional steps. I am far from convinced.

159 See 22:10 ("Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book") as evidence in the frame that John was supposed to publish his vision. Also each message to a church begins with a command to write: τῷ ἀγγέλῳ τῆς ἐν ... ἐκκλησίας γράφον (2:1.8.12.18; 3:1.7.14).

160 Notably this seems to be ignored by all commentators except Poythress (*The returning King*, 80). It does not contradict the observation made by many scholars that 21:23 is very similar to Isaiah 60:19 (see for example Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 1093) and "a fulfillment of Ezek. 43:2, 5, where the prophet sees from the vantage point of the future that 'the earth shone with his glory' and that 'the glory of the LORD filled the house,' that is, the temple." (Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 1094).

161 See 3.2.3.

162 See 3.3.3.3.

163 9:1 reads ἡ κλεῖς τοῦ φρέατος τῆς ἀβύσσου, essentially saying the same thing.

164 Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 493.984; Osborne, *Revelation*, 96.699; Strelan, *Where earth meets heaven*,



Beale comments: “‘The key of the abyss’ is probably the same as ‘the key of death and Hades,’ which Christ holds in ch. 1 because he has overcome death through his resurrection (1:18).”<sup>165</sup> Thompson's list of texts to which the keys of death and Hades (1:18) could allude is impressive, but hardly helpful, particularly since he does not mention similar images in Revelation<sup>166</sup>.

So while the links between the inaugural vision and Revelation's body are not many and not extremely strong, these two parts of Revelation certainly belong in the book together and they belong to the same visionary experience. This suggests that together they seek to convey one common message to the reader. Aune rightly observes that “John's divine commission narrated in 1:9-20 introduces not only the proclamations to the seven churches dictated to him by the exalted Christ (2:1-3:22) but the main part of Revelation as well (4:1-22:5).”<sup>167</sup>

### **3.4 Message and purpose of the frame**

As I have mentioned above, most of 22:6-21 could be summed up in what Jesus says in 22:7: “I am coming soon. Blessed is he who follows (τηρωων) the words of prophecy of this book.” The same is true for 1:1-8. Not only is Revelation's frame a structural unity, its content also has the same thrust, the same message it wants to bring across. Not all aspects of this message are necessarily unique to the frame, but they are very strongly featured there. I shall illustrate this by a brief observation from five different angles. Each of these aspects can be found both in 1:1-8 and in 22:6-20.

#### **3.4.1 The addressees**

The addressees are quite easily identified: The message of Revelation's frame, and therefore the message of the whole book, is directed to the servants of God (1:1, 22:6), the (seven) churches (in Asia Minor): 1:4.11, 22:16. It is a book for the church, for the “ordinary believer”, not a mystery-book designed to test our ingenuity. “Revelation is addressed to ‘his servants’ – not just prophecy buffs, Ph.D.'s, experts or angels, but you. If you are a follower of Christ, this book is for you and you can understand it.”<sup>168</sup>

It is fair to say that Revelation was not written for non-believers but for Christians who needed more clarity about how to live their faith and serve God in their respective

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165 Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 984.

166 Thompson, *Revelation*, 60.

167 Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 115.

168 Poythress, *The returning King*, 12. One might add that there still is a need for Ph.D.'s. Yet it is probably less about helping to understand the book than about finding a way through all the various theories that have been suggested concerning its meaning.

circumstances. They did not need to be told about the basics of their belief, but rather to deepen their understanding of the eschatological consequences of their faith in Jesus. Gilbertson rightly observes that “the seer seeks to influence his readers' present lives by locating the earthly present in the context of ultimate [that is eschatological] spatial and temporal horizons.”<sup>169</sup> Certainly they would be expected to follow (τηρέω) the parenetic exhortation that God himself would make known to them (see below).

### 3.4.2 Witness to the prophetic authority of the book

According to its frame, Revelation is a message from God himself, which Christ sent to his church through an angel (1:1, 22:6.8.20). Its message is absolutely reliable and far too important to be kept secret. It must be published (1:1.11, 22:6.10) It is trustworthy and true and he who attempts to change anything about it faces severe consequences (22:18-19).

The same is implied when John explicitly (1:3; 10:11; (19:10;) 22:6.7.9.10.18.19) labels his book as prophecy, as a word of God into a situation his people is facing. He also underlines this claim implicitly, drawing on the tradition of the prophets of the Old Testament era. Aune probably is right when he observes that John's commission in 1:9-20 “is a commission for a *particular task* (i.e., to write what he will see and hear), not a report of an inaugural vision calling him to a prophetic vocation (like that of many OT leaders and prophets; cf. Exod 3:1-12; Judg 6:11-17; Isa 6:1-13; Ezek 1:1-3:11)”<sup>170</sup>, but that certainly does not mean that John could not have been a (Christian) prophet before as well as after he received the visions of Revelation and it certainly does not mean that Revelation is not in direct continuation of the OT prophetic tradition.

Beale points to this continuity when he states that “John's book is a prophetic work which concerns the imminent and inaugurated fulfillment of OT prophecies about the kingdom in Jesus Christ”<sup>171</sup>. It becomes even more obvious in Beale's comments on 1:10b-11:

The introduction of the commission uses the language of the prophet Ezekiel's repeated rapture in the Spirit, thus giving John's revelation prophetic authority like that of the OT prophets (cf. Ezek. 2:2; 3:12, 14, 24; 11:1; 43:5). [Footnote: For confirmation of this analysis see also on Rev. 4:2; 17:3; 21:10. ... ] This identification with prophetic authority is enforced by the description of the voice that John hears as “a great voice as a trumpet,” evoking the voice that Moses heard when Yahweh revealed himself on Mount Sinai (Exod. 19:16, 19-20 ... ). And this idea is emphasized further by the command to “write in a book” (γράφον εἰς βιβλίον), which likewise reflects the charge given by Yahweh to

169 Gilbertson, *God and history in the Book of Revelation*, 79.

170 Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 115.

171 Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 183.

his prophetic servants to communicate to Israel the revelation they receive (cf. the LXX of Exod. 17:14; Isa. 30:8; Jer. 37:2; 39:44 ... ).<sup>172</sup>

Another example of Revelation referring to an OT prophet to express John's prophetic authority can be observed in 22:10. There John is told "Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book, because the time is near." This is in deliberate contrast to what Daniel is told at the conclusion of his prophetic vision (Dan 12:4) to "close up and seal the words of the scroll until the time of the end." The link becomes even more obvious when Rev 22:10-11 is compared to the repetition of this command in Dan 12:9-10:

#### **Rev 22:10-11**

Then he told me, "Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book, because the time is near.

Let him who does wrong continue to do wrong; let him who is vile continue to be vile; let him who does right continue to do right; and let him who is holy continue to be holy."

#### **Dan 12:9-10**

He replied, "Go your way, Daniel, because the words are closed up and sealed until the time of the end.

Many will be purified, made spotless and refined, but the wicked will continue to be wicked. None of the wicked will understand, but those who are wise will understand."

For Daniel the "time of the end" was still distant, the words of his prophecy therefore being sealed until the time they concerned. John envisions this "time of the end" to be near. Thus the enigmatic and sealed prophecy of Daniel is now revealed, no longer to be sealed, but to be made known through John. Moyise calls this a "heightening of eschatological expectation"<sup>173</sup>: "John modifies the language of Daniel in order to heighten the eschatological awareness of his readers"<sup>174</sup>. Clearly John sees himself in direct continuity with Daniel.

What Daniel prophesied can now be understood because the prophecies have begun to be fulfilled and the latter days have begun. That "the words of the prophecy" are not sealed means that now, at last, the OT end-time prophecies, especially Daniel's, have begun to be fulfilled and, in the light of that fulfillment, can now be understood better. ... Through Christ's initial fulfillment and teaching, saints can have greater insight into OT prophecy and better obey God's word for their generation.<sup>175</sup>

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172 Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 203.

173 Moyise, *The Old Testament in the Book of Revelation*, 55.

174 Moyise, *The Old Testament in the Book of Revelation*, 58.

175 Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 1130.

Bauckham similarly observes that “John ... understood his prophecy to be the climax of the tradition of Old Testament prophecy”<sup>176</sup>. To Bauckham this observation is so central that he even titles his book accordingly: “The climax of prophecy”<sup>177</sup>.

### 3.4.3 Announcing the soon to be expected coming of Christ

There is a sense of urgency throughout Revelation's frame. The time is at hand (1:3, 22:10), it has to happen soon (1:1, 22:6): he comes with the clouds and every eye will see him (1:7)! Thomas suggests that the reference to Zech 12:10-14 in 1:7 implies universal, worldwide attention to Christ's coming: “In adapting the passage to the Apocalypse, John emphasizes a universality of interest in the advent of the Lord. Such widespread attention is implied in Zechariah 12”<sup>178</sup>. However Zechariah 12:10-14 is limited to Israel. Rather John's reference deliberately broadens the horizon of Zech 12:10-14 to include the whole human race. That every human is included definitely becomes obvious in the last part of 1:7 where “all the peoples/tribes of the earth” are said to react to his coming<sup>179</sup>. Aune comments: “While אֶרֶץ *hā āreṣ* in Zech 12:12 can mean either ‘land (of Israel)’ or ‘earth,’ it probably means the former. Yet in Rev 1:7d, the universalizing tendency noted above is again emphasized in the phrase ‘all the tribes of the earth.’”<sup>180</sup>.

Aune also observes the prominence of the parousia in both Revelation's frame and in Jesus' self-designations. He writes: “Predictions in Revelation of the imminent return of Christ occur primarily in the framework of the book and are formulated as first-person-sayings of the exalted Jesus”<sup>181</sup>. Three times in the frame (22:7.12.20) and twice in the seven messages (2:16; 3:11) Jesus himself announces: “I am coming soon!” There is no time to lose. “The time is near!” (1:3; 22:10) Jesus' coming is imminent, it is to be expected at any time.<sup>182</sup> John received Revelation so that God's servant would know “what must soon take place.” (1:1; similarly 22:6). Stephen Pattemore first directed my attention to Daniel 2 as a mutual cognitive environment (as he, working with Relevance Theory, would redefine context) for

176 Bauckham, *The climax of prophecy*, xvi.

177 Bauckham, *The climax of prophecy*. See chapter 9 on “The Conversion of the Nations” (238-337) in particular.

178 Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 77; similarly Bauckham, *The climax of prophecy*, 320-321; contra Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 55-56; Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 197; Boring, *Revelation*, 80; Kraft, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 35; Osborne, *Revelation*, 68; Roloff, *Revelation*, 27.

179 For the reason of their mourning see 3.4.4.

180 Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 56; similarly Bauckham, *The climax of prophecy*, 320-321 (with a reference to Gen 12:3); Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 197; Beasley-Murray, *Revelation*, 58; Farrer, *The Revelation of St. John the Divine*, 67; Johnson, *Revelation*, 26-27; Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 51; Osborne, *Revelation*, 68-69; Roloff, *Revelation*, 27; Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 78-79.

181 Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 59.

182 For a discussion on the expectation of actual temporal nearness of Christ's return see 5.1.1.

interpreting Rev 1:1: “The content of the revelation is described as ἃ δεῖ γενέσθαι ἐν τάχει, which resonates strongly with Dan 2:28f, and opens for the hearers two further elements ..., namely the inevitability and the imminence of the divinely ordained future.”<sup>183</sup> I find the comparison even more intriguing for a different reason. Nebuchadnezzar received this revealing dream and Daniel was granted ability to interpret it for a purpose: “that you [Nebuchadnezzar] may understand what went through your mind” (Dan 2:30; NIV) and so he might come to acknowledge that “surely your [Daniel's] God is the God of gods and the Lord of kings” (Dan 2:47; NIV). Could it be that the church needs to know “what must soon take place” (1:1) and thus received the book of Revelation for the same reason: to know what is going on inside her and to come to the same point as Nebuchadnezzar, confessing that Yahweh/Christ alone is Lord (and consequently living accordingly)?

Thompson suggests that in 1:7 Jesus is not said to be coming (back) but rather merely moving in the sky because he thinks that: “movement here is not specified as toward or away from the audience. ... We should here see Jesus' movement as crossing the sky like lightening”<sup>184</sup>. However, I doubt that this needs to be the case, particularly since the primary meanings of ἔρχομαι are in fact “kommen” (to come), “ankommen” (to arrive) and “erscheinen” (to appear) but definitely not “to move”<sup>185</sup>. This is underlined by the fact that all meanings for ἔρχομαι which are listed in BDAG imply a destination of the movement<sup>186</sup>. Interestingly, Thompson then calls the event eschatological: “As the eschatological (end-time) Jesus is moving across the sky, his appearance has global dimensions: ‘every eye’ and ‘all the tribes of the earth’ see him.”<sup>187</sup> It is clear however that Jesus' eschatological appearing will be more than a mere celestial event. He will come to judge the living and the dead and establish his eternal kingdom (see 3.4.4)<sup>188</sup>. To remind the churches of this vital fact and of its consequences for living in the here and now is what Revelation is all about. Hendriksen claims about Christ's second coming that “this is not the central theme of the book”<sup>189</sup>. However I would insist that indeed Revelation is first and foremost about the church being ready for this final event of history. This is distinctly underlined by the book's last words

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183 Pattemore, ““Blessed are those who hear””, part 3.1 (p. 5 in my print-out); similarly Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 181-182.

184 Thompson, *Revelation*, 51.

185 Kassühlke, *Kleines Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament*, 77.

186 BDAG, 393-395.

187 Thompson, *Revelation*, 51.

188 As I hope to have shown in 3.3.1 there is no need to assume visitational comings of Christ before the final eschatological one (e.g. 2:5.16; 3:11).

189 Hendriksen, *More than conquerors*, 54.

(22:20; only followed by the closing greeting at the end of the letter): “He who testifies to these things says, ‘Yes, I am coming soon.’ Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.”

#### **3.4.4 Christ is the sovereign ruler and judge**

Revelation has a very strong emphasis on the person of Christ. Its christology is probably the one aspect of Revelation that throughout its interpretative history has been more easily accessible than any other part of the book. In contrast to a lot of things in Revelation, the person of Christ is described in quite obvious ways. There is no doubt about his identity whenever he appears in all of the various parts of the book. He is the one central character, he is at the centre of the book's attention. This is true for the frame as well as for the body. But hardly anywhere is it as concentrated as in the frame and the inaugural vision of 1:9-20. Most of these attributes are not restricted to the frame, but they feature rather strongly there and they certainly form a vital part of the frame's message. Even the christological self-identifications of Jesus in the seven messages add very little beyond what has already been said in chapter 1. In the few verses of Revelation's first and last chapters Christ is portrayed in many facets. He is ascribed with various attributes:

He is the Witness (1:5; 22:20), the Faithful One (1:5; 3:14; 19:11), the firstborn from the dead (1:5; 1:18; 2:8), the Living One (1:18; 4:10), the offspring of David (22:16; 5:5) or the bright Morning Star (22:16). He is the Alpha and the Omega (1:8; 22:13; 2:8; 21:6), the First and the Last (1:17, 22:13; 2:8), the Beginning and the End (22:13; 21:6). He also is the One who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, making us kings and priests (1:5b-6a; 5:9-10.12; 7:14-15; 12:11; 20:6).

He is also the ruler over the kings of the earth (1:5; 11:15.17; 15:3; 17:14; 19:6.16), the Lord God (1:8; 22:6; 4:8; 11:17; 15:3; 16:7; 18:8; 19:6; 21:22; 22:5)<sup>190</sup>, the Almighty (1:8; 4:8; 11:17; 15:3; 16:7.14; 19:6.15; 21:22). And he is the one who holds the keys of death and Hades (1:18; 3:7). He is the one who announces that God (who is one with Christ) will bring the plagues on those who add to the prophecy of Revelation, that he will take away the blessings from those who reduce it (22:18-19). Christ will come (1:4.7.8; 22:7.12.20; 2:25; 4:8). Clearly this coming will be to judge the world (22:12; 2:5.26; 3:3; 6:17; 11:18; 12:10; 14:7.15; 16:16).

Because of him (ἐπ’ αὐτὸν) the peoples of the earth will mourn (1:7). Is this because he comes to judge those who pierced him (6:17)? This understanding suggests itself in view of

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<sup>190</sup> Apart from the fact that I generally think of God, Christ or the spirit as of the triune God, it should be noted that it is actually the Ἐγώ εἰμι who is called κύριος ὁ θεός and who claims to be the παντοκράτωρ in 1:8.

the judgment associated with the coming of Christ. After a lengthy discussion Thomas reaches this conclusion: “All the families of the earth will mourn over him in remorse because of the severity of punishment inflicted on them in conjunction with his return.”<sup>191</sup> Giesen is quite harsh in his comments: “Nach Offb 1,7 lassen die Stämme der Erde ... keine Trauer erkennen. Sie denken auch jetzt nur egoistisch an sich selbst, da sie angesichts des Weltenrichters erkennen, daß sie zu ihrem eigenen Unheil gehandelt haben.”<sup>192</sup>

However there is strong support for a different explanation that sees the mourning rather as Zechariah 12:12 would suggest: that “they will mourn for him as one mourns for an only child”, relating the mourning to grief about the fact that he was pierced rather than to their own fear of his judgement. Beale argues extensively for this view:

Some believe that the Zechariah quotation is utilized contrary to its original intention to denote the grief of the nations over their impending judgment. But John typically adheres to and consistently develops the contextual ideas of his OT references, and proposed exceptions to this rule must bear the burden of proof. Indeed, the nations in 1:7b do not mourn over themselves but Jesus, which fits better into an understanding of repentance than judgment. And the extended application of the mourning from the nation of Israel to the believing nations is not an inconsistent development, since the nations are now understood to be the true Israel (note also the emphasis on the salvation of the nations in Rev. 21:24-22:3).<sup>193</sup>

Interestingly, there are a number of commentators who do not elaborate on why the peoples of the earth mourn but simply state that they do and thus leave it to the reader to decide on the reasons. Yet in some cases the context of their comments seems to reveal a certain tendency. For example Rowland says that (even) the weak communities, “despite their lowliness, may be destined to share in the messianic governance”<sup>194</sup> which, together with the vindication of the crucified Messiah that he mentions, seems to suggest that he also understands the mourning as referring to the judgement that has befallen the peoples of the earth. Similarly Michaels sees “implications for a guilty world” in Christ's coming, calling it “an occasion of mourning”<sup>195</sup>. Some seem to entertain both options. Behm, for example, writes: “Der Triumph

191 Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 78-79; similarly Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 59; Corsini, *The Apocalypse*, 78-79; Farrer, *The Revelation of St. John the Divine*, 63; Hendriksen, *More than conquerors*, 54; Hughes, *The Book of Revelation*, 21; Johnson, *Revelation*, 27; Koester, *Revelation and the end of all things*, 51; Ladd, *A commentary on the Revelation of John*, 28-29; Lohse, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 17; Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 51; Schüssler Fiorenza, *Revelation*, 44; Strelan, *Where earth meets heaven*, 32.

192 Giesen, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 80.

193 Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 197; similarly Beasley-Murray, *Revelation*, 58-59; Caird, *The Revelation of Saint John*, 18; Giblin, *The Book of Revelation*, 42; Harrington, *Revelation*, 47; Kraft, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 35-36; Roloff, *Revelation*, 27-28; Sweet, *Revelation*, 67; Thompson, *Revelation*, 51; Witherington, *Revelation*, 77.

194 Rowland, *Revelation*, 58-59.

195 Michaels, *Revelation*, 57; see also Kiddle, *The Revelation of St. John*, 9; Morris, *Revelation*, 50-51; Wikenhauser, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 30.

des Gekreuzigten am Tage der Parusie wir ihnen ihre Schuld vor Augen führen, daß sie wehklagen *um ihn* – zu spät!”<sup>196</sup>

Boring escapes the “either-or” when he deliberately entertains both options stating that “perhaps John leaves the matter dialectically ambiguous, so that these words can be taken as either promise or threat.”<sup>197</sup> Osborne favours such a dialectical approach as he suggests

that a deliberate ambiguity is introduced here, with the reader expected to see a repentance theme in light of the Zechariah parallel and yet a judgment theme in light of the switch from Israel in Zechariah to “the peoples of the earth” here. This ambiguity continues throughout the book, as the conversion of the nations and the judgment of the nations develop side by side.<sup>198</sup>

I am inclined to follow his example since it acknowledges both the context of Revelation (judgment as well as the conversion of the nations) and that of Zechariah 12 (repentance and restoration of Jerusalem).

### 3.4.5 Parenthesis: Blessing and curse

There is very little actual, concrete parenthesis in Revelation's frame (Peters: “No explicit mandate is here given to the Church.”<sup>199</sup>). The little that might be seen as such (22:14-15) merely enforces the body's parenthesis. However there is plenty of parenthetic material in both the seven messages and Revelation's body and the frame points to this fact. It does so by pronouncing blessings on those who follow the advice of the book and a curse on those who refuse to do so and thus continue in their unfaithfulness towards Christ.

According to Revelation's frame, a blessing is promised to those who follow Revelation's prophecy and wash their clothes (1:3; 22:7.14; *also 14:13; 16:15 ; 19:9; 20:6; cf. 7:14 and 2.4.1*): “the seven beatitudes scattered through the book ... indicate the fullness of blessing to be bestowed on the reader or hearer who faithfully obeys the message of Revelation”<sup>200</sup>. They shall have access to the tree of life (22:14; *cf. 2:7; 22:2*) and enter the new Jerusalem (22:14; *cf. 3:12; 21:25-27*).

The others have to stay outside, classified as dogs (meaning impure, maybe referring to homosexuals<sup>201</sup>), magicians or idolators (22:15; *cf. 9:20-21; 21:8.27*): they remain the sinners they were (22:11; *cf. 9:20-21; 16:9.11*), not taking up the offer to come and receive the water

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196 Behm, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 10. Italics added.

197 Boring, *Revelation*, 80.

198 Osborne, *Revelation*, 69.

199 Peters, *The Mandate of the Church in the Apocalypse of John*, 11.

200 Bauckham, *The theology of the Book of Revelation*, 26-27.

201 Aune, *Revelation 17-22*, 1222-1223.



of life for free (22:17; cf. 7:17; 21:6; 22:1). Anybody who changes anything in the book is proclaimed subject to a curse in no uncertain terms: They will miss out on God's new creation, the New Jerusalem, and/or experience the unpleasant plagues described so vividly in Revelation's earlier chapters (22:18-19).

There is a reward for everyone according to their deeds, for the evildoer and the impure, as well as for the just and the holy (22:11-12; cf. 2:23; 11:18; 14:13; 18:4-8; 20:12-13). When Christ comes, he reveals whether everyone has so far lived with God and therefore will continue to do so or not. This reading of 22:12 has been questioned by Giesen: "Denn ein Ausschluß vom Heil kann nicht als Lohn bezeichnet werden."<sup>202</sup> Rather, he argues, that

die Vergeltung nach dem Werk durch Christus ist nach allem noch ein "innerweltliches" Geschehen (ähnlich 2,23) ... , das nur Christen betrifft, während das Gericht nach den Werken in 20,12f, das Gott vollzieht, sich auf das endgültige Gericht über die gottfeindlichen Menschen bezieht.<sup>203</sup>

Similarly Aune argues that "even though people will be rewarded in a way commensurate with their behavior, only the righteous seem to be in view."<sup>204</sup> However there are a number of reasons to reject this proposal:

Jesus is as much the judge of 20:11-15 as God (the father): "both God and Christ execute the last judgment"<sup>205</sup>. This is evident from the fact that often (though not always) they are ascribed the same titles, e.g. "the  $\alpha$  and  $\Omega$ , the First and the Last, ..." (God: 1:8 and 21:6; Christ: 1:17, 2:8 and 22:13<sup>206</sup>). Also, all we are told about the identity of the judge of 20:11 is that he is seated on a great white throne. Since Revelation quite frequently speaks of Christ being on the throne, often together with God (the father), (3:21; 7:17; 12:5; (14:3?); 22:1.3) this could well refer to him as well as to God (the father). Furthermore Jesus appears as the judge of the unbelievers, e.g. in 6:16 ("Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from *the wrath of the Lamb!*") or 19:11-16. Aune thinks that "judgment according to works or behaviour is attributed to the exalted Christ in Revelation only in 22:12 and 2:23", but he concedes that "Christ as judge occurs in a variety of other ways (1:16; 2:12, 16, 22-23; 3:3; 19:15)."<sup>207</sup> I cannot see why then he should not also be the judge in 20:11-15 as well.

202 Giesen, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 486.

203 Giesen, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 486-487, (1999). Note however that in his 1986 commentary (*Johannes-Apokalypse*, 178) he writes "Er [Jesus] wird einem jeden nach seinem Werk vergelten. Das Gericht nach den Werken, das Gott nach 20,12 selbst durchführt, wird hier zur Aufgabe Christi."

204 Aune, *Revelation 17-22*, 1237.

205 Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 1031; similarly Hendriksen, *More than conquerors*, 196; Johnson, *Revelation*, 193; Thomas, *Revelation 8-22*, 429.

206 Bauckham, *The theology of the Book of Revelation*, 25-26. Mounce (*The Book of Revelation*, 375) emphasizes the unity of God the Father and the Son. Similarly Boring, *Revelation*, 211-212.

207 Aune, *Revelation 17-22*, 1218-1219.

I have refuted the idea of visitational comings of Christ prior to his final eschatological appearing earlier (see 3.3.1). That concept is an artificial construct to avoid any negative connotations in connection with the parousia but is not based on textual evidence within Revelation.

Connected to the previous point is the fact that the reward (Giesen: “Lohn”) which Christ brings can for some very well be “der Ausschluß vom Heil”. Even the word μισθός as such contains the twofold option of a (positive) “reward” and “punishment”<sup>208</sup> and can thus not be limited to desirable things<sup>209</sup> (cf. 2:23).

Giesen and those arguing like him have to ignore the immediate context of the verse directly preceding 22:12 where both evil and righteous deeds, both impure and holy lives are in focus. Michaels emphasizes that 22:12 “reinforces the dualism of verse 11.”<sup>210</sup> The choices people make regarding their stance in these issues determine the kind of reward they can expect from Christ (22:13-14).

Beale points out “the fact that the only other use of ‘reward’ (μισθός) in the book (in 11:18) refers to the recompense at the end of the age. This will be the time of Christ's final redemption of his people and of the last judgment.”<sup>211</sup>

Rather than the idea of a this worldly reward for Christians only, the context of Revelation's frame suggests something very different. Most of the promised blessings as well as the curses concern access to the New Jerusalem. Even “the plagues described in this book” (22:18) could either refer to the lake of fire (which is not very likely, considering the plural of “plagues” and Ex 7-11) or else give an eternal dimension to what is described in the seal-, trumpet- and bowl-visions. It could also have a parallel in the punishment of Babylon as described in chapter 18. In any case most of the frame is concerned with the parousia (1:4.7.8; 22:7.12.20) or the churches conduct in light of this climactic event. There is no reason to see the reward Christ brings in any other context. To expect in eternity special rewards for good works<sup>212</sup> similarly has no basis in the text. This is about the final judgment which decides about eternity in the presence or absence of God, inside or outside his new “City of Peace”, nothing before and also nothing after this climax of history.

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208 Kassühlke, *Kleines Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament*, 123: “Lohn, Vergeltung; Strafe”.

209 Similarly Farrer, *The Revelation of St. John the Divine*, 224; Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 406-407; Osborne, *Revelation*, 788; Poythress, *The returning King*, 196; Strelan, *Where earth meets heaven*, 390-391, referring to Rom 6:23; Thomas, *Revelation 8-22*, 504-505.

210 Michaels, *Revelation*, 253

211 Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 1134.

212 Osborne, *Revelation*, 787-788; Witherington, *Revelation*, 281; rightly refuted by Michaels, *Revelation*, 230-231.

However this raises a major theological question which is rightly asked by Beale: “Does this mean that it is on the basis of good works that a person will be redeemed or justified?”<sup>213</sup> The excellent answer he gives is worth quoting at length:

First, we saw above that the “reward” and “work” in Isa. 40:10 and 62:11 focus on salvation. Second it must be remembered that according to the gospel “good works” apart from Christ can save no one, since perfection is required for acceptance before God (Matt. 5:48; 1 Pet. 1:16; cf. Lev. 19:2).

Third, in the context of the Apocalypse “salvation by works” is unlikely because 5:9-10 says that Christ is the only one “worthy” to be accepted before God and that he “was slain and he redeemed by his blood” people from their sins, so that they also could be considered worthy subjects. Indeed this idea is not far away in 22:12, since the idea connoted by “those who wash their robes” in 22:14 goes back to 7:14, “they washed their robes and made them white through the blood of the lamb.” On the other hand, at the final judgment “works” are considered a necessary condition for salvation. But how? Works demonstrate that a person has already met the ultimate, causal, necessary condition for salvation, which is redemptive justification from sin by Christ's death (so also Eph. 2:6-10) [footnote: Following P. E. Hughes, *Revelation*, 237-238.]. At the last judgment such people “washed by Jesus' blood” will find their names “written in the book of life of the Lamb” and will be able to enter the salvific gates of the heavenly city (cf. Rev. 21:27 with 22:14 and 20:15).<sup>214</sup>

As does James (James 2:14-26), Revelation emphasizes that faith without works is dead and thus takes Christ-like works as evidence of faith. “Salvation is by faith, but faith is inevitably revealed by the works it produces.”<sup>215</sup> So while at first sight Revelation may focus on the works, it really is interested in the faith (or lack thereof) which lies behind them and which expresses itself in the life of believers.

Beale hints at another interesting fact about the last judgment. The books of 20:12 in which was recorded what everyone had done are not identical with the book (note the singular!) of life, in which the names of the overcomers are written (3:5)<sup>216</sup>. According to Revelation everybody (including the overcomers: “*everyone* is there”<sup>217</sup>) will be judged according to their

213 Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 1137.

214 Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 1137-1138.

215 Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 376; similarly Giblin, *The Book of Revelation*, 193; Johnson, *Revelation*, 193; Morris, *Revelation*, 234, n. 1; Poythress, *The returning King*, 196; Wikenhauser, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 153.

216 Similarly Aune, *Revelation 17-22*, 1102; Lohse, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 103; Morris, *Revelation*, 234; Roloff, *Revelation*, 231.

217 Boring, *Revelation*, 210. Similarly Aune, *Revelation 17-22*, 1104; Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 1032-1033; Beasley-Murray, *Revelation*, 301; Farrer, *The Revelation of St. John the Divine*, 210; Giblin, *The Book of Revelation*, 193; Hendriksen, *More than conquerors*, 196; Kiddle, *The Revelation of St. John*, 404-405; Koester, *Revelation and the end of all things*, 189-191; Morris, *Revelation*, 234-235; Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 376-377; Poythress, *The returning King*, 183; Roloff, *Revelation*, 230; Thompson, *Revelation*, 179; Wikenhauser, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 153.

Contra Giesen, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 445.447-448; Harrington, *Revelation*, 203; Johnson, *Revelation*, 193; Ladd, *A commentary on the Revelation of John*, 271; Strelan, *Where earth meets heaven*, 347; Thomas, *Revelation 8-22*, 430-431.

deeds (20:12-13). The verdict will be the same for every person appearing before this holy judge: they are not worthy to enter the New Jerusalem. Fortunately however, according to 20:15, this verdict will be overruled by the book of life<sup>218</sup> (cf. Mt 10:32-33; Mk 8:38; Rev 3:5). Those whose names are found written in it will be given access to God's eternal kingdom, having been made blameless through the blood of the Lamb. Farrer sees things the other way round: First the book of life is consulted and those not found therein are rejected. Then those whose names are found receive "a last assessment on the evidence of the 'book of deeds'"<sup>219</sup>. Effectively however, this amounts to salvation by works.

Lastly, as I have demonstrated in 2.4<sup>220</sup>, the works Revelation is seeking primarily are mere faith and exclusive trust in God, acceptance of him as the one and only Lord who has done everything for his own. Faith, love and other deeds are the necessary consequence of accepting the love of Christ, of his gift of faith, but as mentioned above they are only of secondary interest. Faith and the exclusive worship of the triune God are not negotiable, however, when it comes to finding one's name in the book of life. Revelation is quite clear in its insistence that God is the exclusive authority over all and wants to be respected as such.

It makes a difference how one deals with this message, as my following summary of the book's frame shows: "This is a message to the (seven) church(es in Asia Minor). Our Lord Jesus will soon come as the ruler and judge over all the earth. How well you are prepared for him will have enormous consequences. In this book he gives you trustworthy advice on how to be prepared for this day. Follow it if you want to live."

From this fact that Revelation's prophecy (cf. 3.4.2) comes with both a blessing and a curse Beale concludes: "Therefore, προφητεία ('prophecy') in v 3 [1:3] is primarily a reference not to predictive revelation but to divine disclosure demanding an ethical response, in line with OT 'prophecy,' which primarily addresses present situations and only secondarily foretells."<sup>221</sup> In other words: Revelation is primarily interested in the Christians' faith in the here and now and in its eternal consequences, in parenetically exhorting them to live faithfully as followers of Christ, not in some esoteric mystery which, if accessed with the right key, might satisfy human curiosity about a possibly distant future. It is due to this understanding of the frame

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218 Similarly Aune, *Revelation 17-22*, 1103; Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 1034; Hughes, *The Book of Revelation*, 218-219; Koester, *Revelation and the end of all things*, 189-191; Mulholland, *Revelation. Holy living in an unholy world*, 312-314; Sweet, *Revelation*, 294; Witherington, *Revelation*, 251-252.

219 Farrer, *The Revelation of St. John the Divine*, 210.

220 2.4.2 and 2.4.3 in particular.

221 Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 184-185.

that I employ a reading strategy which seeks to interpret all of Revelation – including the body's visions – as parenthesis (cf. 5).

### **3.5 The frame around Revelation**

Considering what I have discussed so far, the structure of Revelation's frame would have to be deduced from the following classification or description of its parts:

- Opening passage (1:1-8): Epistolary prescript, by which the book is given a heading, an introduction by the author and its epistolary nature is described. This is modelled on the book's closing passage (22:6-21) and, like the closing passage, presents the whole book as intentionally parenetic.
- Introductory vision (1:9-20): Commissioning vision, in which Christ as the book's central character appears to John, who is commissioned to publish his vision for the seven churches. Also, the first part of the vision (the seven messages) is specifically introduced. This part has a threefold task: Introducing the whole book as a prophecy from God for the seven churches, introducing the seven messages as messages from the holy Lord and introducing this Lord as the heart of Revelation's message.
- Seven messages (2:1-3:22): Related to the opening and closing passages, to the book's body and, in particular, to the introductory vision.
- Series of visions (4:1-22:9): Body of Revelation, containing various throne-scenes, series of sevens, Babylon, the new Jerusalem and other visions. This part has its own internal structure. It is linked to all of the parts of the frame, as well as having a multitude of internal connections.
- Closing passage (22:6-21): Closing both the book as a whole and the last vision in particular. This section emphasizes the urgent character of Revelation's exhortatory message. There is a short epistolary greeting at the end, again marking Revelation as a letter. It is particularly connected to the inaugural vision, yet even stronger links are to the epistolary prescript which depends on this passage.

Due to the strongly interconnected nature of the book in general and the multiple role of 1:9-20 in particular, it is virtually impossible to draw a graphic display of the various parts' interdependencies and interconnections. Yet we have seen, that 1:1-8 and 22:6-21 on the one hand and 1:9-20 and the seven messages (2:1-3:22) on the other hand each form a strong unity.

As for their message, 1:1-8 and 22:6-21 provide the background to the inaugural vision and the seven messages (and the book's body which follows from there). They emphasize the urgency, the reliability and the parenetic authority of the book and of the seven messages in particular, and they focus on Christ as the centre of the book, emphasizing his holiness and glory. They state that it is the church that needs to hear and follow Revelation's parenetic message, which in fact comes directly from Christ.

The inaugural vision (1:9-20) echoes this message in depicting Christ as holy and glorious, walking among the churches. It stresses the necessity of the book's publication to the church in order for Christ's advice to be heard and followed. It is thus setting the stage for what the glorified Christ has to say to the church in the seven messages, which will be studied in the next chapter.

## 4 The seven messages

This chapter explores the seven messages' structure, the message they convey and their links to the rest of Revelation. This is a key step in determining the role of these two special chapters in Revelation's overall design, logic and flow of argument. The insights resulting from this chapter will suggest that the seven messages indeed have a special role in the composition of the whole book. My suggestion on the nature of this role, and what it consequently means for our efforts to understand the book, will then be explored in the following chapter.

### 4.1 Structure

The seven messages are relatively clearly structured. They are seven consecutive notices to seven specifically named churches and each follows one basic pattern. There are some slight variations, but they are within the overall pattern which I suggest has the following format:

- a Each of the messages is introduced by a command to write to “the angel of the church in” the respective city<sup>1</sup>, anchoring its message in a concrete local historical situation.

Aune distinguishes two separate parts, the “*adscriptio*” and the “command to write”<sup>2</sup>, however they are one logical unit, with the *adscriptio* as the dative-object of the verb in the command to write.

- b The actual message begins with a self-introduction of Jesus, beginning with *Τάδε λέγει ὁ* ... in all seven messages.<sup>3</sup>

Similar to the way he divided the command to write, Aune also finds two parts in Jesus' self-introductions<sup>4</sup>. He does so by separating the *Τάδε λέγει* from its grammatical subject, the exalted Christ who speaks to his church through these messages as God spoke to Israel through the prophets. However there appears to be no compelling reason for this division.

- c An evaluation of the respective church's spiritual well-being, acknowledging its “successes” as well as rebuking it for its shortcomings<sup>5</sup>, always considering the situation

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1 2:1.8.12.18; 3:1.7.14.

2 Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 119-121; Aune, “The form and function of the proclamations”, 184-187. Similarly Boring, *Revelation*, 86-87.

3 The alternative reading in 3:1 though it would not really break this pattern is also extremely unlikely (*Τάδε λέγει κύριος ὁ* ...).

4 Aune, “The form and function of the proclamations”, 187-190; Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 121. Such a division is also proposed by Boring, *Revelation*, 87-88; Witherington, *Revelation*, 91.

5 Depending on the situation of the actual church it is sometimes only either praise or rebuke, not both.

that each church is confronted with. This part is usually (in 5 out of 7 cases) introduced with οἶδά σου τὰ ἔργα<sup>6</sup>, the other occasions also using οἶδα to introduce this section<sup>7</sup>.

This is where my proposal for the seven messages' structure differs from that of several other scholars: I have combined “commendation of the church's good works” and “accusation because of some sin”<sup>8</sup> in what Aune calls “*The Narratio*”<sup>9</sup>. I have done so primarily because the οἶδά σου τὰ ἔργα appears as a marker before both commendation and accusation, the ἔργα mentioned directly afterwards being positive in 2:2.19<sup>10</sup> and 3:8 and negative in 3:1.15. While grammatically the ἀλλὰ ἔχω κατὰ σοῦ ὅτι of 2:4.14.20<sup>11</sup> is not a part of the οἶδα-clause<sup>12</sup>, logically it is a continuation of the οἶδα<sup>13</sup>, of what Jesus knows about each church. The same is the case with the ἀλλὰ ἔχεις ὀλίγα ὀνόματα of 3:4 where, interestingly, the order is reversed<sup>14</sup>: Sardis is first told of its shortcomings before the few are commended for their faithfulness. So while there are two aspects to this evaluation of the churches, they are part of the one divine verdict about their spiritual health. Osborne<sup>15</sup> does justice to that in listing “strengths” and “weaknesses” as the two categories into which the whole section falls. However the picture is more complex than his outline suggests. As we have seen “I know your deeds ...” can also introduce weaknesses and the “yet” does refer to strengths as well.

Beale's comments on how the body of the messages is structured are interesting in that he offers two different options and in passing even considers a third one: First he makes out seven “sections”, with a different section for commendation, accusation and exhortation<sup>16</sup>. When outlining the pattern which he discerns for “the logical flow of thought in each letter”<sup>17</sup>, commendation and accusation are combined. In between, he quite

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6 2:19; 3:1.8.15. In 2:2 the order of these words varies slightly: “οἶδα τὰ ἔργα σου”.

7 2:9.13. Note the (unlikely) alternative readings of 2:9 (οἶδά σου τα ἐργα) and 2:13 (οἶδα τα ἐργα σου) which seem to have been extended to resemble the other five οἶδα-occurrences.

8 Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 225. A similar division is suggested by Caird, *The Revelation of Saint John*, 27; Hendriksen, *More than conquerors*, 59; Johnson, *Revelation*, 35-36; Kraft, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 53; Ladd, *A commentary on the Revelation of John*, 36; Morris, *Revelation*, 58; Witherington, *Revelation*, 91.

9 Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 121-122, italics in the original.

10 The same is true for the other two οἶδα-phrases in 2:9.13.

11 In 2:14 it reads ἀλλ’ ἔχω κατὰ σοῦ ὀλίγα ὅτι.

12 Note that a few scholars see the “I know ...” as a separate structural element: Boring, *Revelation*, 88-89; Poythress, *The returning King*, 84.

13 Aune, “The form and function of the proclamations”, 191; Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 122.

14 Note 2:6 where the similar ἀλλὰ τοῦτο ἔχεις marks the return to the commendation after the accusation.

15 Osborne, *Revelation*, 106.

16 Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 225.

17 Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 225.



sympathetically mentions a third option (“The third [commendation], fourth [accusation] and fifth sections [exhortation] could be viewed as one section introduced by οἶδα ...”<sup>18</sup>).

- d Advice on how to maintain the strengths and on how to overcome the problems (Aune: “*dispositio*”<sup>19</sup>). This is often combined with a stern warning for those who do not repent from their sin but continue in their problematic ways, but in a few cases also with pronouncements of blessing connected to the advice.

This advice-section is sometimes interwoven with the evaluation, so that a clear distinction is hardly possible, thus making it quite reasonable to suggest a unity between this section and the evaluating section. Giesen, for example, labels both parts together as “Botenspruch”<sup>20</sup>. Schüssler Fiorenza lists six components under the title “‘I know’ section”<sup>21</sup>. However, as Aune shows, “this section is marked with the use of imperatives and future indicatives (though futuristic presents such as ἔρχομαι, βάλλω and μέλλω do occur)”<sup>22</sup>, distinguishing it from the evaluation of the churches in which the finite verbs “are limited to past and present tenses in the indicative, since the content is governed by the semantic significance of οἶδα, ‘I know.’”<sup>23</sup> Osborne’s solution is helpful in that he sees both “strengths and weaknesses” and “solution” as parts of the “body” of the messages<sup>24</sup>.

The last two sections are in the following order in the first three messages only. In the remaining four messages the promise to the overcomers stands before the call to listen to the spirit.

- e The call to listen to Revelation’s message (Aune: “*proclamation formula*”<sup>25</sup>), expressed in the very same words all seven times: Ὁ ἔχων οὖς ἀκουσάτω τί τὸ πνεῦμα λέγει ταῖς ἐκκλησίαις.

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18 Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 225.

19 Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 122, italics in the original.

20 Giesen, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 94; similarly Boring, *Revelation*, 89 (“The ‘body’ of each letter is composed of praise and/or blame, promise and/or threat.”); Corsini, *The Apocalypse*, 99; Giblin, *The Book of Revelation*, 51 (“the body of the edict”); Koester, *Revelation and the end of all things*, 56 (“words of rebuke and encouragement”); Lilje, *Das letzte Buch der Bibel*, 78; Roloff, *Revelation*, 41 (“analysis of the situation”); Strelan, *Where earth meets heaven*, 53 (“the church is praised, rebuked, or exhorted”); Yarbrow Collins, *The Apocalypse*, 14.

21 Schüssler Fiorenza, *Revelation*, 46: “a. description of situation (‘I know that...’), b. censure (‘but I have against you...’), c. command to repent, d. a prophetic-relevatory saying (‘look...’), e. promise of Christ’s speedy coming, f. exhortation (hold fast)”.

22 Aune, “The form and function of the proclamations”, 192.

23 Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 121.

24 Osborne, *Revelation*, 106.

25 Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 123-124.

f The promise to those who overcome (νικῶ) to receive and enjoy the glory of God's kingdom as described in Revelation's later chapters.

The reversal in order of these last parts of each message leads Hendriksen to claim that the “seven epistles are divided into two groups: one of three and one of four.”<sup>26</sup> However he fails to mention any implications of this claimed division which thus seems to remain meaningless. Others have also suggested that the seven messages display a structure among themselves.

One suggestion sees the first (Ephesus) and last (Laodicea) messages as one group, the second (Smyrna) and second to last (Philadelphia) as another group and the third to the fifth (Pergamum, Thyatira and Sardis) as a third group<sup>27</sup>. It is quite clear what connects Smyrna and Philadelphia: neither church is rebuked for anything. However that Ephesus and Laodicea are similar can hardly be argued. While for Laodicea there is only rebuke and no praise, Christ praises the church in Ephesus twice, in 2:2-3 (οἶδά σου τὰ ἔργα...) and in 2:6 (ἀλλὰ τοῦτο ἔχεις...) <sup>28</sup>. If any church could be seen as similarly dead as Laodicea it would have to be Sardis: “Mehr Tadel als Lob erhält Sardes; darum steht hier der Tadel am Anfang.”<sup>29</sup> But in this proposal Sardis instead belongs to the same group with Pergamum and Thyatira. This idea therefore seems to be based more on the desire of commentators to see a chiasmic structure than on actual evidence in the text. Beale however makes a noteworthy observation that

at the centre of the middle letter stands a general statement that ‘all the churches will know’ that Christ is the omniscient judge of his unfaithful followers (2:23). This statement is conspicuous as the only thing said in the letters about all the churches other than at the conclusion of each letter.<sup>30</sup>

That this statement is in such a central position in the seven messages<sup>31</sup> underlines the relevance for the seven messages of Jesus' coming as ultimate judge of all (including the churches) which as we have seen features so prominently in the frame (e.g. 3.4.4).

Harrington puts forward a different structure. He makes out “a definite plan or progression. Ephesus receives censure and commendation; Smyrna, Thyatira, and Philadelphia (the even numbers) are praised, the last with marked warmth, while Pergamum, Sardis, and Laodicea are censured, the last very severely.”<sup>32</sup> However Thyatira is quite sternly rebuked for tolerating

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26 Hendriksen, *More than conquerors*, 60.

27 Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 226-227; Kiddle, *The Revelation of St. John*, 19-20; Morris, *Revelation*, 58.

28 See for example Rowland's table of “contrasting characteristics in the messages to the churches” (Rowland, *Revelation*, 65-66).

29 Wikenhauser, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 36.

30 Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 227.

31 Mulholland, *Revelation*, 112, n. 29.

32 Harrington, *Revelation*, 55-56.

Jezebel, the passage dealing with her being by far the longest single discourse in all of the seven messages. To compare Thyatira to Philadelphia can therefore hardly be called adequate. Similarly Sardis and Pergamum in particular also receive praise<sup>33</sup>. Again it appears as though the commentator's desire for a structure has overruled the textual evidence.

Koester groups the churches thematically. He ascribes to Ephesus, Pergamum and Thyatira “the problem of assimilation”<sup>34</sup>, to Smyrna and Philadelphia “the problem of persecution”<sup>35</sup> and to Sardis and Laodicea “the problem of complacency”<sup>36</sup>. While this is a very adequate summary of each of the churches problems<sup>37</sup>, it does not reveal a specific arrangement of the messages but rather shows that with the regard to the content of their respective messages the churches are arranged in no discernible order. As has been suggested before (cf. 2.1) the order in which the churches are mentioned is most likely due to geographical location.

## 4.2 Contents

It is quite easy to see that the seven messages provide the words of prophecy that the frame of Revelation refers to. Here are prophetic words that can be followed (1:3; 22:7)<sup>38</sup>. Here God gives his view of the conduct of his people, combined with divine advice to each of the churches on how to live as the people of God in order to be prepared for Christ's coming. He is going to come and wants to find them prepared and waiting, expecting their holy, glorious Lord.

Caird's comments on this issue are not helpful. He chooses the second of two artificial alternatives when deciding that the seven messages are not about the churches being “fit to meet their Lord” but rather about “whether they are strong enough to survive a thorough-going persecution”<sup>39</sup>. Not only is it incorrect that Revelation (and the seven messages) are solely about persecution, but also the ability to face persecution is one of the very signs that a church is indeed ready to meet its Lord. Besides, as we have seen in 3.4.3 and 3.4.4, Revelation's frame also strongly emphasizes the need to be ready for Christ's coming.

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33 Again Rowland's table of “contrasting characteristics in the messages to the churches” illustrates this quite clearly (Rowland, *Revelation*, 65-66).

34 Koester, *Revelation and the end of all things*, 57-62.

35 Koester, *Revelation and the end of all things*, 63-66.

36 Koester, *Revelation and the end of all things*, 66-69.

37 See 4.2.3 and 4.2.4.

38 See 2.4.1 on τηρέω.

39 Caird, *The Revelation of Saint John*, 27.

#### 4.2.1 The command to write to the angels of the churches

There is extensive debate as to what exactly “the angels of the church” refer to. There are a number of options for their identity which are suggested. Aune's<sup>40</sup> and Osborne's<sup>41</sup> division into two categories (humans or angels) is helpful, with at least two options in each of these categories:

- a The “angels” are human leaders of the churches. This idea takes on various forms. The ἄγγελοι are identified as official “bishops”<sup>42</sup>, prophet leaders<sup>43</sup> or informal leaders. Morris aptly comments: “This would be a good solution except that we do not know whether the churches had bishops or individual pastors as early as this. And if they did, why call them *angels*?”<sup>44</sup> This comment is particularly appropriate since nowhere else in Revelation is ἄγγελος used for a human but always for a heavenly (or demonic) being.
- b The “angels” could be human bearers of the letters to the individual churches. “If this is correct, Christ's explanation of the stars [1:20] informed John that they stood for seven visitors to Patmos, either already present or soon to arrive, men who come to help John but will return home with a specific mission to the churches that sent them.”<sup>45</sup>

Again the main argument against this idea is the fact that everywhere else in Revelation ἄγγελος is used for an otherworldly being. Furthermore “there seems to be no reason for addressing the letters to these ‘postmen’”<sup>46</sup>, especially since we do not know whether there was more than one single messenger who took Revelation to all the churches. Furthermore it appears somewhat doubtful that each of these specific seven churches should have sent someone to John at more or less the same time.

- c The “angels” could also be (symbolic) heavenly counterparts of the churches. Ladd argues that “it is best to understand this as a rather unusual symbol to represent the heavenly or supernatural character of the church.”<sup>47</sup> Kiddle explains that “each earthly body of Christians has, as it were, a soul. And since it is John's purpose to make the churches

40 Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 108-112.

41 Osborne, *Revelation*, 98-99.

42 Hendriksen, *More than conquerors*, 58.

43 Strelan, *Where earth meets heaven*, 46-47; similarly Hughes, *The Book of Revelation*, 30-31; Schüssler Fiorenza, *Revelation*, 52-53.

44 Morris, *The Book of Revelation*, 57.

45 Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 118-119. Similarly Hughes, *The Book of Revelation*, 30-31, Kraft, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 50-52.

46 Morris, *The Book of Revelation*, 57.

47 Ladd, *A commentary on the Revelation of John*, 35. Similarly Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 112; Beasley-Murray, *Revelation*, 68-70; Harrington, *Revelation*, 51-53, Koester, *Revelation and the end of all things*, 56; Morris, *Revelation*, 56-57; Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 63; Rowland, *Revelation*, 62; Sweet, *Revelation*, 73-74.

conscious of their divine character, ... he addresses them, not as churches, but as angels.”<sup>48</sup> Behm takes the symbolic aspect further still: “Die ‘Engel der Gemeinden’ sind psychologische Zwischenfiguren, wie visionäres Denken sie liebt, personifizierte Stellvertreter, in denen Johannes die Gemeinden konkret erlebt”<sup>49</sup>.

While indeed many of Revelation's images are symbolic, it seems strange that the stars in Christ's hand are symbols of angels who in turn should be symbols, this time of the churches, which, it is important to note, have been symbolized by the lampstands in the very same vision. It also appears to be very unlike John and his audience to understand angels as anything other than angels. Throughout the book ἄγγελοι are exactly that: angels. “Der Seher, der im Geiste die irdische und himmlische Gemeinde überschaut und der die Scharen der Engel um Gottes Thron sieht, hat auch hier gewiß an Engel gedacht. Für die zweifelnde Frage des Modernen, ob es denn Engel gebe, ist in seinem Denken kein Raum gewesen.”<sup>50</sup>

- d It is therefore suggested that the ἄγγελοι are real angels which represent and are responsible for the churches as representatives of each church. Beale states that

according to the idea of corporate representation, which is suggested further by recognizing that angelic beings are corporately identified with Christians as their heavenly counterparts elsewhere in the book: the angel in 19:10 and 22:9 says, “I am a fellow servant of you and your brothers.”<sup>[51]</sup> In addition, the angel in Rev. 8:3-4 seems to represent saints, since he receives their prayers and presents them before God.<sup>[52]</sup> Consequently, the “angels” in 20b refer to heavenly beings who also represent the church<sup>53</sup>.

It appears as though Johnson agrees when he writes that the ἄγγελοι are “the heavenly messengers who have been entrusted by Christ with responsibility over the churches and yet who are so closely identified with them that the letters are addressed at the same time to these ‘messengers’ and to the congregation”<sup>54</sup>. While this concept appears to be unique in biblical texts, it seems to make the most sense here. It recognizes that the angels and the churches are not identical but distinct (cf. 1:20) and that in Revelation ἄγγελοι are always

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48 Kiddle, *The Revelation of St. John*, 17.

49 Behm, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 15.

50 Lilje, *Das letzte Buch der Bibel*, 77.

51 Footnote in Beale: “Noted in Kroll, *Revelation*, 102, but not seen by him as relevant to the ‘angels’ of chs. 1-3.”

52 Footnote in Beale: “Similarly Mulholland, *Revelation*, 93.”

53 Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 217; similarly Lilje, *Das letzte Buch der Bibel*, 77-78; Michaels, *Revelation*, 63-64; Osborne, *Revelation*, 98-99; Poythress, *The returning King*, 85; Wikenhauser, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 35; Yarbrough Collins, *The Apocalypse*, 15.

54 Johnson, *Revelation*, 34.

otherworldly beings and not humans while at the same time doing justice to the fact that they can be addressed interchangeably in the seven messages.

Giesen suggests that they could be guardian angels: “Wahrscheinlich ist an Schutzpatrone der Gemeinden gedacht. Sie gelten genauerhin als deren himmlische Repräsentanten und Doppelgänger”<sup>55</sup>.

- e In addition Roloff<sup>56</sup> offers the idea that the term ἄγγελος was used to emphasize that angels are messengers of God and thus not to be worshipped themselves (cf. 19:9-10; 22:8-9). Boring<sup>57</sup> underlines that this may be implied, however it is not sufficient to explain what the term actually was supposed to describe or to clarify who these ἄγγελοι were.

Whichever way we understand the angels, what remains clear is that Revelation as a whole and the seven messages in particular are for the churches to read and follow. Giesen underlines this: “Wenn also der Adressat der Engel in der Gemeinde ist, so sind die wahren Adressaten die Christen in ihr.”<sup>58</sup> Formally the messages are directed to the angels of the churches. In actual fact it is the churches who need to hear their message.

#### 4.2.2 Jesus' self-introductions

In all seven messages the self-introduction of Jesus begins with the same words “Τάδε λέγει ὁ ...”<sup>59</sup>, which indicate that what follows is genuine prophecy from Jesus in the tradition of OT prophecy from Yahweh<sup>60</sup>. Boring's explanation is worth quoting at length:

The standard prophetic messenger formula in the Old Testament was “Thus says the Lord, ...” with the message following in the first person. The prophet did not speak as a reporter of what he had been instructed to say, using indirect address in the third person, but spoke directly in the person of the Lord who had commissioned him or her. John adopts that style and its accompanying formula, the repeated “The words of him who ...” (RSV) being exactly identical to the Septuagint translation of “Thus says the (Lord), ...” Characteristic of Christian prophecy, the speaker's slot in the formula (the “Lord” [Yahweh] in the Old Testament) is filled with the exalted Lord of the church's faith, the Lord Jesus.<sup>61</sup>

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55 Giesen, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 91; similarly Boring, *Revelation*, 86-87; Giblin, *The Book of Revelation*, 49; Lohse, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 21-22.

56 Roloff, *The Revelation of John*, 38-40.

57 Boring, *Revelation*, 86-87.

58 Giesen, *Johannes-Apokalypse*, 38.

59 The alternative reading in 3:1 though it would not really break this pattern is also very unlikely (Τάδε λέγει κύριος ὁ ...).

60 See 3.3.1.3 b.

61 Boring, *Revelation*, 87-88; square brackets ([ ]) in original.

It has often been pointed out that each of the self-designations of Jesus is particularly relevant for the specific church to which the respective message is directed. Ramsay<sup>62</sup> in particular (and to some degree Hemer<sup>63</sup>) sees references to local geography, history, trade and architecture in each of the seven messages including the self-designations of Jesus. For example, Ramsay sees an allusion to Pergamum as “the official capital and titular seat of Roman authority”<sup>64</sup> in Jesus being described as having a sword coming from his mouth (2:12): “To no other of the seven cities could this exordium have been used appropriately. To Pergamum it is entirely suitable. He that has the absolute and universal authority speaks to the church situated in the city where official authority dwells.”<sup>65</sup> Similarly Hemer<sup>66</sup> sees local metal making as the background of the description of Jesus feet as ὅμοιοι χαλκολιβάνω (2:18). However most of these links are rather arbitrary and could quite easily be drawn for other cities as well. Both the military power of the Roman empire and χαλκολιβάνον will most likely have been known to people throughout the province. The same would be true for most of the other references Ramsay (and Hemer) suggests. Beale's comment is fitting: “Many proposals of background that have been suggested as having interpretative significance for the letters are intriguing but often hard to demonstrate as probable allusions.”<sup>67</sup> Kiddle is even clearer: “The existence of incidental allusions of this kind, however, in no way justifies the attempt often made to detect elaborate analogies between the history and character of the cities and of the churches”<sup>68</sup>.

A more promising way to uncover the relevance of these self-designations of Jesus for the respective churches is to draw out their links with themes in the respective messages. Yarbro Collins demonstrates this very appropriately<sup>69</sup>. She reminds us that the description of Jesus as the one who walks among the lampstands (2:1) “prepares for the threat in 2:5 – that if the faithful in Ephesus do not repent, their *lampstand* will be removed *from its place*.”<sup>70</sup> She points out that the life/death theme of “the first and last, who died and came to life” (2:8) “is picked up in the exhortation *Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life* (vs. 10) and by the promise that the one *who conquers shall not be hurt by the second death* (vs. 11).”<sup>71</sup> She observes that the description of Christ as “the one *who has the sharp two-edged*

62 Ramsay, *The letters to the seven churches*.

63 Hemer, *The letters to the seven churches*.

64 Ramsay, *The letters to the seven churches*, 212.

65 Ramsay, *The letters to the seven churches*, 213-214.

66 Hemer, *The letters to the seven churches*, 111-116. See also Ramsay, *The letters to the seven churches*, 242.

67 Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 228.

68 Kiddle, *The Revelation of St. John*, 17.

69 Contra Michaels, *Revelation*, 66.

70 Yarbro Collins, *The Apocalypse*, 15, italics in the original.

71 Yarbro Collins, *The Apocalypse*, 17, italics in the original.

*sword* [2:12] ... is related to a threat. If the Pergamene Christians do not repent, Christ *will come* to them *soon* and make *war against* the Nicolaitans *with the sword of his mouth* [2:16].<sup>72</sup> The links are not as explicit in the message to Thyatira, although Yarbrow Collins still sees them<sup>73</sup>. In the message to Sardis we need to remember that the seven stars in Christ's hand are the angels of the seven churches (4.2.1): "The theme of angels is taken up again in the promise to Sardis – Christ *will confess* the *name* of the one who conquers before God *and before his angels*."<sup>74</sup> That Jesus has authority to set before the church in Philadelphia an open door which no one can shut (3:8) is due to him holding "the key of David. What he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open."<sup>75</sup> The message to Laodicea begins by saying that

Christ is the *faithful and true witness*. The implied question is what are the Laodiceans doing by way of witness. Christ is the *beginning of God's creation*. Have the Laodiceans relied so much on their wealth – created goods – that they have forgotten the creator? The implied exhortation is that created goods are gifts which may be taken back at any time.<sup>76</sup>

Together the introducing self-declarations of Jesus at the beginning of each message paint an impressive picture showing him as the sovereign Lord of the church. The churches are in his hands, he lives among them, sharing with them (2:1). He is the eternal one who has overcome death (2:8). His judgement will clearly separate, it is as definitive as a two-edged sword (2:12). His holy eyes reveal all darkness, piercing through it. He is God's Son, even his feet are holy (2:18). He is the Lord of hosts, even spirits and stars are at his command (3:1). His holiness is only matched by his faithfulness, what he does can never be changed by anybody (3:7). He through whom everything was created is trustworthy and true (3:14).

A whole range of facets of who Christ is are mentioned, some more strongly than others, most of them emphasizing aspects of christology appearing throughout all of Revelation<sup>77</sup>. He reveals himself as the eternal source of life, as the final judge, as the Holy Lord over all, as absolutely faithful and as lovingly caring for his church. A different aspect is important for each of the local churches. In order for his message to be heard in the appropriate attitude, he introduces himself in a way that is highly relevant to each church.

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72 Yarbrow Collins, *The Apocalypse*, 18, italics in the original.

73 Yarbrow Collins, *The Apocalypse*, 21-22.

74 Yarbrow Collins, *The Apocalypse*, 24, italics in the original.

75 Yarbrow Collins, *The Apocalypse*, 27. Cf. 3:7.

76 Yarbrow Collins, *The Apocalypse*, 30, italics in the original.

77 Though there certainly are quite a few more. For example the "Lamb" symbolizes Christ as the redemptive sacrifice, an aspect of Revelation's christology not so obviously contained in the seven messages.



### 4.2.3 Analysis of each church's situation

The actual message the thus-introduced-Jesus has for each of the churches begins with the word οἶδά (“I know”). This further underlines the speaker's ultimate authority. This becomes particularly evident in the messages to Smyrna (“I know your poverty – but you are rich”; 2:9) and Sardis (“you have a name that you live but you are dead”; 3:1) where apparent realities are exposed as illusions in light of the ultimate divine reality. A similar contrast is offered in the various ἀλλὰ-clauses for which the “I know” still applies<sup>78</sup>.

The key word for the evaluation of the churches is ἔργα, their deeds<sup>79</sup>. They are what Christ examines, he knows them, their completeness is vital. This is to be seen quite a few times: οἶδά σου τὰ ἔργα introduces most of these sections<sup>80</sup>. Ephesus hates the ἔργα of the Nicolaitans (2:6). Thyatira's latest ἔργα are more than their first ones (2:19). The ἔργα of Sardis were not found completed (3:2). This emphasis on ἔργα is supported even more by the other occurrences of the word in the seven messages: Ephesus is advised to do the first ἔργα (2:5). Thyatira is told that Jesus is he who (after examining kidneys and hearts, that is their innermost being<sup>81</sup>) gives to everyone according to their ἔργα (2:23). Also, in the message to Thyatira Jesus equates those who overcome with those who do his ἔργα until the end (2:26): “And he who overcomes and who does my deeds (ἔργα) until the end, to him will I give...”

As the omniscient Lord, Christ is in the position to tell the churches what they apparently cannot see for themselves. He shows them what he thinks about their relationship with him. He lets them know whether or not they are dealing with the situation they are in in a way that is appropriate for a servant of God. He does not leave them uncertain of whether or not they are actually true to their faith. He informs them whether or not they are ready to meet their Lord when he suddenly appears. They are told what makes them strong, where their weaknesses are and what tempts or threatens them.

While the concrete problems are quite different for each church, some share similar problems or virtues<sup>82</sup>. Ephesus, Pergamum, Sardis and Thyatira receive both praise and correction, Laodicea is only rebuked with nothing to be praised, while Smyrna and Philadelphia seem to need no correction at all, doing well despite being subject to persecution (cf. 2.2.3).

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78 See 4.1 c.

79 See 59.

80 See 4.1 c.

81 Osborne, *Revelation*, 161.

82 Note however that like the ones suggested by Koester (cf. 4.1) these similarities cannot be used to deduce a structure among the messages.

Praise is given for the following: perseverance (2:2.3.19), rejection of false teaching (2:2.6), readiness to suffer for the faith (2:3.9; 3:10), spiritual richness (2:9), faithful witness in a hostile environment (2:13; 3:8), love, faith and service (all 2:19) and purity (3:4).

On the other hand, the churches receive rebuke for these things: leaving their first love<sup>83</sup> (2:4), acceptance of false teaching (2:14-15.20); fornication and idolatry (2:14.20-22), dying while maintaining a facade of life (3:1-3), incomplete deeds (3:2), lukewarmness (3:15-16), being wretched, poor, blind and naked while proclaiming richness (3:17).

Interestingly, some of these reasons for rebuke are the direct opposite of what Christ likes about other churches: While Pergamum and Thyatira accept false teachers, Ephesus does not tolerate them. While Laodicea is wretched and poor, despite feeling rich, Smyrna feels poor, yet is rich. While the incomplete deeds of Sardis provoke Christ's rebuke, Ephesus and Thyatira are praised for their perseverance. Some churches are quite "successful" at things which make others stumble. Some stand against the threats of persecution (2:3.6.9.13), thus remaining pure (3:4), while others give in to the temptations (2:14.20-22), which are symbolized by the Nicolaitans, Balaam and Jezebel.

A brief overview of the issues present in the churches could read as follows:

- Ephesus: Ephesus faced and resisted the teaching of the Nicolaitans and possibly some other false teachers. They may have suffered persecution but remained faithful (2:3). However they have done so in their own strength, as their own effort, not as a gift of God's love for them (cf. 2.4.2)
- Smyrna: The Christians in Smyrna faced severe persecution instigated by Jewish denunciation (cf. 2.2.3), which may have been the cause for their material poverty. However, spiritually they are rich (2:9).
- Pergamum: Pergamum is a centre of persecution, but despite this the Christians have been faithful to Christ even to the point of death (cf. 2.2.3). However they tolerate both the Nicolaitans and the Balaamite teaching which rationalizes participation in temple banquets and other pleasures of the pagan society of their city (cf. 2.2.1).
- Thyatira: Thyatira is commended for its deeds which continue to grow (2:19). However, as the church in Pergamum, the church tolerates the probably Balaamite

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83 What this actually means would make an excellent study in itself and could only be hinted at in 2.4.2!

teaching of Jezebel which rationalizes participation in the pleasures of pagan religion (cf. 2.2.1.3).

Sardis: The church in Sardis has a good reputation but does not live up to it. Although they should know better, they do not live in faithful witness<sup>84</sup> and thus they are spiritually dead, their deeds are incomplete and their clothes stained. However there are a few Christians in Sardis who live faithfully (3:4).

Philadelphia: Like the church in Smyrna, the Philadelphian Christians are subject to Jewish opposition including denunciation before the Roman authorities (cf. 2.2.3). In all this the Christians have been faithful and have maintained their witness to Christ.

Laodicea: Like Sardis the church in Laodicea sees itself as flawless but is told that quite the opposite is the case. Their material wealth made the Laodicean Christians blind to spiritual matters, particularly their spiritual poverty, blindness and nakedness, which probably serve as images for their lack of faithful witness (cf. 2.5), possibly due to their easy accommodation with the prevailing culture<sup>85</sup>.

I thus suggest that the churches had to deal with a number of different issues and some churches even face a range of issues. Clearly such a variety of issues is prone to attract the criticism of those who have identified the issues differently. The much more urgent challenge however comes from scholars who see in Revelation's every detail some expression of one single (bigger) conflict which was the same for all the churches. But, as one might expect, there is no agreement on the nature of this supposed central issue.

One classic position claims that Revelation is merely a book of comfort to churches under persecution. Hendriksen for example states that “the Apocalypse has as its immediate purpose the strengthening of the wavering hearts of the persecuted believers of the first century AD.”<sup>86</sup> The churches, it is said, faced determined opposition from the emperor, local authorities and the decidedly anti-Christian Jewish synagogue. In this situation Revelation provides a perspective of hope beyond the churches' hopeless circumstances. However the textual evidence contradicts such an understanding. The churches in Sardis and Laodicea, for

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84 This interpretation builds mainly on the promise to the overcomers in 3:5 where it is implied that Christ will not acknowledge the dead in Sardis before his father and his angels. The analogy to Mt 10:32-33 (father) and Lk 12:8-9 (angels) (Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 280-281; Vos, *The synoptic traditions in the Apocalypse*, 85-94) warrants a reading that demands faithful witness from the church (cf. 2.5). For lack of witness as the problem in Sardis see Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 273-281.

85 Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 304-307.

86 Hendriksen, *More than conquerors*, 44. Similarly Abir, *The cosmic conflict of the Church*, 211.

example, receive anything but comfort. Rather they and other churches are sternly rebuked. Both rebuke and approval quite often deal with issues in no way related to persecution: Ephesus receives rebuke for having left their first love (2:4) but is commended for rejecting false teachers (2:2), while Pergamum (2:14) and Thyatira (2:20) are rebuked for not doing so. In Sardis the problem seems to be the “dirty clothes”, apparently a metaphor for a lack of witness (3:4, cf. 2:5) and a life marked by religious compromise. And Laodicea obviously is so content in its material wealth that persecution is just not on the agenda. So while persecution is an issue for some churches (cf. 2.2.2), for others it is not.

The more modern version of this idea limits the issues Revelation addresses to a conflict with a totalitarian Roman empire<sup>87</sup>. Essentially, it is argued, Revelation is not about persecution, although the churches may have experienced some. Rather it is understood as a critique of the Roman empire as such. Its absolutist claim on people to the point of demanding worship of the emperor, its commercial power which was built on oppressive trade practices and its intolerance towards those who refuse to take part in its corrupt system are all seen as the target of Revelation's rhetoric. Consequently Schüssler Fiorenza asks: “How does the author counteract the political situation and theological issue debated in the seven churches?”<sup>88</sup> Revelation is understood as a theological pamphlet against an ungodly political system. However the evidence in the seven messages also suggests that this is too narrow an understanding. Laodicea, for example, can hardly be seen as in any conflict with anybody. The church in Laodicea mistakes material prosperity for spiritual life, apparently living an early version of what today might be called “prosperity gospel”. The problem of the church therefore is not primarily assimilation to the empire. The case of Jezebel of Thyatira is similar. As I demonstrated in 2.2.1.3, Revelation's critique of Jezebel can hardly be read as a problem of imperial power. Similarly in the message to the church in Sardis we do not find any reference at all to either persecution or assimilation. The church there died a spiritual death because it had left the foundations of its faith. This underlines my argumentation in 1.3 (p 17) that Revelation is primarily about the covenant of God with his people and is only secondarily concerned with political issues.

Others argue that the book only deals with internal power-struggles within the churches. Duff<sup>89</sup>, one of the most prominent scholars to adopt this perspective, quite rightly emphasizes the temptations and internal struggles that are present within the churches of Revelation. He

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87 Schüssler Fiorenza, *Revelation*, 53-57; Yarbrow Collins, *The Apocalypse*, xi.

88 Schüssler Fiorenza, *Revelation*, 53.

89 Duff, *Who rides the Beast?*

rightly points out that the problem of false teaching as a major manifestation of these internal problems is an important concern of the seven messages (and Revelation as a whole), but I cannot see that Ephesus, Pergamum and Thyatira (the churches where references to false teaching can be found: 2:2.6.14-15.20) are “the primary focus of John's rhetorical efforts throughout the Apocalypse”<sup>90</sup> and that therefore Revelation's purpose can be limited to some rivalry between mainstream Christianity and John's orthodoxy, as Duff claims. He definitely takes things too far when he tries to eliminate any traces of persecution (cf. 2.2.2). Not only are these far too clear to ignore, it effectively depends on the claim<sup>91</sup> by some scholars that modern historical research cannot find evidence of real persecution in Asia Minor and that therefore John and his audience could not possibly have faced persecution. However, this claim does not stand up to scrutiny (cf. 2.2.2). On the other hand, Duff's classification of the churches in 3 categories (internal problems mentioned and elaborated, problems mentioned but not elaborated, no problems mentioned)<sup>92</sup> is also quite helpful, even though it already bears the marks of his efforts to eliminate any signs of external conflict.

Revelation is too much of a real communication in a real situation to focus on only one aspect of the churches' reality. Not every church faces persecution, not every church has to deal with false teaching and not every church has enough money to even be tempted to rely on material things rather than on Christ. Thus Revelation is both, a book of stern rebuke to churches in compromise and a book which seeks to comfort persecuted Christians. Both aspects are seen clearly in the seven messages. Gilbertson identifies four different situations, namely “the threat of false teaching (2:2, 14-15, 20-3); persecution (2:9-10, 13); loss of commitment (3:1-3, 15-19) and powerlessness (3:8).”<sup>93</sup>

Similarly DeSilva is “struck by the different life situations faced by the churches, and in many cases the different challenges present within a single congregation, such that the old paradigm of reading Revelation simply as comfort for the marginalized and persecuted will no longer hold.”<sup>94</sup> He concludes that “Revelation can thus be read from some situations as a word of encouragement but from others as a wake-up call to see that one's easy alliance with society is a partnership with the Whore of Babylon.”<sup>95</sup>

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90 Duff, *Who rides the beast?*, 35.

91 e.g. Thompson, *The Book of Revelation*, 171-172.

92 Duff, *Who rides the beast?*, 35-36.

93 Gilbertson, *God and history in the Book of Revelation*, 91.

94 DeSilva, *The hope of glory*, 179.

95 DeSilva, *The hope of glory*, 179.

#### 4.2.4 Recommendations

Aune calls this section *dispositio*<sup>96</sup>. He observes: “The *dispositio* differs from the other structural elements in the seven proclamations in that it is not formally marked with a stereotypical phrase used consistently throughout. Yet the *dispositio* is marked by the use of verbs in the imperative and future indicative”<sup>97</sup>. This use of imperative and future verb forms is not surprising given that it is here that the churches are told which response to his analysis of their state (cf. 4.2.3) Christ expects of them and which consequences of their actions they can expect from him. The future indicatives (“or present indicatives functioning as future indicatives”<sup>98</sup>) announce what Christ will do when he comes, while the imperatives contain what he counsels (or commands) the churches to do in order to be ready for him. “To correct or alert each congregation, Jesus issues a penetrating command. These commands further expose the exact nature of the self-deception involved.”<sup>99</sup> In the terms of Revelation: the churches are supposed to follow (τηρέω<sup>100</sup>) his words, so that their ἔργα (cf. 2.4.2) might be considered complete (3:2).

As could have been expected from the variety of issues that were present in the churches, this advice is different for each church, offering an individual remedy for each of the diagnosed problems. Nonetheless, Jesus' recommendations to each church do have a common thrust of renewed faith, the focus being on repentance (four messages<sup>101</sup>), remembering the origins (two messages<sup>102</sup>) and holding on (five messages<sup>103</sup>). These three “actions” cover what Christ specifically recommends to the churches. Again three groups can be made out: There are churches that only need the encouragement to hold on (Smyrna, Thyatira and Philadelphia), others that simply are called to repent (Pergamum and, in a rather figurative way, Laodicea), while the third group needs to repent as well as to remember and to hold on (Ephesus and Sardis).

As for those who are merely called to hold on, the reason seems quite clear: Either Christ has found nothing wrong with them, and so they are merely encouraged to keep going (Smyrna

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96 I find Osborne's (*Revelation*, 106) term “solution” more helpful.

97 Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 122. Italics in original.

98 Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 122.

99 Johnson, *Revelation*, 36.

100 Τηρέω is often replaced by κρατέω in the seven messages. The meaning shifts slightly from “follow” towards “hold”. Τηρέω however contains both, thus having a rather parallel meaning to κρατέω (see 2.4.1.3).

101 Ephesus, Pergamum, Sardis and Laodicea.

102 Ephesus and Sardis.

103 Smyrna (be faithful: γίνου πιστός), Thyatira (hold on: κρατήσατε), Sardis (keep it: τηρεί), Philadelphia (hold on: κράτει) and Ephesus (do the first deeds: τὰ πρῶτα ἔργα ποιήσον).

and Philadelphia), or the church (Thyatira) is divided into two groups, with only the praiseworthy group being given any advice while the other group is nearly treated as no longer belonging to the church in the first place.

Both Smyrna and Philadelphia are churches that experience strong opposition or persecution. While Philadelphia is encouraged to keep up its faithful endurance, with triumph over its enemies announced (3:9), Smyrna faces an even more difficult time of persecution (2:10) and is therefore urged to remain as faithful as before. This call to remain faithful is quite similar to Philadelphia's charge.

In Thyatira those not following Jezebel are told that she is all they will have to suffer<sup>104</sup>, so they too are urged to keep up their love, faith, service and perseverance. Jezebel and her followers on the other hand are not addressed directly. The others are told that Jezebel and her group would need to repent, should they not want to face great distress (2:22). This expresses that Jesus no longer sees them as part of the church and does not expect any repentance.

For Pergamum it seems to be enough to simply call them to repentance. What it is that they need to turn away from has been stated before. Their burden has been clearly identified. How they need to deal with it is obvious: they need to turn away from the false teachings of Balaam and the Nicolaitans. "Therefore repent!" is all they need to be told. The same word (μετανόησον) in the same imperative form is used in the message to Laodicea, forming the centre of Jesus' advice to that church together with the preceding imperative ζήλευε (be eager) which only enforces μετανόησον. All the other advice expressed in imagery is merely expressing the same message in a different way. The advice in 3:18 to buy effectively is a call to repentance from the lukewarmness and false self-confidence diagnosed earlier in the message. In 3:20 Laodicea is advised to open the door to Jesus and to let him in which again is an image for repentance, illustrating the church's need to put their trust in Jesus instead of their own material wealth.

As for Ephesus and Sardis, a mere call to repentance is not enough. Both are told to repent, Jesus using the same word μετανοέω as in the other messages, for Sardis in a direct imperative, for Ephesus more indirectly by telling them that not repenting will have drastic consequences<sup>105</sup>. Both churches are told to remember their origins (with the imperative

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104 Hughes, *The Book of Revelation*, 51; Strelan, *Where earth meets heaven*, 75.

105 Again more indirectly, the same applies for Sardis too. In 3:3 ἐὰν οὖν μὴ γρηγορήσῃς really implies repentance, as is expressed in two (unlikely) alternative readings which both include μετάνοησης, in one case even replacing γρηγορήσῃς by it.

μνημόνευε, Osborne: “to ‘remember’ is not just to bring it to mind but to act on it.”<sup>106</sup>) and to either do the first deeds (Ephesus) or keep (τήρει) what they had originally received (Sardis). These two expressions are used in a parallel way here. Considering the parallel use of τηρέω and κρατέω in the seven messages that we have noticed before<sup>107</sup>, it becomes quite obvious that they both need to be understood as parallel to the calls to hold on in the messages to Smyrna, Thyatira and Philadelphia. The call to strengthen the remains of true faith in Sardis (3:2) needs to be understood in a similar way as referring to keeping the remnants of the local church's original relationship with its Lord<sup>108</sup>, whether these remnants are faithful persons or a remaining consciousness or attitude (Thomas: “principles”<sup>109</sup>) among the church as a whole. Aune argues that “what remains” is about people rather than “non-living things” because supposedly the neuter of τὰ λοιπά can be used for persons as well<sup>110</sup>. However, only a few verses before (2:24) we find that John uses τοῖς λοιποῖς for what clearly is a group of persons. It therefore seems to make sense to understand the phrase in 3:2 as non-personal. Beale translates “remaining things”<sup>111</sup>. Thomas on the other hand includes both options: “The pressing need was for a reconstruction of both persons and principles...”<sup>112</sup>.

Yet Ephesus and Sardis need to be reminded of what it is that they should hold on to, because they are currently not doing so. They have let go of their original trust in Jesus and rely more on their own reputation (Sardis) or their own deeds (Ephesus) than on him. To return to their origins, to actual deeds of faith (Sardis) done in love (Ephesus), is what they are advised to do.

The future indicatives which spell out the consequences of following this advice for the various churches, differ from the promises to the overcomers (cf. 4.2.5) primarily in three ways. First these future indicatives are usually directly linked to the advice to the churches (e.g. 3:10 “Hold on to what you have, so that no one can take your crown.”). Second the promises to the overcomers are significantly more formalized than these announcements in the recommendations' section. Third while the promises to the overcomers are just that, promises for those who follow the advice of Christ as he gives it in Revelation and the seven messages

106 Osborne, *Revelation*, 116.

107 See 2.4.1.3.

108 The (unlikely) alternative reading “hold (τηρησον) what remains” suggests that the scribe who was responsible from this variant understood it similarly.

109 Thomas *Revelation 1-7*, 249.

110 Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 216.219. Following Aune is Witherington, *Revelation*, 105. Kraft (*Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 76) also argues that τὰ λοιπά refers to “die andern Gemeindeglieder”, albeit with a different argument.

111 Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 273. Similarly Caird, *The Revelation of Saint John*, 48; Harrington, *Revelation*, 67.

112 Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 249. Similarly Johnson, *Revelation*, 52; Osborne, *Revelation*, 174; Prigent, *Commentary on the Apocalypse of St. John*, 194.



in particular, most of the *dispositio*'s future indicatives are concerned with the consequences the churches will have to face if they do not follow this advice. Ephesus could experience Jesus coming against them and be excluded from the community of faith (symbolized by the group of lampstands), Pergamum could find itself defeated by Christ as a mighty warrior, Sardis could be caught unprepared when Jesus will suddenly return like a thief (cf. 3.3.1.2), Philadelphia could be robbed of its crown and Laodicea could be blind and find its nakedness exposed. In Thyatira judgement is only announced for Jezebel and her followers should they not repent, yet, as we have seen before, without much expectation that they might actually do so. I have already discussed the suggestion<sup>113</sup> that the coming of Christ which is announced to these churches is a conditional coming prior to the parousia rather than the parousia itself (see 3.3.1.2). Osborne's comments have significant merit:

Scholars often find too great a dichotomy between present and future judgment in the book. There is an inaugurated force in passages such as this one [2:5]. Christ's coming in judgment in the present is a harbinger of his final coming. In this context Christ's displeasure will be felt both in the present and at the final judgment.<sup>114</sup>

However, since Christ is present with the churches anyway (2:1!), the emphasis on the term “coming” is hardly warranted. Yes, as Osborne says, “Christ's displeasure will be felt both in the present and at the final judgment.” Christ may judge now and certainly will do so at the parousia. But “come” he will only at the parousia.

While the emphasis of these announcements is on judgment, on the consequences of not living according to Jesus' advice, they also include promises to those who do live accordingly. Some churches are told here as well as in the next section what they can expect if they do follow the advice. However, here only the first two points of difference to the promises to the overcomers apply: these promises are not presented in a special formula and they are directly linked to the advice in this section. The latter becomes clear when looking at the specific promises: Smyrna will receive the *crown of life* for being faithful even until *death*. In Sardis those who *have not defiled their clothes* but have remained faithful can look forward to being *clothed in purity*. Those in Laodicea who do repent, that is those who listen to his voice, who hear him knock and who open the door to him, will enjoy table fellowship with Christ. The promises use the same image as the recommendations.

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113 e.g. Caird, *The Revelation of Saint John*, 32; Giesen, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 62; Ladd, *A commentary on the Revelation of John*, 39-40; Reddish, *Revelation*, 54; Roloff, *Revelation*, 45; Smalley, *The Revelation to John*, 62; Wikenhauser, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 38.

114 Osborne, *Revelation*, 118. Similarly Hughes, *The Book of Revelation*, 55; Yarbrow Collins, *The Apocalypse*, 25: “The main point is that human beings are held accountable, regardless of when and how the accounting will take place.”

Aune includes a larger part of the message to Philadelphia (3:9-11 instead of 3:11 only) as part of the *dispositio* and thus also mentions the promises to the church there<sup>115</sup>. However, these promises unlike those to Smyrna, Sardis and Laodicea are not conditional in regard to the church's potential future faithfulness but rather are based on actual faithfulness in the past. They are promises of satisfaction for past persecution and protection from further persecution(cf. 2.2.3).

#### 4.2.5 The promises to the overcomers

All seven churches receive a promise that will be fulfilled should they overcome, that is follow the advice that they have received: “It is on the basis of believers heeding the exhortations of the body of each letter that they will inherit the promise.”<sup>116</sup> This becomes particularly clear in the message to Thyatira. There (2:26) the usual verb νικάω (here: νικῶν) is supplemented by τηρῶν ... τὰ ἔργα μου, a clear reference to both the evaluation and the advice the church received. As we have seen, τηρέω τὰ ἔργα is what Jesus expects his church to do. It is how their overcoming will be discerned (see below). For those who overcome, a multitude of blessings is announced.

Some of these blessings refer back to the respective message. The church in Smyrna, for example, who had been called to be faithful even until death, receives the promise that it will not be harmed by the second death. After the followers of Balaam and the Nicolaitans at Pergamum are challenged for eating idolatrous meat those who abstain from it are promised the hidden manna. Farrer comments: “it is appropriate that it [the divine provision of the manna] should be promised those who resist the wiles of the new Balaam.”<sup>117</sup> In Sardis some have been commended for not defiling their clothes. They had already been promised white clothes, a promise repeated for the overcomers. In Philadelphia those who face persecution by *the synagogue of Satan* are promised to become pillars in *the temple of God*.

Most of the promises to the overcomers however, seem to refer to Revelation's body, especially to the chapters about the millenium, the final judgement and the new Jerusalem (20-22:5). Gilbertson even claims that “each message contains a promise relating directly or indirectly to the New Jerusalem.”<sup>118</sup> Wikenhauser points out that this not surprising: “Der Siegerlohn ist in allen Siegersprüchen derselbe, das ewige Leben, das Teilhaben an der ewigen himmlischen Herrschaft Christi. Aber jedesmal wird er den Lesern unter einem anderen Bilde

115 Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 122.233.

116 Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 234.

117 Farrer, *The Revelation of St. John the Divine*, 74.

118 Gilbertson, *God and history in the Book of Revelation*, 91. Similarly Johnson, *Revelation*, 36.

vor Augen gestellt.”<sup>119</sup> Ephesus is promised the tree of life which we also find in 22:2<sup>120</sup>. The second death that Smyrna will escape features in 20:6.14 and 21:8. As Gilbertson notes<sup>121</sup>, death will be no more in the New Jerusalem (21:4). Similar to the authority over the nations promised to Thyatira (2:26-27), Christians are issued with authority over the earth in 5:10 and in 20:4. The iron scepter (2:27) can be found in the hand of Jesus in 19:15 and the morning star (2:28) is sharply contrasted by the star named Wormwood of 8:11. The book of life from which Sardis' overcomers will not be wiped out (3:5) also features in 13:8, 17:8 and in 20:12.15. That Philadelphia is promised the name of God to be written onto them (3:12) is reflected in the 144,000 who have the names of the Lamb and its Father written on their foreheads (14:1). In addition the same is also said about the servants of God in 22:4. The new Jerusalem that is announced to Philadelphia (3:12) is extensively illustrated in 20:9 and 21:2-22:5. These are the more important examples, but others could easily be found. Gilbertson concludes, that “[t]he earthly experience of the church is placed in the ultimate context of the expected descent of the New Jerusalem.”<sup>122</sup> There (21:7) we even find one more, a final promise to the overcomers: “He who overcomes will inherit all this, and I will be his God and he will be my son.” This is a programmatic statement, summing up one of Revelation's central intentions, namely to encourage its hearers and readers to overcome temporal difficulties in order to truly be children of God, to enjoy the goodness of having the one true God as their personal God<sup>123</sup>.

DeSilva takes up this forward-pointing aspect of the promises to the overcomers. He asks what overcoming means in Revelation and answers by saying that “John will clarify the behaviors that constitute ‘victory’ as his visions unfold.”<sup>124</sup> And indeed νικᾶω is frequently used in Revelation's body. Twice we read about the beast conquering (11:7, 13:7), obviously achieving temporary victory through violent measures<sup>125</sup>. In 6:2 the word seems to be used to convey an image of impressive power. In the other cases however victory is gained through the victor's death: The lion of the tribe of Judah (5:5) really is the Lamb that was slain (5:6.9), Michael and his angels essentially were victorious by the blood of the Lamb and because (12:11) “they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death.” DeSilva thus concludes: “Conquering ... means resisting the pressures to worship the beast (cf. 13:15-17)

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119 Wikenhauser, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 38.

120 Note the sharp contrast to the deadly harvest of the vine in 14:14-20.

121 Gilbertson, *God and history in the Book of Revelation*, 91.

122 Gilbertson, *God and history in the Book of Revelation*, 92.

123 Similarly Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 234.

124 DeSilva, *The hope of glory*, 197.

125 Osborne, *Revelation*, 122.

even if it entails accepting execution.”<sup>126</sup> And indeed as we have seen this is a vital aspect of what Christ asks of the churches in the seven messages.

Not surprisingly then it has been suggested that ὁ νικῶν is another term for a martyr: “The conqueror ... is the victim of persecution whose death is not loss but is in reality his victory.”<sup>127</sup> But as the parallel use of ὁ νικῶν and ὁ τηρῶν ... τὰ ἔργα μου in 2:26 shows, by referring back to the various issues present in the churches, overcoming is used in a wider sense here in these promises to those who overcome not by their own strength but by the blood of the Lamb (7:14; 12:11) the threats and temptations they have to face, whether they come from the outside world or from inside the church or even from within the believers themselves<sup>128</sup>. According to Smalley the victory of the overcomers is “victory over doctrinal error and imperial persecution”<sup>129</sup>. Wikenhauser aptly comments: “Unter dem ‘Sieger’, dem ein herrlicher Lohn verheißen wird, ist jeder zu verstehen, der standhaft bleibt und den Sieg über das Böse, aber auch über alle Drangsale, Leiden und Verfolgungen erringt, insbesondere [but not exclusively] der Märtyrer, wie 3,21; 5:5 zeigen.”<sup>130</sup> Such an understanding is underlined by whom 21:7-8 list as opposites to the overcomers: “the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practise magic arts, the idolaters and all liars” (NIV). Osborne thus concludes: “In short, overcoming in Revelation is analogous to πιστεύω (*pisteuō*, believe) in Paul, referring to an active trust in God that leads to faithfulness in the difficult situations of life lived for Christ.”<sup>131</sup>

Kiddle points out that some of the promises to the overcomers (e.g. for their names to remain in the book of life) are open to faithful Christians who were not martyred: “The book of Life, as we see from the great Judgment scene, is by no means only written with the blood of the martyrs; the names of all faithful Christians are there, all the righteous, pure, and true (cf. xxi. 27).”<sup>132</sup> To me, unlike Kiddle, this underlines that to overcome does not necessarily include martyrdom<sup>133</sup>.

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126 DeSilva, *The hope of glory*, 197.

127 Ladd, *A commentary on the Revelation of John*, 41. See also: Caird, *The Revelation of Saint John*, 33; Kiddle, *The Revelation of St. John*, 62-65.

Contra: Beasley-Murray, *The Book of Revelation*, 77-79; Roloff, *The Revelation of John*, 46; Witherington, *Revelation*, 96.

128 Similarly Giesen, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 94; Koester, *Revelation and the end of all things*, 57.

129 Smalley, *The Revelation to John*, 64.

130 Wikenhauser, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 38.

131 Osborne, *Revelation*, 123. Similarly Boring, *Revelation*, 91; Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 151-153.

132 Kiddle, *The Revelation of St. John*, 62.

133 Similarly Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 152.

Building on the notion that conquering entails accepting execution (should it occur), Yarbro Collins adds another aspect to the meaning of overcoming. She writes:

In the context of the Apocalypse as a whole, “conquering” means being acquitted in a court of law. The acquittal of the faithful is paradoxical. It is expected that they will be found guilty in the local Roman courts and executed. But the testimony they give and their acceptance of death will win them the acquittal that counts – in the heavenly court, in the eyes of eternity.<sup>134</sup>

Beasley-Murray however in my view offers the best explanation:

the promises to the conquerors are fundamentally assurances to the faithful of the benefits of redemption, expressed in the language of apocalyptic. ... The end may well be martyrdom for some, but that is not the chief point of the concept. Its essential feature is participation in Christ's victory<sup>135</sup>.

#### **4.2.6 The call to hear the message**

In the closing part of each of the messages we find the identical call to listen to what the Spirit says to the churches. Scholars have debated the nature of this formulaic saying. Enroth distinguishes three suggested interpretations, namely an esoteric understanding, a parenetic understanding, to which she herself ascribes, and “a noetic one combining the previous two.”<sup>136</sup>

Enroth's argument for a parenetic interpretation centres on her observation that “the formula is akin to the exhortation to be victorious, which is found either before or after the HF [hearing formula], although both formulae (the HF and the exhortation to be victorious) can be used independently.”<sup>137</sup> This observation certainly has substance particularly considering the parenetic orientation I have observed when examining the framing chapters of the book (cf. 3.4.5).

The formula therefore underlines the urgency and importance of Revelation's message, of the whole book as well as of the seven messages and of the promises to the overcomers in particular. It is paralleled in 13:9's Εἰ τις ἔχει οὖς ἀκουσάτω, the context of which (13:10) suggests that at least part of what the Spirit tells the churches is that they are expected to remain faithful if or when they face persecution. Strelan summarizes this parenetic

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134 Yarbro Collins, *The Apocalypse*, 14.

135 Beasley-Murray, *The Book of Revelation*, 78-79. Similarly Giesen, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 94; Osborne, *Revelation*, 122; Prigent, *Commentary on the Apocalypse*, 161.

136 Enroth, “The Hearing Formula in the Book of Revelation”, 599.

137 Enroth, “The Hearing Formula in the Book of Revelation”, 607.

understanding rather aptly: “To hear is to obey; in this case, to remember, repent and do (2:5).”<sup>138</sup>

However Enroth's dismissal of any “esoteric” interpretation is too quick. She rightly points out that Revelation knows a different word for mere insight: “When the author wants to indicate a deeper meaning to his hearers and readers, he directs his call to the ‘understanding’ (νοῦς) not to the ‘ear’ (οὖς).”<sup>139</sup> But this does not necessarily mean that the parenetic message does not require some deeper insight or divinely inspired understanding. While there is no evidence to support a notion that only specially anointed prophets could understand Revelation's words, it is only the churches to which the Spirit speaks, not the general public of Asia Minor. Only the chosen ones in the churches that will heed Revelation's advice.

While the first part (“Let him who has an ear hear”) may at first hearing invoke the notion of a wider audience, the synoptic background<sup>140</sup> brings further evidence that this formula limits the addressees of Revelation to Christians. In the synoptics it is used to imply that only those who are ready to believe are capable of understanding what Jesus' parables mean. This is emphasized in three key occurrences: Mt 13:9, Mk 4:9 and Lk 8:8. In all three cases Jesus concludes the parable of the sower by saying: “He who has ears to hear, let him hear.”<sup>141</sup> Then as his disciples ask him to explain he answers: “The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of God has been given to you, but to others I speak in parables, so that, ‘though seeing, they may not see; though hearing, they may not understand.’”<sup>142</sup> Apparently only those who already follow Jesus are in a position to “hear” and thus do according to his words.

Thus the book of Revelation as a whole as well as the messages bring a word of God to the churches (or rather the one, global church), not to the world: “These things are meant for his chosen ones.”<sup>143</sup> Yarbro Collins writes that “[h]ere the saying shows that the messages are meant to be veiled and mysterious, but at the same time, they are addressed to all who have the Spirit”<sup>144</sup>. However I disagree with the first statement. I doubt that the messages were meant to be “veiled and mysterious”, rather I would suggest that they appear so unless a hearer/reader has the Spirit. Ellul comments: “Die ‘objektive Wahrheit’ ist in Jesus Christus;

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138 Strelan, *Where earth meets heaven*, 59. Similarly Osborne, *Revelation*, 121; Smalley, *The Revelation to John*, 63.

139 Enroth, “The Hearing Formula in the Book of Revelation”, 607.

140 Vos, *The synoptic traditions in the Apocalypse*, 71-75.

141 Mk 4:9; Lk 8:8. Mt 13:9: “He who has ears, let him hear.”

142 Lk 8:10 (NIV).

143 Osborne, *Revelation*, 121. See Kraft, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 58 for a discussion on “prophetische Verstockungstheorie” and “Gnadenwahl”.

144 Yarbro Collins, *The Apocalypse*, 14. Similarly Prigent, *Commentary on the Apocalypse*, 161.

die Fleischwerdung des Wortes (die Hinführung zur Tat, zur Umkehr), das Verstehen des einzelnen, die Verwirklichung der Botschaft, wird durch den Geist vermittelt.”<sup>145</sup>

Just as valid is Beale's observation that the formula “has the dual function of signifying that symbolic revelation will be received by the elect but rejected by unbelievers. Therefore, the exhortation assumes a mixed audience, of which only a part will respond positively.”<sup>146</sup> Clearly Revelation assumes that not all of its hearers will respond to its message (cf. 4.2.4), even though they all are part of the seven churches to whom the whole book is addressed in the first place (cf. 3.4.1). It is within the churches that the issues which Revelation addresses arise.

As an aside it is worth noting that in the hearing formula neither Christ nor his father but the Spirit (singular, like 14:13; 22:17, unlike 1:4; 3:1; 4:5; 5:6: “the seven spirits”) is mentioned as the one speaking to the churches<sup>147</sup>, contributing to the trinitarian perspective of Revelation: “Jesus and Spirit are equivalent in all the messages.”<sup>148</sup>

### **4.3 Connections to the other parts of the book**

#### **4.3.1 References to the frame and the inaugural vision**

As I have shown in 3.3.1 and in 3.3.3, the seven messages are closely related to the other parts around Revelation's body, namely the frame of 1:1-8 and 22:6-21 and the inaugural vision of 1:9-20. The connections are particularly strong to the latter, even to the point that these two ought to be seen as a unity, 1:9-20 rather specifically introducing the seven messages as well as introducing the whole book through a vision of Jesus who is the central character of both the seven messages and the book as a whole.

Among a few other things, the seven messages share with the frame the interest in parenthesis, in following advice to receive a blessing. “Deeds” play a vital role in this in both the frame and the seven messages. The frame purposefully sets the stage for the seven messages which are introduced by the inaugural vision.

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145 Ellul, *Apokalypse*, 121. On the spirit, see below at the end of 4.2.6.

146 Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 234.

147 Beasley-Murray, *The Book of Revelation*, 76; Thompson, *Revelation*, 65. Contra Giesen, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 104.

148 Harrington, *Revelation*, 55. Also Behm, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 18; Hughes, *The Book of Revelation*, 39; Ladd, *A commentary on the Revelation of John*, 40; Smalley, *The Revelation to John*, 63.

### 4.3.2 Connections to the body

When discussing the promised blessings for the overcomers (4.2.5) I mentioned some connections between the seven messages and Revelation's body. However there are many more. Some are more obvious and some more subtle, some are clear and others are debatable, some are direct and others more associative. I shall here concentrate on the more important ones because there plainly are too many to mention them all (if one could even be sure not to overlook any).

#### 4.3.2.1 Christ's self-introductions

The actual messages begin with a self-introduction of Jesus which, as I have shown in 3.3.3.3, usually refers back to 1:9-20. But, as already became evident there, most of these self-introductions of Jesus are also connected to both the frame and the body of Revelation:

In 2:8 ὁ πρῶτος καὶ ὁ ἔσχατος is linked not only to 1:17 but to 1:8, 21:6 and 22:13 as well. The sharp (two-edged) sword of 2:12 is picked up from 1:16 but also reappears in 19:15.21<sup>149</sup>. In the same image Jesus is described as having eyes like blazing fire (19:12), an attribute already ascribed to him in both 1:14 and 2:18. Also, in 2:18, according to Lohse “dient auch hier der Titel Sohn Gottes dazu, um die herrscherliche und richterliche Würde, die Gott verliehen hat, anzuzeigen (vg. 19,15).”<sup>150</sup>

It is evident that the glory of the angel in chapter 10 is but a shadow of the glory of God as it is revealed in Christ. But he shares with Christ a few of his attributes albeit in a substantially weaker form. Among these attributes are the feet which in the angel's case are described as being “like pillars of fire” (10:1) compared to Jesus' feet being said to be “like bronze (glowing in a furnace)” (1:15; 2:18).

The sevenfold spirit of God appears not only in 3:1 but in 1:4, 4:5<sup>151</sup> and 5:6<sup>152</sup> as well. Probably it is identical to the Spirit<sup>153</sup> (singular) of 11:11, 14:13 and 22:17 which is contrasted with (three) unclean spirits in 16:13.14 and 18:2.

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149 Osborne, *Revelation*, 140; Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 180-181.

150 Lohse, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 29; Osborne, *Revelation*, 173.

151 Osborne, *Revelation*, 173; Roloff, *The Revelation of John*, 58; Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 244.

152 Behm, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 25; Harrington, *Revelation*, 68; Lohse, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 29; Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 244.

153 Contra Giesen, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 126.



That Christ is the Holy One (3:7) is reflected in 4:8<sup>154</sup> and 6:10<sup>155</sup>. In both cases it appears as though God is in view, but that in 4:8 the Holy One is said to be the one “who was, and is, and is to come” suggests that Christ is just as much in focus (cf. 3.2.1.1)<sup>156</sup>. Note also the polemical contrast in the description of the beast of ch 17: “he once was, now is not and yet will come.”<sup>157</sup> As for 6:10 the combination of holy and true as christological or divine attributes (ὁ ἅγιος καὶ ἀληθινός) is a particularly clear reflection of 3:7 (ὁ ἅγιος, ὁ ἀληθινός)<sup>158</sup>. That God is called true in 15:3, 16:7 and 19:2.11 underlines this<sup>159</sup>.

Comments on how the key of David (3:7) is related to the key of the Abyss (9:1; 20:1.3) are covered in 3.3.2.

Finally, that 3:14 calls Jesus the origin of all that was created by God (3:14<sup>160</sup>) has its counterpart in Revelation speaking about “him who lives for ever and ever, who created the heavens and all that is in them, the earth and all that is in it, and the sea and all that is in it” (10:6), claiming that “you are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honour and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being” (4:11).

#### 4.3.2.2 *The deeds*

The important role of ἔργα for both the frame and the seven messages is evident (cf. 2.4.2), but it also occurs in the body: The deeds of those who die in the Lord will follow them (14:13)<sup>161</sup>, humankind refuses to repent from their deeds (16:11) and the dead are judged according to their deeds (20:12.13).

Further 14:12-13 has links to a few places in the seven messages: Together with 13:10 it links ὑπομονή with πίστις, both of which also play a vital part of the churches' ἔργα: ὑπομονή is listed as part of the churches' ἔργα in 2:2.3.19; 3:10<sup>162</sup>, while πίστις appears in 2:13.19<sup>163</sup>. It is noteworthy that as in 14:12 and 13:10 they appear together in 2:19<sup>164</sup>.

154 Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 273.

155 Behm, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 26; Johnson, *Revelation*, 56; Roloff, *The Revelation of John*, 61; Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 273; Thompson, *Revelation*, 81.

156 Sometimes the Father and the Son can hardly be distinguished. For example when *the song of the Lamb* (15:3) says “Great and marvellous are your deeds, *Lord God Almighty*” it is implied that the two are really one.

157 17.8b, similar in 17:8a.11. This beast's future coming obviously is limited (20:10).

158 Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 283; Osborne, *Revelation*, 186; Thompson, *Revelation*, 81.

159 Osborne, *Revelation*, 187; Thompson, *Revelation*, 81.

160 Contra Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 298 and Poythress, *The returning King*, 93. See 3.3.3.3.

161 Thompson, *Revelation*, 64.

162 Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 202.

163 Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 202; Roloff, *The Revelation of John*, 54; Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 212; Thompson, *Revelation*, 75.

164 Osborne, *Revelation*, 506; Thompson, *Revelation*, 75.

Note also that the κόπος of the saints is recognized as their ἔργα not only in 14:13, but in 2:2.3<sup>165</sup> as well<sup>166</sup>.

#### 4.3.2.3 *Lies and deception*

The unpleasant fact of lies, deception, false teachers and false prophets plays a role in the seven messages as well as in the body: Ephesus has found evil men claiming to be apostles to be false (2:2), Smyrna suffers from those claiming to be Jews but belonging to the synagogue of Satan (2:9) and the same will be true for Philadelphia (3:9)<sup>167</sup>, while Balaam, the Nicolaitans and Jezebel are obviously false teachers (2:6.14.15.20)<sup>168</sup>. In the body a ψευδοπροφήτης appears in 16:13, 19:20 and 20:10, the liars face the second death along with murderers, idolaters and unbelievers (21:8, cf. 21:27; 22:15) whereas the 144,000 of 14:1-5 are praised because no lie was found in their mouths (14:5).

#### 4.3.2.4 *Repentance*

Repentance, the need for which Jesus emphasizes in his advice to the churches (2:5.16.21.22; 3:3.19), seems to be the adequate response for the plagues in Revelation's body. In 9:20.21 and 16:9.11 it is suggested that humankind should repent in response to the plagues which unfortunately does not happen. As 3:10 suggests, the “hour of trial” will come over the whole world in order to test (πειράζω) or seek the repentance of those who live on the earth. These “trials” or plagues then are the objects of a substantial part of Revelation's “action” (6:4.8.10.13.15; 8:5.7.13; 9:3.4; 11:6; 13:3-4.11-14; 14:6; 16:1.2; 17:2.5.8; 19:2), with the majority of their occurrences in the context of the series of seals, trumpets and bowls<sup>169</sup>. This suggests that these series of sevens describe at least one aspect of “the hour of trial” that is announced in 3:10.

That this hour of trial “is intended by God as a *penal judgment* of unbelievers”<sup>170</sup>, as Beale argues, seems unlikely. While “those dwelling on the earth” (τοὺς κατοικοῦντας ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς) indeed are “unbelieving idolaters”<sup>171</sup>, the above mentioned context (9:20.21; 16:9.11) is clear that repentance is expected of them as a result of the plagues, although they largely refuse to repent.

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<sup>165</sup> In 2:3 John uses not the noun κόπος but the verb κοπιᾶω which expresses the same laboring effort.

<sup>166</sup> Johnson, *Revelation*, 146; Lohse, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 24; Osborne, *Revelation*, 112; Smalley, *The Revelation to John*, 370; Thompson, *Revelation*, 64.

<sup>167</sup> Cf. 2.2.3.

<sup>168</sup> Cf. 2.2.1.

<sup>169</sup> Cf. 6.2 for a more detailed discussion on the relevance of the links between the seven messages the series of sevens and their invitation to repent.

<sup>170</sup> Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 290. Italics added.

<sup>171</sup> Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 290. Similarly Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 240; Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 289.

Note also that πειρασμός can hardly be translated as “tribulation”<sup>172</sup> in the sense of punishment as Beale interprets it. More accurately it describes an event or process intending to clarify an uncertain case (here: of allegiance) so that “test”, “trial” or even “temptation” would make a significantly better translation<sup>173</sup>. While the latter (“temptation”) might be behind the use of πειράζω in 2:10, it can certainly be considered inadequate 3:10<sup>174</sup>.

#### 4.3.2.5 *The blasphemy of the synagogue of Satan*

Not only does βλασφημία (in this case from the “synagogue of Satan”, cf. 2:9) distress the church in Smyrna, βλασφημία also is the reaction of unrepentant humans (probably including those of the “synagogue of Satan”) to the plagues of the later bowls (16:9.11.21) and it seems to be one of the main occupations of the first beast (13:1.5.6)<sup>175</sup> as well as a main characteristic of the beast on which Babylon rides (17:3)<sup>176</sup>.

Not only are the false Jews portrayed as subject to Satan's influence and thus named after him in the seven messages (2:9; 3:9), the church in Pergamum has to live where Satan's throne is (2:13). Satan later appears as the ancient serpent in 12:7-9<sup>177</sup> which stands behind all the demonic action throughout Revelation's body and which is imprisoned in 20:2<sup>178</sup> and judged in 20:10. Commenting on 2:9 Johnson thus points out that

[m]any further references to the archenemy of the followers of Christ are found throughout the book (2:13; 3:9; 9:11; 12:9-10, 12; 13:4; 20:2, 7, 10). In fact, he is one of the principal actors in the apocalyptic drama. ... Satan is the author of persecution and wicked men are his instruments<sup>179</sup>.

Death as a result of faithful witness to Jesus threatens not only the Christians at Pergamum (2:13), but in Smyrna (2:10) as well. Revelation is quite clear that they will not be the only ones to die for their faith in Jesus, as can be seen in 6:9, 11:7, 12:11, 17:6 and 20:4.

#### 4.3.2.6 *Idolatry and fornication*

The false teaching of Balaam, the Nicolaitans and Jezebel has either rationalized or lead to idolatry and fornication in the churches (2:14.20-22). DeSilva argues for understanding

172 John liberally uses θλίψις to denote a concept of tribulation however even θλίψις does not necessarily imply punishment (cf. 2:9.10) although it certainly can be used in this way (cf. 2:22).

173 Kassühlke (*Kleines Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament*, 146) lists “versuchen, probieren ... prüfen” and similar words for πειράζω and “Versuchung, Verlockung, Probe” for πειρασμός.

174 Contra Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 240.

175 Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 241.

176 Giesen, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 108; Harrington, *Revelation*, 58 (13:1.5.6. 17:3); Osborne, *Revelation*, 131 (13:1.5.6. 17:3); Thompson, *Revelation*, 68.

177 Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 246; Harrington, *Revelation*, 60; Johnson, *Revelation*, 42; Thompson, *Revelation*, 71.82.

178 Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 246.

179 Johnson, *Revelation*, 42.

fornication as a symbol for idolatry: “In this context it is better to read the second charge – committing fornication – metaphorically, especially in light of the history of depicting God's relationship with God's people Israel as a marriage (with frequent infidelity on the part of the bride).”<sup>180</sup> Farrer seems to see this differently as he states that the Nicolaitans broke “the biblical rules of chastity. ‘Fornication’, *porneia*, is a word widely used by Hellenistic-Jewish writers for incorrect sexual behaviour of all kinds.”<sup>181</sup>

There are valid reasons for both views, making it difficult to reject one option in favour of the other (“either is possible”<sup>182</sup>) although I tend to side with Farrer (cf. 2.2.1.2 and 2.2.1.3 for a more detailed discussion). Whether they refer to the same issue or not, the combined images of idolatry and fornication certainly are a continuous feature of Revelation. Both, idolatry and fornication, are characteristics of the unrepentant humans in 9:20-21 and those practicing them will have to face the second death along with the liars and murderers (21:8, similarly 22:15)<sup>183</sup>.

In this context of sexuality-related language, Jezebel of Thyatira is extremely interesting. From the way she and the judgement she faces is described, it is inevitable to link her to Babylon (cf. 6.1.4.15 for more detail). All that is missing is that Jezebel is not directly labeled as a whore, a word frequently used for Babylon (14:8; 17:1-5.15.16; 18:3.9; 19:2). The judgement of Jezebel (2:22-23) in particular parallels Babylon's fall strikingly, particularly the distress of those who had been involved with her (18:9-10.17-19), how they are stricken to death (ἀποκτείνω: 19:21) and how she is described as being thrown down (βάλλω: 18:21). Also noteworthy is the sharp contrast between these two adulterous women on the one side and Revelation's pure women on the other side. As we are told in 21:9 the new Jerusalem is this bride (21:2) of the lamb, a holy and pure city, in obvious contrast to the profane and impure Babylon (ch 18).<sup>184</sup>

#### **4.3.2.7 The unpredictability of Jesus' return**

Nobody knows beforehand when the time will arrive for Jesus to come – in judgment for some, for salvation for others (2:5.16.25; 3:3.20; 14:7.15; 18:10)<sup>185</sup>. This prospect of Jesus

<sup>180</sup> DeSilva, *The hope of glory*, 181.

<sup>181</sup> Farrer, *The Revelation of St. John the Divine*, 74.

<sup>182</sup> Osborne, *Revelation*, 145.

<sup>183</sup> Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 250.1059; Osborne, *Revelation*, 387.741; Smalley, *The Revelation to John*, 543; Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 218.

<sup>184</sup> For a few other details on how the for major female characters of Revelation are connected see Duff, *Who rides the beast?*, 83-96.

<sup>185</sup> I understand this coming as eschatological, not as a visitation of the churches prior to the parousia (cf. 3.3.1.2).

coming suddenly and unexpectedly like a thief is not only expressed in the message to Sardis (3:3), but in 16:15 as well<sup>186</sup>. The link between these two is so strong that it has even been suggested that 16:15 really belongs in the middle of 3:3<sup>187</sup>. However, as Hemer argues, “[t]he whole context of 16:15 has ... the situation in Sardis in mind”<sup>188</sup>, thus only underlining the importance of this link.

#### **4.3.2.8 *White clothes, wealth and the meal fellowship with Christ***

Pure white clothes are not only important in Sardis (3:4-5) and Laodicea (3:17-18), but are a sign of purity throughout Revelation (4:4; 6:11; 19:8.14), granted through the redemptive death of the Lamb (7:9.13; 22:14), and preventing their wearer from being caught naked (3:17-18; 16:15)<sup>189</sup>.

Laodicea's self-deceptive trust in material wealth (3:17-18) is mirrored in those mourning about the demise of Babylon which means the end of their wealth (18:9-19)<sup>190</sup>. True wealth with “pure gold” however can be found in the new Jerusalem (21:18.21)<sup>191</sup>.

The meal Jesus will share with those who open the door to invite him into their lives (3:20) is most likely related to the wedding supper of the lamb (19:9)<sup>192</sup> and strongly contrasted in “the great supper of God” of 19:17-18, a strong image for God's judgment.

#### **4.3.2.9 *The number seven***

Last, but probably not least, the structural use of the number seven is a feature common to both Revelation's body and the *seven* messages. Although no direct link between the series of sevens in the book's body and the seven messages can be claimed, it certainly underlines the fact that these two parts of Revelation belong together. While the seven messages are constructed as paralleling entities with a parallel internal structure, the seven seals, trumpets and bowls are of a more flowing nature, one series springing from the previous one. Also each of these series gets more detailed as it progresses, in contrast to the seven messages which

186 Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 221; Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 275; Behm, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 25; Giesen, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 127; Lohse, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 31; Osborne, *Revelation*, 177; Smalley, *The Revelation to John*, 83; Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 253; Thompson, *Revelation*, 79; Wikenhauser, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 45.

187 Charles, *A critical and exegetical commentary*, 1:80.

188 Hemer, *The letters to the seven churches*, 146. Similarly Giesen, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 127; Osborne, *Revelation*, 177; Smalley, *The Revelation to John*, 83.

189 Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 222-223.259; Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 276-279; Johnson, *Revelation*, 53; Lohse, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 31; Osborne, *Revelation*, 210; Roloff, *The Revelation of John*, 90; Smalley, *The Revelation to John*, 84-85; Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 256-260.312; Thompson, *Revelation*, 35-36.79.85; Wikenhauser, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 45.

190 Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 258; Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 305; Thompson, *Revelation*, 85.

191 Thompson, *Revelation*, 85.

192 Giesen, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 143; Osborne, *Revelation*, 213; Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 324.

remain unamplified. So while there are some remarkable differences, the same idea lies behind both series of sevens: “John uses the number **seven** as a symbol for completeness and wholeness.”<sup>193</sup> “This number seven occurs again and again in the Apocalypse and is everywhere symbolical of completeness.”<sup>194</sup> Obviously the author has purposefully used it in both the seven messages and in Revelation's body.

Note also Gilbertson's interesting comment, that Revelation “uses the number three and a half, exactly half of seven, to express incompleteness and limitedness”, which leads him to see a whole new significance in “the connection made by the use of the formula of three and a half years”<sup>195</sup>.

Regarding the structure of the the messages note that the hearing formula has a direct counterpart in 13:9 (cf. 4.2.6 above).

#### 4.3.2.10 *Conclusions*

It is obvious that the seven messages and Revelation's body are strongly connected, far too strongly for any claims to be upheld about the seven messages being an addition of a totally different text into Revelation. Aune, who argues for an original Revelation without the messages<sup>196</sup>, has to claim that the links between the two parts were purposefully crafted. One example of this is his treatment of the occurrences of ὑπομονή and πίστις in 13:10 and 14:12, all of which he claims “are almost certainly expansions” or “later additions”<sup>197</sup>. This seems too artificial a solution. In all four cases the words are far too integral a part of the text to be considered later additions.

It is interesting to note that Aune, the only leading scholar to recently argue extensively for a multi-source Revelation (Beale: “Today [1999] the consensus is that only one author wrote the book”<sup>198</sup>), claims to be interested in “understanding the *composition* of Revelation as the end product of ... a literary *process*”<sup>199</sup>. He thus states: “My ultimate concern is not to atomize Revelation into a plethora of discrete textual units ..., but rather to try to understand how and

193 Caird, *The Revelation of Saint John*, 14. Bold types in the original.

194 Hendriksen, *More than conquerors*, 16.

195 Gilbertson, *God and History in the Book of Revelation*, 113.

196 Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, cv-cxxxiv. He also offers a good overview of the other source-critical approaches to Revelation which see it as composed of various originally unrelated texts.

197 Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 202. Aune uses the term “expansions” for the two occurrences of πίστις and “later additions” for ὑπομονή.

198 Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 34. Note however that Prigent for example still argues for at least two editions, but from one single author (Prigent, *Commentary on the Apocalypse*, 150): “The Letters were thus introduced at a later time, by the author of the book of Revelation, in the book which he had already drafted.”

199 Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, cxviii.

why a single author, John of Patmos, brought Revelation into being.”<sup>200</sup> However it is quite clear that this single author wanted his audience to hear his words as they now are, not in any other form. Smalley rightly comments:

I find it difficult to respond positively to the radical rearrangement of the material in Revelation proposed by Charles, or to the elaborate source-critical theories which he constructs in order to amend a “deprivation of the text” (see esp. 1, 1-lxv); and the suggestion of Aune (esp. cxviii-cxxxiv) that the Apocalypse came to birth in two major stages (“first and second editions”) appears to be equally unnecessary.<sup>201</sup>

Even if Revelation was the product of a redactional composition of otherwise unrelated material, which Smalley considers possible<sup>202</sup>, to know these sources would do very little to help understand the work John created. It might show how he read these sources, but even that is doubtful and would yield little for our understanding of what he created from them. All this would teach an exegete is that the links were purposefully placed where they are and that they may not be ignored when trying to understand the work. That the text as it is inherently demands regard for these links however is the topic of this thesis and does not require Aune's source-critical construct. Osborne sums up the apparent view of the many commentators who do not even discuss the issue: “The unity of the book, both in language and in structure, seems evident from the data, and theories of composition are ultimately unnecessary.”<sup>203</sup>

I suggest that the plethora of links between the two parts show that both the seven messages and the body of Revelation belong in this book together. They both serve Revelation's one purpose, they are part of the one vision that John was shown and commissioned to send to the churches.

#### **4.4 Recapitulation of results**

The seven messages pick up from the introductory chapter and carry its themes further when they are developed as the aspects of Christ relevant for the specific messages. In the messages Christ advises the churches of his view of their respective circumstances, offers parenetic advice for correcting deficiencies and improving on strengths and calls them to respond accordingly. The seven messages thus present the most clearly and continuously parenetic section of Revelation and offer a view into the diverse circumstances the churches faced and which Revelation consequently seeks to address. While the messages have one common goal, namely to restore or strengthen the faithfulness of the churches, the issues that need to be

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200 Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, cxviii.

201 Smalley, *The Revelation to John*, 2.

202 Smalley, *The Revelation to John*, 2. Similarly Osborne, *Revelation*, 28.

203 Osborne, *Revelation*, 28. He mentions Beasley-Murray, Kroll, Roloff, Mounce and Beale (p. 27).

overcome to reach this goal are different for most of the churches. Not surprisingly then the parenetic advice each church receives is different and yet similar to that of the other churches. While the parenetic formula at the end of every single message which calls “the churches” to heed the messages' prophetic counsel further highlights the universal importance of all the messages to every church, the promises to the overcomers present the “incentive” to heed and do according to the messages' prophetic counsel in terms that are relevant to each church's specific situation as presented in the respective message. However while to overcome may mean something else to every single follower of the Lamb, ultimately the promises to those who do overcome apply to all of them, as they all show but a few aspects of the New Jerusalem's much wider and comprehensive reality.

Not only are the seven messages introduced by and thus linked to what precedes them, they also point beyond themselves to Revelation's body. Most – if not all – major themes of the seven messages either surface again in the following chapters or else are strongly linked to an image or theme in the second part of John's vision.



## 5 The proposed reading strategy

This chapter unfolds my proposal of a reading strategy for Revelation's body based on the book's introductory and concluding chapters. Considering the results of the last two chapters and drawing conclusions from them, I suggest a way to see and thus access Revelation at large and the visions in the book's body in particular. This will be achieved in two steps: First I will seek to determine the character of Revelation's main visionary chapters in terms of their nature, function and purpose and following from this I will in a second step develop some methodological tools (among the wide range of other more widely used ones) for exegeting this particular text.

In the next chapter (6) I will then present two examples of how these two components of my proposed reading strategy can be applied to specific themes of Revelation. This will demonstrate the relevance of both determining the character of Revelation's body and interpreting it accordingly. I thus will seek to demonstrate what such a reading strategy practically means for the exegesis of Revelation and that it leads to plausible and perhaps even original results.

Considering the discussion so far the following information about Revelation's structure and message emerges:

Revelation's frame consists of the book's first eight verses and its last 16 verses (22:6-21). It has close links to all other parts of the book. Its message is summed up in 22:7: "Behold, I am coming soon. Blessed is he who holds/follows the words of prophecy of this book." In this way it introduces the whole book, suggesting that as divine prophecy all of it offers advice (parenthesis) which it expects to be followed. The consequences of either doing so or not are indicated and these indications refer the reader/hearer to both the seven messages and Revelation's body.

The inaugural vision (1:9-20) contains both the commission to John to publish to the seven churches what he consequently wrote down as the Book of Revelation and the self-introduction of Jesus as the Lord of the church and main character of the whole ἀποκάλυψις.

Both aspects connect it equally to the seven messages and to Revelation's body. Some of these connections to the body are through or in conjunction with the seven messages. Also a very strong unity of these two parts could be observed and I concluded that the inaugural vision and the seven messages may be seen as one single part of the book. Together they set the stage

for the visions of the body. The seven messages introduce most (if not all) of the body's major themes in their evaluation of the seven churches and in the diverse parenetic advice that they expect the churches to follow in their deeds. The emphasis on τηρέω and ἔργα connects the messages to the frame<sup>1</sup> in a particularly direct and powerful way and thus the frame and the messages together suggest that the hearer/reader can expect yet more parenesis in the book's body.

## 5.1 Revelation's body: poetic parenesis

If, as has been suggested in 3, Revelation's self-declared purpose is to advise the seven churches on how to be prepared for Christ's coming by offering them words of prophecy which they can follow, it might be a promising perspective of scholarly interpretation to read Revelation's visions primarily as parenesis. While the book's introductory chapters (namely the seven messages) contain solid pieces of parenetic advice to each of these seven churches, it is more difficult to determine how the remainder of the book contains the same kind of advice as in the seven messages.

I suggest that the body may be expected to contain such parenetic advice, since parenesis is what the frame promised for all of Revelation. While they rarely use the terms parenesis or parenetic, many scholars effectively hold a similar view of the body as fulfilling a parenetic role, as offering guidance for Christian living in the situations the churches found themselves in (despite differing views about the nature of these situations).

When Smith states “that the main issue addressed by the book of Revelation is essentially a decision problem”<sup>2</sup>, he does not limit this to any part of the book. Rather he sees all of Revelation as encouraging its Christian recipients to “choose faithful witness to God over compromise with pagan religion, despite the possible suffering that faithfulness may entail.”<sup>3</sup>

Making a similar point deSilva speaks of all of Revelation having

a rhetorical agenda. It seeks to persuade seven different Christian communities to take certain specific actions (seen most clearly in the seven oracles of Rev 2:1-3:22), as well as to engender a firm commitment to certain values in opposition to other values (reflected throughout the work).<sup>4</sup>

A case can be made for the parenetic nature of John's visions as recorded in Revelation's body.

I understand Revelation's purpose and intention as encouraging its hearers/readers to (re-)align

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1 The same idea is present in the body, but it is more obviously so in the frame and the seven messages.

2 Smith, “A Rational Choice Model of the Book of Revelation”, 98-99.

3 Smith, “A Rational Choice Model of the Book of Revelation”, 97.

4 DeSilva, *The hope of glory*, 178.

their lives with the will of God and his Christ as it becomes evident throughout the book. From this perspective Revelation as a whole wants to reveal this will of God for the lives of his followers. It is in essence a call to faithfulness for Christians. I suggest that viewing the book from this perspective will perhaps provide an effective guard against major misinterpretations. DeSilva notes that Revelation “manifests most strongly what is a concern for almost any New Testament author [and, one might add, for almost any Old Testament author as well], namely the claim that God has to be honored, and the need to choose the course of action that shows God the honor that is God's due.”<sup>5</sup> Acknowledging this call to choose and thus reading Revelation as parenesis, may offer a vital tool for not missing its self-declared key point, an oversight which likely would result in misleading conclusions that were never supposed to be drawn.

### 5.1.1 The concerns of Revelation's body

There is significant disagreement about the focal issues discussed in each part of the book. I have already argued that the seven messages deal with a wide variety of concerns as they were present in the seven churches (cf. 4.2.3). Bauckham points out

that precisely by addressing very specifically a variety of actual church situations, Revelation addresses a *representative* variety of contexts. The range of different situations in the seven churches is sufficient for any Christian church in the late first century to find analogies to its own situation in one or more of the messages and therefore to find the whole book relevant to itself. Churches in later periods have been able to do the same, allowing for a necessary degree of adjustment to changing historical contexts.<sup>6</sup>

Indeed, the seven churches themselves are supposed to represent the variety of issues present in the worldwide church (cf. 2.1), possibly even throughout the ages: “Although the letters are written to real churches of the first century, they are relevant to the church universal, for the strengths and weaknesses of the seven are characteristic of individual churches throughout history.”<sup>7</sup> Therefore a wide range of concerns is to be expected. I will argue that the same applies to Revelation's body, that its visions concern the same wide spectrum of issues, and that it continues the very discourse of the seven messages, only in a different genre.

Others have explained the body's role differently. One classic approach appears to be nearly extinct in scholarly literature, with Thomas' 1992 commentary<sup>8</sup> the last major work to represent it. However it continues to be strong in popular literature (i.e. the “Left

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5 DeSilva, *The hope of glory*, 182.

6 Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, 16-17. Italics in the original.

7 Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 57. Similarly Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 186-187; Poythress, *The returning King*, 72.

8 Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 29-39.

Behind”-series) and in wide parts of worldwide evangelical Christianity. This approach also understands the seven messages to be about the present reality of the historic churches, their struggle against false teaching, immorality, laxity and the pressure of persecution. The seven messages are seen as a call to faithfulness in an unfaithful world which is relevant for the entire church even beyond the historic addressees. Such an understanding of the seven messages is largely compatible with my observations. However, this approach is problematic mainly in its understanding of the body as exclusively of eschatological concern. Its visions' supposed intention would then primarily be to foretell and thus inform the church about the events surrounding the parousia of Christ some 20 or more centuries later. Within this perspective, if the body then has any parenetic value at all, it is limited to those Christians who live to see these eschatological end-times. Revelation then prepares them for the tribulation ahead and urges them to remain faithful in it.

Such claims that the messages and the body are concerned with different issues and that the visions in Revelation's body are a mere prediction of things that were supposed to happen thousands of years after it was written, founder when it comes to whether the visions could be relevant to Revelation's first addressees. Under such claims the body's visions are rendered utterly meaningless for any readers who live before these eschatological end-times, particularly so for the book's first recipients. If the visions did not concern their local realities, then the visions did not have any parenetic value for the churches. If anything, the visions could then be informative, but not in a way that would lead their audience to life-changing decisions. As Boring correctly points out, Revelation is “a *letter*, written to first-century readers who were expected to understand it, and they *did*. If Revelation were ‘really’ a book of predictions of later events, such as the oil crisis in the Middle East, Russian and American militarism, it would have been meaningless to its first readers and would not have been a letter to *them* at all.”<sup>9</sup> Any interpretation of Revelation's visions necessarily has to take this into account. Even more so if indeed all of Revelation was intended as parenesis, since then John's visions had to be “applicable” to their own time at least as clearly as to the time of the interpreter.

Hendriksen's comments aptly describe the dilemma: “We should constantly bear in mind that the purpose of God and the seer is to make men wise unto salvation. ... if these symbols

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9 Boring, *Revelation*, 24. Italics in the original. Note that the references were contemporary when Boring's commentary was published in 1989, but would make little sense to many young readers today (2006), less than twenty years later.

merely ... predict isolated, future events, it may satisfy some people's curiosity but it can hardly be said that people ... are edified.”<sup>10</sup>

Unfortunately Boring's alternative<sup>11</sup> that in John's opinion the parousia was so near that he saw Revelation's first readers as already living in the eschatological end-times is barely a satisfying explanation and is thus not much better. Boring insists that John expected the end to be actually imminent (within a maximum of decades) because otherwise the expressed imminence of Christ's coming would supposedly have been deceptive and no real reason for the persecuted churches to hold on. According to Boring, John must have been mistaken since the end did not come for at least another 1900 years: “Does this mean he [John] was wrong? Yes.”<sup>12</sup>. Caird's suggestion “that John's coming **crisis** was simply the persecution of the church”<sup>13</sup>, does not offer a satisfactory alternative. John expects *Jesus* to come “soon”, not merely persecution (cf. 3.4.3).

However, Boring's view seems to ignore the concept of the servants of Christ that I discussed earlier (cf. 3.3.1), one of the New Testament's key images for Christ's eschatological second coming. This idea in both Revelation and the gospels does certainly include the *potential* imminence of the master's return, yet the emphasis is on something else: on the obedient deeds of the servants who do as their master commissioned them. They will be prepared when the master suddenly and unexpectedly returns. He will find them at the task he gave them and will consider their deeds as completed. This event will certainly come and it could happen at any time, even now. The urgency is therefore not a matter of inevitable imminence but rather of the need to be ready at any time. Thus John's use of “near” (1:3; 22:10) and “soon” (1:1; 2:16; 3:11; 22:6.7.12.20) does not refer to a short period of time of no more than a few decades at the most but rather to the always possible imminence of the parousia and the need to always be ready which follows from this possibility<sup>14</sup>.

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10 Hendriksen, *More than conquerors*, 42. Similarly Eckstein, *Du hast mir den Himmel geöffnet*, 7.

11 Boring, *Revelation*, 68-74. Similarly Wikenhauser, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 20.

12 Boring, *Revelation*, 73.

13 Caird, *The Revelation of Saint John*, 12. Bold characters in the original. Contra Gilbertson, *God and history in the Book of Revelation*, 115.

14 Johnson, *Revelation*, 20.22. Beale (*The Book of Revelation*, 181-182.185-186), Giesen (*Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 63) and Osborne (*Revelation*, 54-55.59) see an inaugurated eschatology in “near” and “soon” while Mulholland (*Revelation. Holy living in an unholy world*, 61-2.67-69) combines inaugurated eschatology with a reading (p 61) of τὰχύ (2:16; 3:11; 11:14; 22:7.12.20) and ἐν τάχει (1:1; 22:6) as indicating “that the action described is to take place ... ‘in the appointed time’. In other words, there is no delay or contingency in God's purposes; they are always on schedule.”

Revelation is not a timetable of apocalyptic<sup>15</sup> events before the end of the world, whenever this end is supposed to come. DeSilva comments (using honour as the standard for faithfulness): “John's driving question from beginning to end is not simply about the course of events leading up to the end but about whom to honor and at what cost that honor is to be preserved.”<sup>16</sup> Thompson thus is quite right when he comments that “humans are to prepare for and not speculate on the time of God's coming. The ‘yet-to-come’ gives weight to the present: What we do matters.”<sup>17</sup>

Scholars like Hahn<sup>18</sup>, Hughes<sup>19</sup>, Ladd<sup>20</sup> and Poythress<sup>21</sup> advocate an approach which appears more adequate than the timetable of apocalyptic and which does not fall into the same traps, while still considering the seven messages to be primarily concerned with the present of the seven historic churches and the body to be concerned with future events, be they in the immediate or eschatological future. But the book's reporting of these future events is seen as serving an essentially parenetic purpose for both the first and subsequent readers, as “giving weight to the present”. The events are thus not predicted to satisfy the readers' curiosity or to prepare them for a distant future which they may well never see, but rather to show to the addressees the long-term (eschatological) consequences of their decisions in the here and now, thus giving them yet more reasons for changing their attitude, allegiance and behaviour as followers of Christ.

The main difficulty with this approach is that, like the ones mentioned before, it is founded on one specific interpretation of 1:19 as the interpretative key to the Book of Revelation<sup>22</sup>, which supposedly suggests that the body is about “what will take place later”, that is about future events. However I have disputed the supposed key relevance of 1:19 (cf. 2.3), highlighting the dubious nature of such a proposal. Rather, as even some of this view's supporters observe<sup>23</sup>,

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15 Here I consciously use this word in its popular sense: as a mixture of cosmic, mysterious, frightening, overwhelming and at the same time fascinating.

16 DeSilva, *The hope of glory*, 182. In his own research deSilva is most interested in the question of honour.

17 Thompson, *Revelation*, 43

18 Hahn, “Zum Aufbau der Johannesoffenbarung”, 154.

19 Hughes, *The Book of Revelation*, 71.

20 Ladd, *A commentary on the Revelation of John*, 12-14.

21 Poythress, *The returning King*, 27-37.

22 Behm, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 1.15; Boring, *Revelation*, 84; Hendriksen, *More than conquerors*, 58; Hughes, *The Book of Revelation*, 29-30; Kraft, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 49; Ladd, *A commentary on the Revelation of John*, 34; Lohse, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 8.21; Poythress, *The returning King*, 57.60.81; Prigent, *Commentary on the Apocalypse*, 143-145; Ritt, *Offenbarung des Johannes*, 10; Swete, *The Apocalypse of St John*, 21; Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 43-44.113-116; Wikenhauser, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 34. See also Beale's description and critique of this understanding of 1:19 in Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 161-163.

23 i.e. Ladd, *A commentary on the Revelation of John*, 34; Swete, *The Apocalypse of St John*, 21.

we find references to both the churches' present and the future in both the seven messages and the body.

Swete's proposal<sup>24</sup> differs primarily in that he sees in Rev 12-13 a return to “contemporary history”<sup>25</sup> comparable to the seven messages on which the discourse builds once again towards the eschaton. But this also is too restrictive. References to the churches' present experiences cannot be limited to Rev 12-13. Moreover Swete seems to imply a linear development of events from the churches' time to the parousia, a notion which lacks foundation in the text. Finally, Swete claims that “[t]he first half – it might almost be called the first book – of the Apocalypse is complete in itself, and had all our MSS. broken off at xi. 19, and no vestige of the last eleven chapters survived, it is conceivable that the loss might never have been suspected.”<sup>26</sup> However, even a cursory glance at 11:19 reveals that it is anything but an ending to a book, rather it increases the tension for what happens next in 12:1. As is typical of Revelation, no one image can be separated from the ones surrounding it. Thus while 12:1 indeed introduces a new image, this new image is prepared and introduced by the preceding verses. In the very next sentence Swete acknowledges a link between the two supposedly separate parts: “In xii. 1 the author makes a fresh beginning, for which the reader had been prepared in x. 11.”<sup>27</sup> Swete's reading of 10:11 (“Then I was told, ‘You must prophesy again about many peoples, nations, languages and kings.’”) however is quite clear that the book was anything but complete after ch. 11.

It has become evident that schemes which try to limit the visions in Revelation's body to future events fail under scrutiny. But many scholars suggest that while the subject matter of these visions cannot be limited to future events, it needs to be restricted to one single issue. This issue has traditionally been identified as the persecution of the faithful<sup>28</sup>. There are also some who – like Duff (cf. 2.2.2 and 4.2.3) – claim to have identified the real issue in a different but very specific scenario, but these attempts have little to commend them.

In recent scholarship there appears to be a trend to see Revelation's critique of the Roman empire's political and pseudo-religious system as the book's and thus the body's main concern<sup>29</sup>. While I do not think that John could not possibly have criticized the (Roman)

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24 Swete, *The Apocalypse of St John*, xxxix-xliii.

25 Swete, *The Apocalypse of St John*, xliii.

26 Swete, *The Apocalypse of St John*, xxxix-xl.

27 Swete, *The Apocalypse of St John*, xl.

28 For example Behm, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 3: “Ein Trostbuch für die angehende Märtyrerkirche...”

29 As one example all articles but one (Rossing, “Reading Revelation ecologically”) in Rhoads (ed.), *From every people and nation. The Book of Revelation in intercultural perspective* are in some way based on this assumption.

authorities of his times, I do maintain that John's (like that of other New Testament authors) critique of Roman government authorities would hardly target these authorities merely for being part of the Imperium Romanum but rather for specific injustices in their dealing with the oppressed and disadvantaged. While still reading Revelation against Rome, Royalty aptly comments: "The harsh polemic against Babylon/Rome in Revelation can mask the simple fact that it was written by, for, and to Christians. Domitian and his counselors and the Roman governor of Asia never read it."<sup>30</sup>

What is more, however, a reading limited to a modern anti-imperialist hermeneutic also overlooks the variety of topics present in both parts of Revelation. I have shown the diversity of issues in the seven messages (cf. 4.2.3). Likewise it is not very difficult to see that the body also deals with a range of matters, most likely including, but certainly not limited to, a critique of Rome.

This becomes most obvious in the lists of vices in 9:20-21, 21:8 (cf. 21:27) and 22:15 (in the frame) which are concerned about a range of issues, namely theft (only 9:21), murder, lying or falsehood (including false teaching or pseudo-prophecy, not 9:21), sexual immorality (which here is likely used literally for sexually immoral rather than metaphorically for idolators<sup>31</sup>), sorcery and idolatry (including, but not limited to, emperor worship), cowardice, disbelief (or unfaithfulness) and abomination<sup>32</sup> (the latter three only in 21:8). Not surprisingly there have been attempts to reduce all of these to one central problem.

For example when commenting on 21:8, the most comprehensive of these lists, Beale claims that "[b]y introducing the list of sins with 'cowards' and concluding it with 'liars,' he [John] shows that these vices primarily indicate failures of so-called Christians facing the threat or reality of persecution."<sup>33</sup> However, Aune's explanation of "cowardice" as "a designation ... for general moral degradation"<sup>34</sup> can be supported as well. And even if failure to confess should be the reality behind the "cowards"<sup>35</sup>, then ψευδός in its various forms is still not used in Revelation for denying one's faith (ἡρνήσω τὴν πίστιν; 2:13 / ἡρνήσω τὸ ὄνομά μου; 3:8)

30 Royalty, *The streets of heaven*, 28.

31 Contra Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 520; Giesen, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 459.489.

32 Aune (*Revelation 17-22*, 1131.1222-1224) suggests that this and "the dogs" in the 22:15 version of the list refer to sodomy or homosexuality. See also Witherington, *Revelation*, 282.

33 Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 1059. Beale refers to Boring, *Revelation*, 217. Similarly Harrington, *Revelation*, 209; Roloff, *The Revelation of John*, 238; Smalley, *The Revelation to John*, 543.

34 Aune, *Revelation 17-22*, 1131.

35 Caird, *The Revelation of Saint John*, 267; Charles, *A critical and exegetical commentary*, 2:216; Johnson, *Revelation*, 198; Kiddle, *The Revelation of St. John*, 421-422; Ladd, *A commentary on the Revelation of John*, 279; Michaels, *Revelation*, 239; Morris, *The Book of Revelation*, 240; Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 386; Osborne, *Revelation*, 741-742; Prigent, *Commentary on the Apocalypse*, 605; Thomas, *Revelation 8-22*, 450-451.



but, as the combination with prophecy or teaching in most occurrences (2:2; 16:13; 19:20; 20:10)<sup>36</sup> implies, for misleading others, often even under the guise of faith. This becomes obvious in Beale's own words as he comments on the link of 21:8's "liars" to the occurrence of "falsehood" in the similar lists in 21:27 and 22:15: "This highlights that those judged are people whose apparent Christian profession is contradicted by their lifestyle or their false doctrine."<sup>37</sup> That indeed false teaching (and its practical consequences) and not denial of Christ is the problem is even more likely when Beale's further comments are considered: "Possibly also in mind here in Rev. 21:8 are those who promote the lie about the beast (13:12-15)."<sup>38</sup> Wikenhauser offers yet a different explanation for the term "liars": "Unter den 'Lügnern' ... sind Menschen zu verstehen, die Falschheit in Wort und Werk verüben (vgl. Joh 8,44), also Bösewichter überhaupt (ebenso 22,15; 21,27)."<sup>39</sup> However this appears somewhat arbitrary not only because a liar and a villain are still distinct, despite the evil inherent in the acts of both. Moreover should John 8:44 actually be relevant here, it would prove the opposite point because it is not concerned with villainous behavior, but rather with the distortion of the word of God through "the Jews" (probably the Pharisees), thus again with false teaching of sorts, again under the guise of faith.

Giesen's proposal is relatively close to Beale's but it needs to be mentioned separately. Again commenting on 21:8, Giesen suggests that these lists contain "nur Verhaltensweisen, die für Menschen charakteristisch sind, die dem Götzen- und Kaiserkult anhängen"<sup>40</sup>. He then concludes:

Der Vf [Verfasser] verwirft somit die Ausübung des Kaiser- und Götzendienstes, wirft aber den Anhängern keine moralischen Verfehlungen vor. Die meisten von ihnen sind sicherlich tatsächlich moralisch integer. ... Es geht dem Vf hier also nicht um Ethik, sondern um die Glaubensentscheidung.<sup>41</sup>

The last remark is certainly correct, but this "Glaubensentscheidung" should never be played off against its ethical consequences. While indeed ἀπίστοις could well be a generic term covering all of the other vices, this does not make actual sexual immorality or false teaching any less a reality. Nor does it mean that the imperial cult is the only alternative to faith, the only reason for murder or the only form of idolatry.

36 Aune, *Revelation 17-22*, 1224.

37 Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 1060.

38 Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 1060.

39 Wikenhauser, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 156 (commenting on 21:8).

40 Giesen, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 459.

41 Giesen, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 459-460.

Aune's observations on 21:8 are more helpful. He observes that the list “has parallels with the Ten Commandments and traditional applications of the Ten Commandments, including other early Christian vice lists”<sup>42</sup>. This suggests that indeed we are dealing with a much broader range of issues than merely the churches' Roman environment. Rather the vice lists – and with them the rest of Revelation's body – are concerned about a variety of aspects of faithful Christian living. This is by no means incompatible with the observation that most if not all of the listed vices are closely related to the Babylon image (“the characteristics of ‘the harlot’”<sup>43</sup>). Rather it ought to alert us to the possibility that the Babylon image might not refer to the Roman empire alone but could be significantly more diverse and multi-faceted (cf. 6.1).

There are many further examples of the diverse issues dealt with in Revelation's body, most of which can be interpreted to fit an “anti-Roman” reading of Revelation. This however is not surprising when one considers that due to their “inexact” nature Revelation's visions can be subjected to almost any agenda. Again, this is not to say that the Roman empire plays no role in Revelation's rhetoric, but to emphasize that the book cannot be limited to a critique of the empire. Three brief examples underline the variety of theological and ethical issues addressed in Revelation:

- a There is a clear emphasis on eschatology in chapters 20 and 21 (and in plenty of other places as well) with two focal points in the form of the last judgment (20:11-15; 21:8) and the paradise-like abundance of life (cf. 2:7) in the presence of God (e.g. 21:3-4: “They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God”).
- b The promised absence of any suffering is in stark contrast to the depiction of the church as suffering. But it is in this very suffering that the church proves to be faithful, righteous and ultimately victorious (e.g. 6:9-11; 12:10-11; 17:6; 18:24).
- c The critique of the merchants in chapter 18 however seems to be concerned about quite a different issue when it targets unfair trade practices springing from a love for money over justice (cf. 2:17-18).

Finally, Revelation had more readers in mind than the original addressees (cf. 2.1) and was not meant to be a letter to the seven specified churches only. These seven churches are representative of the church universal. As becomes evident in the image of the seven lampstands they “represent the entire people of God during the interadvent age”<sup>44</sup>, “the totality

42 Aune, *Revelation 17-22*, 1131. Similarly Kraft, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 144; Lohse, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 59; Roloff, *Revelation*, 119.238; Smalley, *The Revelation to John*, 243.543

43 Hendriksen, *More than conquerors*, 201.

44 Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 187.

of the people of God witnessing in the period between Christ's resurrection and his final coming.<sup>45</sup>

Therefore Revelation cannot be a mere interpretation of events around the time of its writing, although this certainly was its first purpose. Revelation's prophecy intends more than giving God's opinion on its own time's current affairs. It also predicts future events, among other things promising the coming of Christ, the judgement of all and everything on earth at the end of time as well as the new heavenly reality of the New Jerusalem.

This then strongly suggests the conclusion that both the seven messages and Revelation's body are concerned with a variety of issues. The many connections between the two parts of the book certainly support the proposal of a reading strategy which considers these issues in both parts of the book to be similar if not the same, of a reading strategy which expects in Revelation's body again the same issues that are discussed in the seven messages. I expect that most if not all of these issues will be dealt with in Revelation's body as well as in the messages. I similarly expect that only few if any additional concerns play an important role in the body's visions. There may be some more issues in the body than the ones I have identified as the messages' concerns (cf. 4.2.3), but that most likely is due to my failure to either see or mention them all, not to their absence from the seven messages' discourse.

Mulholland writes that Revelation is a "portrayal of an experience of the breadth, length, height, and depth of life in Christ"<sup>46</sup>, thus suggesting that the book concerns the full variety of experiences and issues with which disciples of Christ are faced in their quest for faithful, "holy living in an unholy world"<sup>47</sup>. I have no intention to argue with such a suggestion. If, as I argued in 2.1, the seven churches represent the Christian church as a whole, being purposefully chosen for their various realities to represent just about any situation the church could find itself in, then it is only natural that not only the seven messages to these churches but the rest of the book as well is concerned with the same full variety of experiences and issues.

This does not mean the body's visions cannot place these concerns in a wider context. Quite clearly that is the case. It is in light of the all-encompassing realities depicted in the body that the churches are to see their individual, local realities. The global nature of the plagues described in the seal-, trumpet- and bowl-series means they concern Revelation's seven cities of Asia Minor as much as the rest of the world. The seven churches are part of the one global

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45 Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 207.

46 Mulholland, *Revelation. Holy living in an unholy world*, 59.

47 This is the subtitle of Mulholland's 1990 commentary: *Revelation. Holy living in an unholy world*.

church, their cities are part not only of Asia Minor but of the Roman empire and beyond that of the world. This world and in it the worldwide church are part of God's history which has its goal in the New Jerusalem. It is in this widest of all contexts that the churches find themselves and which is to guide their individual life as followers of the Lamb. Thus Gilbertson states about Revelation as a whole

that John's primary aim was to encourage his readers to live faithfully and to avoid damaging compromise with the prevailing political, economic and religious climate of their times. In order to achieve this rhetorical impact, John uses the device of first enabling his readers to place the earthly present in an ultimate perspective, and then refocusing attention back onto the earthly present.<sup>48</sup>

### 5.1.2 Revelation as poetry

The means by which this rhetorical impact is made are highly relevant. I do not think that the media actually is the message, but the means by which it is transported plays an important part in how the message is received and understood. The media in the case of Revelation's body is different to most other books in the Bible and it certainly is different to Paul's theological expositions. In the words of Schüssler Fiorenza:

Rather than writing a theological sermon on "the last things" or a moral exhortation on how to act, Revelation seeks to move its audience to action with the power of its images and visions. Its rhetoric does not seek to evoke just an intellectual response but also wants to elicit emotional reactions and religious commitment.<sup>49</sup>

The rhetoric of Revelation's body thus works more like a work of art, a novel, a (Greek?) drama<sup>50</sup> or a movie<sup>51</sup>, like a fantastic story in the sense that it requires fantastic capacities on behalf of the readers, that its images are beyond experience and thus not accessible without creative imagination. This means that it is not so much concerned about imparting knowledge but rather about evoking emotions and attitudes. When he discusses the impact of Revelation's symbolic imagery on the reader's imaginative capacity Smith describes Revelation's rhetoric in terms more reminiscent of film-making than of a theological work while also underlining the parenetic character of Revelation's body:

The pervasive symbolism of Revelation can be conceived as an exercise in scenario simulation and vivid image formation, especially through the recapitulation of judgement and salvation sequences, that is designed to affect the eschatological imaginative capacity of believers ... The point is not that the readers necessarily needed to know more about

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48 Gilbertson, *God and History in the Book of Revelation*, 140-141.

49 Schüssler Fiorenza, *Revelation*, 129.

50 Bowman, "The Revelation to John. Its dramatic structure and message"; Voortman and Du Rand, "The language of theatre in the Apocalypse of John."

51 Note Paulien's very interesting essay "The Lion/Lamb King. Reading the Apocalypse from popular culture."

their eternal fate, since their problem was not primarily one of information deficiency nor insufficient doctrinal teaching, but rather that the future consequences of their current behaviour needed to become more salient and less remote in their minds and decision-making.<sup>52</sup>

Thus Smith suggests that Revelation's body plays a vital part in communicating Jesus' parenetic advice to the churches. It helps them to better imagine and perceive and therefore better evaluate the consequences that their faithfulness or unfaithfulness has. Its many, often detailed images serve to enhance the imaginability of otherwise not perceivable realities, particularly so of future (eschatological) events which need to be imaginable to become relevant for decisions about present actions.

However even as Revelation's story makes a transcendent reality imaginable, it does not make that reality explainable, does not give the readers more than an approximation of its central aspects. It does not give the reader a grip on this other reality by which they could control it. Rather it captivates the reader's imagination and seeks to transform their attitude and emotional response towards the realities it so portrays. It thus works like a meta-narrative, developing its full potential not through intellectual consideration but on the level of emotional appropriation in shaping world views and attitudes.

Unfortunately classic scholarly tools of exegesis struggle to access a text on this level, simply because they are tools of intellectual discourse rather than emotional appropriation. By and large I find that classic scholarly tools make for a highly fruitful approach to Biblical texts, even in Revelation, but the classic approach fails to grasp some of the book's dynamic if not supplemented by a more associative approach. The longer I engage in Revelation the more I become convinced that Händel's Messiah offers as good an interpretation of the book as the best of scholarly approaches. Not surprisingly Revelation's reception in the arts has been very fruitful and often more readily accepted than any other form of interpretation or appropriation. That Kovacs and Rowland<sup>53</sup> have undertaken the task of gathering, selecting and presenting some of the rich treasure of artistic (and of “more conventional”) interpretation of Revelation is thus gratefully appreciated.

Like many other things as well, works of art can be appreciated on at least two levels: in their general, overall impression and in the intricate details that make up the artwork as a whole.

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52 Smith, “A Rational Choice Model of the Book of Revelation”, 113.

53 Kovacs, Rowland and Callow, *Revelation*. See also the occasional references to music and visual arts in Koester, *Revelation and the end of all things* (ie 33-38.55.83.96.121.157.182) or the illustrations to Revelation in the early publications of Luther's translation of the Bible in Martin, *Martin Luther und die Bilder zur Apokalypse*.

These two modes of interaction are not mutually exclusive, although their results may be quite different. Rather they both contribute to a more comprehensive understanding.

One example from everyday life is in the different ways in which a casual wine drinker and a connoisseur might describe one and the same wine. That to the first it is “full, soft and delicious” does in no way contradict the latter's intricate description of hints of berry, chocolate or oak flavours. Rather the two are complementary with the layman's terms certainly important in the connoisseur's comments as well. In the extreme the two may even merely use different language to describe the same features. On the other hand the expert may notice when a wine has been tampered with, something that may well escape the layman's attention. One might describe the function of these multiple levels in the overall assessment as layered. The deciding emotions however are primarily evoked by a general, overall impression rather than by attention to details.

As another example a painting of a romantic scene will evoke certain emotions in a casual observer, regardless of the particular technique used to bring the paint onto the canvas, regardless of whether every one of the trees in the background was actually painted in any great detail or rather as a conglomeration of nondescript green blobs of paint. These details however are of immense importance to specialists, and occasionally even to the casual observer, particularly so when the details contradict or parody the scene of which they are a part. The details can thus either reinforce or correct the first impression and the emotions it evoked.

I suggest that Revelation's rhetoric works along similar lines. First of all it wants to influence the readers' (and hearers'!) emotions and attitudes in its completeness, by planting in their minds “general” impressions. Even under the assumption that Revelation's first hearers had a significantly longer attention span than today's average person in the western world, Revelation is far too long to notice, let alone reflect on, its many details in one continuous reading of the book. Rather such a reading will yield broad, maybe even vague, convictions, among them probably the certainty that Christ as the Lamb will ultimately overcome the demonic forces which oppose the faithful church, that despite the chaos which seems to govern the world ultimately justice will prevail and that in light of the eschatological announcements of Revelation faithfulness to Christ in the here and now is to be seen as highly relevant. Given that Revelation was originally intended to be primarily received in this way rather than through scholarly research, such broad convictions about its message are highly relevant.

However this does not render scholarly studies in Revelation irrelevant. Rather an analytical reading can bring about new insights that may either reinforce, modify or sometimes even altogether question the general insights gained from a more “casual” reading. For example a casual reading may infer from the final victory of Christ and the destruction of the power of evil that the followers of Christ are to use force to overcome their (evil) aggressors. However, a more thorough reading ought to observe that it is through the shedding of its blood that the Lamb conquers<sup>54</sup>, reinforcing the very important point that the church also overcomes by her suffering<sup>55</sup>, thus correcting or even outright rejecting the initial understanding. On the other hand, attention to the details should not be allowed to distract from the sweeping scenario that is unfolded in Revelation and of the (intended) emotions and attitudes this scenario evokes in the hearers/readers if allowed to take effect as a whole. As Hendriksen notes “[t]he details that pertain to the picture should be interpreted in harmony with its central thought.”<sup>56</sup> In other words: a casual reading may help prevent the danger of scholarly attention to detail, namely to not see the forest for the trees. Schüssler Fiorenza gives a good summary of this aspect of Revelation:

one has to approach the book in the same manner in which one would approach a work of art. If one seeks to appreciate a symphony, for example, one must listen to the whole work in order to grasp the full impact of its total composition – its tonal colors, musical forms, motifs, and relationships. Only after one has listened to the work as a whole can one go on and analyze the elements and details of its composition and study the techniques employed by its composer.<sup>57</sup>

## 5.2 Reading a vision of parenetic poetry in its context

Building on the results of the previous chapters I propose a reading strategy which is composed of a number of decisive principles for the (scholarly) interpretation of Revelation as a whole, but the body in particular. It is quite clear that these principles cannot stand on their own, that they can only be part of a broader approach taking into account many other exegetical tools and hermeneutical insights. What I am suggesting is not an entirely new and independent system of interpretation that could do without the input of any other interpretative methods or concerns. Some of what I suggest is to be used merely as additional criteria to question or confirm the appropriateness of conclusions reached by other means. Among others I consider the following three to be indispensable concerns in the interpretation of Revelation

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54 Cf. Hays, *The moral vision of the New Testament*, 173-175.

55 Cf. Hays, *The moral vision of the New Testament*, 176-179.

56 Hendriksen, *More than conquerors*, 40.

57 Schüssler Fiorenza, *Revelation*, 32.

and endeavour to use them alongside my own reading strategy in the exemplary application of this proposal (chapter 6):

- a Beale's work in the field of the use of the Old Testament in Revelation as represented in both his 1999 commentary<sup>58</sup> and his earlier monograph on the issue<sup>59</sup> is invaluable. Other important works include Moyise' research on the Old Testament in Revelation<sup>60</sup> and Kowalski's Habilitationsschrift on the use of Ezekiel in Revelation<sup>61</sup>, but also many of Bauckham's studies<sup>62</sup>.
- b One field of investigation that is as yet underdeveloped and thus needs significant further scholarly attention is the influence of other New Testament traditions on Revelation. The discussion about Revelation's relationship with other Johannine literature is usually limited to questions of authorship, thus neglecting important links in form and content. While Vos' work<sup>63</sup> was a first step in investigating the importance of the Synoptics for Revelation, very little has been done to further examine this significant aspect. The situation is worse only in regard to the New Testament epistles, the only reference to which seems to be in the context of Revelation's epistolary framework.
- c With regard to the investigation of relevant Greco-Roman concepts used in Revelation Pattemore's work<sup>64</sup> on the use of the linguistic "Relevance Theory" in the interpretation of Revelation is certainly one of the most helpful publications as it provides a valuable gauge for what actually is part of the author's and the first readers' "mutual cognitive environment"<sup>65</sup>. Roose's work on the fate of ageing prostitutes in Asia Minor<sup>66</sup> provides a good example of a relevant secular historical context to the Babylon vision in Revelation 17-18.

### 5.2.1 Reading the vision as poetry

That Revelation's visions function like a work of art does have implications for their interpretation. One of these implications, I have argued in 5.1.2, is that the visions need to be read not as a series of individual images but rather in their combination as one larger vision, not as a collection of short stories but as one novel (or drama) which traces the various strands

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58 Beale, *The Book of Revelation*.

59 Beale, *John's use of the Old Testament in Revelation*.

60 Moyise, *The Old Testament in the Book of Revelation*.

61 Kowalski, *Die Rezeption des Propheten Ezechiel*.

62 Bauckham, *The climax of prophecy*.

63 Vos, *The synoptic traditions in the Apocalypse*.

64 Pattemore, *The People of God in the Apocalypse*.

65 Pattemore, *The People of God in the Apocalypse* 51-67.

66 Roose, "The fall of the 'Great Harlot' and the fate of the aging prostitute".



of one single red thread. The detailed description of the New Jerusalem has no purpose in itself but mainly serves to portray the city as the ultimate fulfillment of every human desire, resplendent with the glory of God, the one place everyone must seek to gain access to. How the right to access the heavenly city of God is gained or kept, on the other hand, is what the book is all about. Thus the details of the Jerusalem vision serve to underline the overall impression the book wants to induce in the reader, to reinforce the attitudes the book evokes in its audience. The situation can be seen along similar lines for details of other images.

I suggest that any interpretation of any part of Revelation needs to be subjected to a compatibility check with Revelation's overall plot. This plot is not, as Barr seems to suggest, deduced primarily or even entirely by means of a thorough scholarly analysis of the book's form and content, of "the cause-and-effect logic that binds the incidents [the single images] together and mandates that one follow the other."<sup>67</sup> Rather this plot is to be found primarily in the emotions and attitudes stirred in the reader who reads the book like a novel, like a fantastic story, who preferably reads it in one sitting. This seems to be supported by the Scripture Project's "conviction ... that reading Scripture is an *art* – a creative discipline that requires engagement and imagination, in contrast to the Enlightenment's ideal of detached objectivity."<sup>68</sup>

The resulting emotions and attitudes are relatively subjective in that they depend not only on the personality of the reader, but also on their situation at the time of reading, particularly their emotional state. However this is the case with all response to art. When critics love a sculpture, but the general public largely finds it ugly or offensive (or dislikes it for any other conceivable reason), then clearly it evoked different emotions in the two groups. When teenagers love a comic strip, their parents may well find it extremely shocking: again different attitudes are questioned or enforced. The response is largely dependent on the attitudes, values and belief systems held before interacting with the artwork.

Revelation anticipates this and expects the desired response only from a certain group of people, from "those who have ears to hear", from followers of Christ (cf. 4.2.6). Thus, to read Revelation as a work of art requires the mindset of faith. This, along with its emphasis on the communal aspect of reading scripture as one canon, appears to me as being the most important aspect of the Scripture Project's "Nine theses on the interpretation of Scripture"<sup>69</sup>. For scholarly purposes a reading which consciously and sympathetically empathizes with an

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67 Barr, "The story John told", 12.

68 Davis, *The art of reading Scripture*, xv. Italics in the original.

69 Davis, *The art of reading Scripture*, 1-5. See also Hays, "A hermeneutic of trust".

attitude of faith may possibly be an adequate enough substitute if the interpreter cannot themselves identify with a position of faith, although I recognize that such a reading will usually be extremely difficult to achieve.

One other implication of reading Revelation's visions as a work of art is that as such it can be read parenetically (cf. 5.2.2 below). Schiller, probably one of Germany's most important "classic" theatre theorists (as well as author, of course), argued for a view that understood "the stage as a moral institution"<sup>70</sup>. Until this day this concept is seen as constituting the social value of theatre<sup>71</sup> (as well as other cultural, artistic endeavours), effectively assigning the task of ethical instruction to the arts. Revelation's visions can thus be seen as a very adequate medium for parenetic advice which in turn suggests that they be read as parenesis.

### 5.2.2 Reading the vision as parenesis

As I have argued, Revelation as a whole may be read as a primarily parenetic work. This applies to the body as well as to the frame and the seven messages. The explicitly parenetic statements in the body (ie 13:10; 14:7.12, 18:4) are then only the tip of the parenetic iceberg the larger part of which floats under the apocalyptic surface of the visions. Münchow observes that "der Paränese auch andere literarische Gattungen dienstbar gemacht werden können,"<sup>72</sup> that a text does not have to be explicitly parenetic in form to be parenetic in intent, content and function. Thus Aune's claim that "*there is actually very little of a hortatory or parenetic nature in 4:1-22:5*"<sup>73</sup> is just as questionable as his corresponding claim that because "parenesis does occur in isolated sections of Revelation" only, "[t]he seer's emphasis on 'keeping' or 'obeying' (τηρεῖν) [cf. 2.4.1] ... is therefore applicable *only* to the material found in Rev 1:1-3:22; 22:10-21."<sup>74</sup> I have argued that the opposite is the case.

In an effort to explore Revelation's parenetic nature I suggest to systematically subject any interpretation of any part of the book to scrutiny with regard to its proposed parenetic intention. In a reading which primarily reads the book as parenesis, with all its parts serving this parenetic intention, the interpretation of any part of the book at the very least needs to allow that part to contribute to the book's parenetic message. Preferably such an interpretation would highlight the specific parenetic function of the passage in question. Not every detail in

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70 This is the English title of Schiller, "Die Schaubühne als eine moralische Anstalt betrachtet".

71 Forsthoff, "Theater als moralische Anstalt".

72 Münchow, *Ethik und Eschatologie*, 15.

73 Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, cxxv. Italics in the original.

74 Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, lxxxvii. Italics in the original.

itself can be expected to contain a parenetic message, but it can be expected to contribute in some way to the wider image's parenetic function.

This can be demonstrated with a relatively easy and – I think – obvious example: the various precious stones which adorn the walls of the New Jerusalem (21:19-20). They are relevant in at least four ways:

- a The fact that they are without exception *precious* stones that *adorn* the city, further enhances the glory and beauty of the city<sup>75</sup>. They “symbolize the presence and transcendent majesty of God who now, as in the wilderness tabernacle of old, dwells in the midst of his people (20:3)”<sup>76</sup>, making it all the more desirable for the reader/hearer to maintain or gain access to it and therefore to heed the parenetic advice of the book.
- b They are the same twelve (kinds of) stones as those on the high priest's breastpiece on which were written the names of the twelve tribes of Israel<sup>77</sup>. They are however also closely associated with “the twelve apostles of the Lamb” (21:14)<sup>78</sup>. Whether this refers to the church as the real Israel or to the gathering of the church and the “old” Israel as the eschatological people of God is open to debate<sup>79</sup>. In either case the church is an essential part of the (true) eschatological people of God to which the precious stones refer as an essential part of the new city of God. The faithful church thus is further identified with the heavenly bride of the Lamb. This underlines the parenetic call for faithfulness.
- c Giesen observes about the precious stones: “Sie bilden einen Kontrast zu den Juwelen, die die Hure Babylon geschmückt hat”<sup>80</sup>. The precious stones thus indicate the real beauty of the bride of the Lamb, the faithful church, as opposed to the artificial and superficial splendour of unfaithful Babylon.
- d Beale examines a wide range of Old Testament and ancient Jewish references to the twelve kinds of stones on the high priest's breastpiece. The one reference that stands out as relevant is in Ezekiel:

In Ezek. 28:12-16 the stones are inextricably linked to “perfect righteousness,” a likely connotation also of the stones in Revelation 21, which is confirmed by 21:27 which emphasizes that no uncleanness or sin will be allowed into the new Jerusalem, in fulfillment of OT prophecy (Isa. 52:1; 60:20-21; Ezek. 44:9; Zech. 14:21).<sup>81</sup>

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75 Witherington, *Revelation*, 270.

76 Aune, *Revelation 17-22*, 1187.

77 Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 1080.

78 Giesen, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 469.

79 Reader, “The twelve jewels of Revelation 21”, 456.

80 Giesen, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 469.

81 Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 1087.

This aspect emphasizes the purity of the city and the consequent need for anyone who wishes to be part of it to be pure themselves, thus it presents a further incentive to faithful and pure (holy) living.

It is however less relevant for Revelation's purposes what colours the stones are<sup>82</sup> or which stone is ascribed to which tribe and which characteristics are thus associated with the tribes. Farrer's elaborate discussion<sup>83</sup> is based on rather arbitrary assumptions, and not surprisingly does not yield anything of parenetical value. Reader appropriately concludes: "[T]he stones of the Apocalypse cannot be correlated with specific tribes, apostles, zodiac signs or geographical directions. Furthermore, nothing can be derived from the colors, names or sequence of the stones."<sup>84</sup>

Not surprisingly such theories can usually also be refuted on other grounds than their lack of parenetic value, but this ultimately only underlines my suggestion to read every part of the book in regard to its support of the book's parenetic message and thus to interpret it within a framework of parenesis.

### **5.2.3 Reading the parenetic vision in context**

There is one more principle for a scholarly reading of Revelation which can assist in determining a passage's purpose in the overall flow of the book's parenetic rhetoric. Of the three principles I propose in this thesis ("Reading the vision as poetry": 5.2.1; "Reading the vision as parenesis": 5.2.2; "Reading the parenetic vision in context"; 5.2.3), this last one probably is the most substantial and exegetically demanding. It builds mainly on the observation that Revelation's message may be found in both the book's body and in the seven messages, that the seven churches may find the parenetic advice they are advised to follow (τηρέω) in all parts of the book. This parenesis as well as God's diagnosis of their current state, their threats and temptations, is stated in the relatively clear prose of the seven messages and extensively illustrated in a more figurative way in the following chapters. DeSilva describes the function of Revelation's two parts like this: "The hearers of Revelation are ... invited into a deliberative arena in which they are directly advised by the seven oracles and indirectly by the visions that follow."<sup>85</sup> The two main parts of Revelation not only address largely the same issues, they form one organic whole. Hendriksen puts it like this:

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82 Swete, *The Apocalypse of St John*, 290-294.

83 Farrer, *A rebirth of images*, 216-244.

84 Reader, "The twelve jewels of Revelation 21", 455.

85 DeSilva, *The hope of glory*, 183.

The apocalypse is a work of art, marvellous art, divine art. By subtle bands its various parts are tied together. One is unable to understand chapters 2 and 3 unless he has read chapter 1. And chapters 2 and 3, in turn, form the setting, as it were, for the later portions of the book. The promises found in these two chapters return and are explained more fully in the later passages.<sup>86</sup>

Hendriksen's observation that previous chapters are required to understand later ones is not surprising. Pattemore states "that context [as the interpretative framework] is not a fixed, predetermined construct, but is created progressively as the communication proceeds."<sup>87</sup> In other words: what we read in the beginning of a text shapes our understanding of what we read later in the same text.

Modern scholarship rightly draws on historical knowledge of Revelation's original environment. Intertextuality has rightly been emphasized in recent years. There is however a concept which I think is similarly important. It might be called "intra-textuality" and denotes the way of reading a book as providing within itself at least some of the primarily relevant context or rather co-text. Such a concept can hardly be controversial, particularly when a text is a coherent unity like Revelation<sup>88</sup>. Trying to interpret any (biblical) text without its (immediate!) context is likely to result in failure, in the case of Revelation it appears to me to be as disastrous and misleading as is possible. I fully agree with Caird when he says that "he [John] is his own best interpreter."<sup>89</sup> Any interpretation of a passage from Revelation has to take into account its various links to other parts of the book. Probably more so in Revelation than in any other New Testament book no single passage or image is independent of the rest of the book, no individual verse can be adequately understood without consideration of not only the words preceding and following it, but also of the entire rest of the book.

In concrete terms this means that Revelation's body needs to be interpreted in the light of or through the lens of the seven messages as much as they in turn need the body in the background of any appropriate interpretative attempt.

For example the tree of life which is mentioned in the message to Ephesus (2:7) evokes associations with the Genesis account of the fall of humankind<sup>90</sup> and thus points to an eschatological restoration of the uninhibited relationship between God and humankind as it would have been before the fall. The occurrence of the tree (or trees<sup>91</sup>) in the New Jerusalem

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86 Hendriksen, *More than conquerors*, 59.

87 Pattemore, *The People of God in the Apocalypse*, 51.

88 Contra Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, cv-cxxxiv, but in agreement with the wide majority of scholarship (cf. 4.3.2).

89 Caird, *The Revelation of Saint John*, 3.

90 Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 152; Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 235; Osborne, *Revelation*, 123-124.

91 Cf. Ezek 47:7.12.

vision (22:2) does not deny this, but among other things clarifies that the tree is now planted in a new city, not in the old garden. It is part of God's new creation, in which God will not just come and visit his creatures (Gen 3:8), but in which his throne, his presence, is right there in their midst, the tree of life directly on the river that flows from the divine throne. Thus, while 2:7 on its own with its promise of paradise renewed would have been a perfectly acceptable promise to the Ephesian overcomers, 22:2 clarifies that the promise is even better<sup>92</sup>, that the overcomers can expect even more than what humankind lost in the fall. On the other hand the relevance of the New Jerusalem vision is significantly increased for the Ephesian church through the re-occurrence of the tree of life which serves as a reminder of the promise to “their” overcomers, making for stronger identification with the vision (“This is about us here in Ephesus!”).

While the interpretative implications vary, being potentially weaker in one direction than in the other, it is clear that Revelation's parts provide vital clues for the interpretation of another part. But while later passages of a text can shed new light on previous ones (as in the example of the tree of life), the primary interpretative relationship is that outlined above: An earlier passage creates the “mutual cognitive environment” for the later passages. For Revelation this means that the seven messages create the hermeneutic mindset for interpreting the body's visions. The messages are the preceding co-text for the images which is crucial in their interpretation. The messages thus enable the access to Revelation's body, particularly so the parenesis contained therein. They therefore lend themselves to be the starting point to further exploration of the book, particularly since their parenetic advice is inextricably linked to the remainder of the book.

Another aspect that makes it advisable to read Revelation's visions in light of the seven messages and to refer back to the messages in the interpretation of the body's images is the symbolic and thus potentially multilayered and therefore often polyvalent nature of these images. While it is not necessary – probably not even desirable – to unequivocally identify the realities these symbols point to, it still is desirable and a demand of academic scholarship to be able to access them with some degree of rational reasoning. This can be achieved by rooting them in the realities of the churches for which they are to serve as parenesis. Caird emphasizes the need “to recognize that John writes sometimes in apocalyptic and sometimes in non-apocalyptic language, and to accept the non-apocalyptic passages as a key which he has provided for the decoding of his apocalyptic imagery”<sup>93</sup>. While Caird seems to draw different

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92 Poythress, *The returning King*, 192-193.

93 Caird, *The Revelation of Saint John*, 32.

conclusions from this conviction than I would (he uses it to argue that “an imminent Parousia was *not* one of the events which John believed were ‘bound to happen soon’ (i. 1)”<sup>94</sup>), I agree with him on the necessity to interpret the “apocalyptic” (Revelation's body) by the “non-apocalyptic” (the seven messages).

Duff argues for a similar interpretative relationship between the seven messages and the body of Revelation. That his reading of the body differs significantly from mine is due to our different readings of the seven messages. But it appears as though we would agree on the form (if not the content) for the most adequate approach to reading Revelation's visionary chapters:

The surest way of proceeding in this study is to look carefully at Revelation's internal evidence. The best place to look for this internal evidence is in the so-called letters to the seven churches in chapters 2 and 3. These provide one of our clearest windows into the historical situation behind the communities.<sup>95</sup>

This insight is anything but revolutionary. Not surprisingly then, many commentators often refer to the seven messages in their interpretation of the body's images. However I observe two major shortcomings with how this is often done:

- a In practice references to the seven messages are few and far between. Caird for example never mentions the connection between the message to Ephesus and the New Jerusalem-vision through the common image of the tree of life. When commenting on 2:7 and the meaning of “conquering” he makes reference to 2:26, 3:31, 7:11, 7:14 and 12:11<sup>96</sup>, his comments on 22:2 include references to Ezek 47 and Gen 2<sup>97</sup>, but the connection between the two is never made. Similarly Thompson draws from Ezekiel, the Psalms of Solomon, 1 Enoch and Genesis to comment on the meaning of the tree of life in 22:2 but does not mention the promise to the overcomers of Ephesus. In his comments on the promise of 2:7 he displays the second shortcoming of most scholarship in dealing with the links between messages and body.
- b Thompson writes that “[t]he Ephesians who conquer will be granted ‘to eat from the tree of life,’ of which Adam and Eve were not allowed to eat (22:2, 14, 19; Gen 3:22; cf. T. Levi 18; *1 Enoch* 25; *2 Enoch* 8; 2 Esdr 8:52).”<sup>98</sup> While recognizing the connection of 2:7

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94 Caird, *The Revelation of Saint John*, 32.

95 Duff, *Who rides the beast?*, 31.

96 Caird, *The Revelation of Saint John*, 33.

97 Caird, *The Revelation of Saint John*, 280.

98 Thompson, *Revelation*, 66. Italics in the original. Note that Thompson's language is not quite clear. I suppose that he means that after the fall Adam and Eve were no longer allowed to eat of the tree of life, but what he writes may be understood as implying that they never were allowed to eat of it in the first place.

to 22:2 it (apparently) remains unexplored and its implications lost<sup>99</sup>. Unfortunately this appears to be symptomatic of the majority of scholarly work on Revelation. More often than not, the reference is not given any actual (detectable) influence in the interpretation of the passage at hand. While I find it laudable that the connections are seen and mentioned, the fact that they are hardly elaborated or specifically analyzed makes it difficult for the reader to understand what if anything the commentator wants to suggest by referring to the connected passage. This is hardly satisfactory.

The lack I perceive is thus not one of theoretical persuasion, but is more a problem of systematic application. I am confident that in principle my fellow scholars see the relevance of intra-textuality in the interpretative endeavour. But I do not see the interpretative action following on this insight to the degree that I would deem desirable. Therefore my proposal is for a systematic integration of intra-textual references and their implications into the hermeneutical effort. Unless the Book of Revelation itself is allowed to systematically influence the scholarly reading of it, the bias of the interpreter's preconceptions about it will be very difficult to limit. While any interpreter's identity will always influence their reading, intra-textuality can help significantly to safeguard against many inappropriate inferences about a text's message, which is particularly necessary with a text of Revelation's symbolic nature.

It therefore appears advisable to systematically apply Revelation's own "inbuilt" hermeneutical key, to consistently take into account how an image, theme or concept relates to the images, themes or concepts in the seven messages. Such an actively co-textual or intra-textual reading will seek out relevant connections of the passage at hand to other parts of Revelation. It will not only be aware of them, but will allow them to influence the reading of the interpreted passage to a high level and will seek to make transparent how these connections determine the meaning of the passage in question. This reading strategy, while not neglecting insights gained from an image's other aspects, will thus give high priority to ensuring its co-text is sufficiently considered and used to highlight an image's purpose in the overall rhetoric of the book.

Naturally there are limits to what is practically achievable. In theory, within an intra-textual reading, when considering any part of Revelation, one opens an endless succession of connections. Can one interpret the Babylon-image without identifying the beast? Can the beast be truly identified without an in-depth look at the woman of ch 12? Can ch 12 be understood without considering the other references to the persecuted church? The list could

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99 Similarly for example Giesen, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 104.474.



go on. Revelation is far too much an organic whole to not be interconnected beyond the possibility of disentanglement. For scholarly discourse this presents some difficulty, because the links are too numerous to be explicitly accounted for.

In practice this means that an interpreter will rarely be able to consciously incorporate intra-textual references beyond the third, second or even first level of interconnectedness. Therefore often a moderately superficial understanding of related passages will have to suffice for interpreting the passage at hand. While this is not entirely satisfactory and may yield the occasional misunderstanding, it should give an acceptable approximation and is certainly more adequate than considering these links merely occasionally or even not at all. When I demonstrate the application of my reading strategy in the next chapter (6) I also hope to give examples of the level of examination which is necessary in order to be effective.

Scholarly discourse can rarely grasp and document the imaginative and highly emotional process of associating images and ideas, of linking concepts and persons, of identifying with or distancing oneself from actors in a story, of embracing or rejecting certain values and ideals. One would really have to tell a story to convey the full meaning of Revelation. That however is exactly what Revelation itself does, and it would take a truly great storyteller to come up with a story more to the point, more relevant and more accessible than that which John tells us in the account of his vision.

## **6 Demonstration of plausibility**

This chapter serves two primary purposes: First of all it seeks to demonstrate the plausibility of my reading strategy as I outlined it in the previous chapter. The results of reading Revelation intra-textually, of allowing the seven messages to impact on the understanding of the body's visions, of reading these visions as self-interpreting parenetic art, will show that not only is such a hermeneutic reasonable, practically applicable and complimentary to other aspects of interpretation, but also yields useful results which will enable readers to understand Revelation today. Clearly this cannot serve as clinical proof of an universal necessity of adopting such a reading strategy. Most likely such proof would not even be possible, while I certainly hope to remain open to a potentially possible falsification. Until falsified however, I think a plausible proposal can confidently be accepted as accurate and thus applied in scholarly research.

The demonstration of plausibility will be carried out by applying the reading strategy to two concrete exegetical issues, and it will therefore secondly serve as an illustration which details how I envision my reading strategy to function. I thus hope to provide a model for further exegetical exploration in other aspects of Revelation. Every image in Revelation's wide spectrum requires a somewhat different approach, therefore making it impossible to simply follow my examples step by step. The general principles however should remain the same. As in any exegetical endeavour, depending on the examined text, some possible methodological tools yield more results than others which in turn may be very effective when applied to a different text. Thus when I only make (explicit) use of some methods this does not mean that all these and no others should ever be used for the interpretation of Revelation. Rather a different set of exegetical tools will probably be necessary for other examples. There are however some exegetical methods which I consider to be mandatory for interpreting virtually all of Revelation's images and these include consideration of the plentiful Old Testament background as the symbolic world, the metanarrative in which the book's first readers lived their faith, and of intra-textuality as an “in-built” hermeneutical key to unlock the cognitive environment which is created by preceding (and – to some degree – even succeeding) co-text.

### **6.1 What is behind “Babylon”?**

One of the most prominent figures in all of Revelation is Babylon, the great whore. In this chapter I will give a brief and selective overview of the image's history of interpretation, examine why the image is sometimes seen as referring to Jerusalem, investigate the main

reasons for the currently common view that the image refers to the Roman empire, study the links between the image and the seven messages (and thus apply my proposal) and in a final step present a proposal for the image's function. I will argue that the scope of Revelation's Babylon cannot be limited to Rome and that there is strong evidence for a broader horizon of interpretation which incorporates the references to Jerusalem as well as other images used in the Babylon vision. While Rome certainly cannot be completely ignored in regard to the Babylon image, I will argue that likewise it may not exclusively dominate the image's interpretation at the expense of its other aspects.

After already being mentioned in earlier parts of the book (14:8; 16:19), Revelation's Babylon image is the dominant theme of Rev 17 and 18. John sees a woman: "Babylon the great, the mother of prostitutes" (17:5), drunk with the blood of the saints (17:6) and whoring with the kings of the earth over whom she reigns (17:2.18; 18:3). She rides on the beast which has seven heads with ten horns (17:3). The seven heads are seven hills on which she sits (17:9) but also seven kings (17:10), the horns stand for ten (different?) kings (17:12) who will eventually turn against the woman and bring her to ruin (17:16). Fallen from her haughty opposition to God she is grieved over by the kings of the earth (18:9-10) and the merchants who made their profits from supplying her luxuries (18:11-19). In heaven, on the other hand, there is great joy at her demise (18:20-19:3).

There are three themes which dominate the description of Babylon and appear central to the image's focus. Babylon is depicted as responsible for the death of Christians (17:6; 18:20.24; 19:2). Persecution plays an important role in the image. Babylon is heavily involved in global trade, indulging in luxuries supplied by merchants and their ships (18:3.11-19), suggesting commerce as a major theme. Finally the vision is ripe with prostitution or adultery language relating both to "the kings of the earth" (17:2; 18:3.9) and to "the inhabitants of the earth" (17:2; 18:3; 19:2). These three themes of persecution, worldly goods and sexual licence seem to define the essence of Babylon's nature. In their details she is adequately described.

It is in this Babylon image that Revelation's depiction of anti-Christian forces culminates. The obvious anti-Christian counterpart to the New Jerusalem, Babylon becomes the overarching metaphor for all the other anti-Christian images in Revelation. Mulholland does not exaggerate when he suggests for the whole of Revelation "that the final focus of the vision is God's action in Christ and its consequences for the two orders of being that shape (or misshape) human existence: Fallen Babylon and New Jerusalem."<sup>1</sup> Mulholland's interpretation

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1 Mulholland, *Revelation. Holy living in an unholy world*, 45.

thus moves forward by uncovering how Revelation works out the contrast between “Fallen Babylon” and the New Jerusalem in almost every passage of the book. And indeed these two images are among Revelation's most important images incorporating in themselves all the other images of idolatry and faithfulness, unholiness and holiness, rebellion and obedience, respectively. As the New Jerusalem image represents undisturbed communion with God, so the Babylon image holds the essence of what Revelation at large identifies as the threat to the churches and thus seeks to see them turn away from. Not surprisingly then Revelation's Babylon has always fascinated academic and artistic interpreters of Revelation alike. To know the identity of Babylon, it seems, is to know what the whole book is about.

It needs to be noted however that a similarly strong image exists in the beast. The beast is the obvious counter-image to the Lamb. The two images of the beast and of Babylon are inextricably intertwined to the point of making it rather difficult to keep the two apart. Although they are most likely not identical, they are connected. In 17:3 Babylon is pictured as riding on the beast, thus suggesting a strong relationship. In contrast 17:16 reports Babylon's demise at the hands of the beast and its 10 horns. That I focus on Babylon rather than the beast, is mainly due to the fact that the links to the seven messages are more obvious in the Babylon image. However, since it is impossible to examine the Babylon image in some depth without considering the beast, the nature of the beast is inevitably investigated to some degree as well.

### **6.1.1 Babylon's history of interpretation**

In the history of Revelation's interpretation, the Babylonian prostitute has been identified with countless persons and institutions, often influenced by commentators' perspectives on contemporary issues. Among the most prominent and frequently accused candidates for being identified as Babylon, the Catholic church and its papacy rank highest. In the twelfth century Joachim of Floris sparked interest in a futurist reading of Revelation. “Er meint, der Antichrist sei schon geboren, wenn auch noch nicht hervorgetreten. D. h. nichts anderes als daß Joachim auf der Schwelle des neuen Zeitalters zu leben glaubt”<sup>2</sup>. Joachim thus initiates a mode of interpretation which sees Revelation's images to come to fulfillment in the interpreter's own time. Despite seeing the corruptness of the papal church, Joachim remained “loyal to the Church and its hierarchy, but his followers were quick to identify the Pope as the beast and papal Rome as the woman astride the scarlet beast.”<sup>3</sup> The reformers continued this antipapal

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2 Maier, *Die Johannesoffenbarung und die Kirche*, 175.

3 Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 25

tradition which remains popular in parts of the Protestant world even today. Probably Luther is the most prominent among the polemical antipapalists. Even before his own reconciliation with the presence of Revelation in the canon, Luther liberally used the book to interpret the situation of the church in his own days<sup>4</sup>. He first uses Revelation polemically in June 1520 when comparing Rome to the great whore Babylon<sup>5</sup>, despite claiming in 1522 that Revelation does not clearly speak of Christ and his works and thus thoroughly struggling with the book<sup>6</sup>. By 1530 he leaves no doubt as to who Babylon needs to be identified with: “Die babylonische Hure von Apk 17 ist nichts anderes als das Papsttum.”<sup>7</sup> This verdict also becomes obvious in the illustrations to the 1534 edition of the Luther Bible where the Babylonian whore is pictured wearing the papal tiara<sup>8</sup>. Nearly 200 years later Bengel declares: “Babel heißt sensu Prophetico das Papstthum, und in specie die Stadt Rom”<sup>9</sup>. Thus, he concludes, the image could not possibly refer to the protestant church as well. Today, scholarly interpreters fortunately refrain from such finger pointing, but in 2005 a hitchhiker I took in my car tried to convince me that indeed the then new Pope Benedict XVI was the antichrist. He had this insight from a course on Revelation he attended in his (adventist, if I remember correctly) church.

Not surprisingly Catholics refuted such claims vehemently and offered their own explanations:

Roman Catholic commentators naturally reacted against such interpretations. For Ribeira the whore is not contemporary Rome but future Rome under the power of the Antichrist (1593: 35, 184-208, 284-301, 303, 374-8, 385 in Wainwright 1993:61-2). Similarly, Suárez suggested that Babylon is not Christian Rome but a “renewed pagan Rome to come at the end of time” (in Armogathe in McGinn 2000:189).<sup>10</sup>

Hahn (1758-1819), a strongly defining personality in early Pietism in southwest Germany, turned from this tradition of concrete identification of images and historical events. While he saw the parousia as imminent, his speculations remained very careful and ever self-critical. Indeed, he found

Babel nicht nur in Rom und in der katholischen Kirche, sondern auch in der evangelischen Kirche. Ja, würde er selbst eine Kirche gründen, “so würde es in kurzer Zeit auch ein kleines Babel seyn, und ich würde nur ein kleines Gäßlein in der grösseren Babel erbauen mit besonderen Formen and Ceremonien” ... Der Ausgang aus Babel hat

4 Maier, *Die Johannesoffenbarung und die Kirche*, 295.

5 Martin, *Luther und die Bilder zur Apokalypse*, 106.

6 Maier, *Die Johannesoffenbarung und die Kirche*, 294.

7 Maier, *Die Johannesoffenbarung und die Kirche*, 297.

8 Martin: *Luther und die Bilder zur Apokalypse*, 192

9 Cited from Maier, *Die Johannesoffenbarung und die Kirche*, 397.

10 Kovacs, Rowland and Callow, *Revelation*, 185-186.

geistlich zu geschehen, d.h. durch gründliche Bekehrung und Heiligung innerhalb der äußeren Kirche ... Datierungen und Berechnungen entfallen. Die näheren Umstände, das Wann, Wie und Wo der Endereignisse, bleiben verborgen. Von der Erkenntnis der göttlichen Wege verlagert sich der Akzent auf die Heiligung. ... Die Identifizierung des Antichrist bzw. der Hure mit dem Papsttum oder Rom wird gelöst.<sup>11</sup>

While significantly shaping (German) evangelical interpretations of Revelation, such a reading could not prevent ever new attempts to exactly identify Revelation's images and Babylon in particular. Probably due to the stricter separation of church and state the attention seems to have shifted. Babylon is usually no longer seen merely as some variant of the Christian church (although this notion is by no means extinct) but rather as a universal world government, one great superpower which once in control will demand absolute loyalty.

According to the *Scofield Reference Bible*, there are two “Babylons” which are to be distinguished in the Apocalypse: ecclesiastical Babylon, which is apostate Christendom, headed by the papacy, and political Babylon, which is the Beast's confederated empire, the last form of gentile world domination. Ecclesiastical Babylon is “the great whore”, and is destroyed by political Babylon (Rev 17:15-18), so that the Beast alone may be the object of worship (cf. 2 Thess 2:3, 4; Rev 13:15, Scofield 1917: 1346-47).<sup>12</sup>

It is primarily dispensationalism in many of its various forms (not including, for example, Thomas<sup>13</sup>) and the Jehovah's Witnesses<sup>14</sup> which seem to be prone to such an interpretation. Various “Babylons” have since been identified and often subsequently rejected in a broad spectrum of historic entities<sup>15</sup> from the European Union or the United Nations to the former Soviet Union, from Saddam Hussein to George Bush senior and junior. Needless to say that scholarly engagement with such interpretative schemes rarely exceeds brief<sup>16</sup> and stern rejection, and rightly so. In general it certainly is more helpful to develop and promote a constructive way of reading Revelation than to merely criticize end-time scenarios without offering a helpful alternative.

### 6.1.2 Babylon as a symbol for Jerusalem

It has also been suggested that Babylon is a metaphor for earthly Jerusalem as opposed to the New Jerusalem. In the late 18<sup>th</sup> century Abauzit, Harduin and Herder established a school of

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11 Maier, *Die Johannesoffenbarung und die Kirche*, 445. Citation from Trautwein, *Die Theosophie Michael Hahns und ihre Quellen*, 239 (Stuttgart: Calwer Verlag, 1969).

12 Kovacs, Rowland and Callow, *Revelation*, 187.

13 cf. Thomas, *Revelation 8-22*, 205-208.279-351.

14 Kovacs, Rowland and Callow, *Revelation*, 187; Wainwright, *Mysterious apocalypse*, 100.

15 Kovacs, Rowland and Callow, *Revelation*, 187; Wainwright, *Mysterious apocalypse*, 81-87. See also Wikipedia contributors, “Babylon (New Testament)” and Wikipedia contributors, “Whore of Babylon”.

16 Rossing (*The rapture exposed*) is a notable and rather helpful exception.

interpretation which saw Revelation addressing Judaism under Nero. Abauzit's views are described by Bousset:

Das Tier ist demgemäß der jüdische Sanhedrin, die sieben Häupter die letzten Hohenpriester, der achte Ananus, durch dessen Tod das Tier die tötliche Wunde erhält; die sieben Berge werden auf sieben Hügel Jerusalems bezogen, die zehn Hörner auf zehn Toparchen, welchen beim Aufstand die einzelnen Distrikte zur Verwaltung übergeben waren, Babel ist natürlich Jerusalem.<sup>17</sup>

While by no means the dominant mode of interpretation, support for the identification of Babylon with earthly Jerusalem remains strong. Often this option is used to advocate that Revelation was not written under Domitian but around the time of the Jewish Revolt which resulted in the destruction of the temple in 70AD. Holwerda presents a number of arguments for this view. He points out “daß die *Beziehung auf Rom* der in den Versen 8-13 [of ch 17] von dem Engel gegebenen Deutung des Tieres-mit-der-Dirne im Widerspruch zu sein scheint mit den Zügen, mit denen die ersten sechs Verse die Dirne ausmalen.”<sup>18</sup> Quoting from Black/Rowley he argues that the image of the great harlot

is more appropriate to Jerusalem than of Rome. The Heb. prophets constantly accused the holy city of the spiritual sin of fornication, namely religious syncretism and imprudent associations with foreign kings; in v. 2 this city, whatever it is, is accused of just that kind of association with the kings of the earth.<sup>19</sup>

Similarly the words of Jesus against Jerusalem in Mt. 23:29-38 resound surprisingly clearly in Rev 16:6 (about the followers of the beast on which Babylon is later to ride), 17:6 and 18:24: Babylon like Jerusalem has shed “the blood of prophets and of the saints” (Rev 18:24). Vos comments on this reference to Matthew (and Luke 11:50) and remarks: “Now it is somewhat remarkable, and perhaps not any accident, that a similar charge [to that against Babylon] was brought against Jerusalem by our Lord.”<sup>20</sup> However Vos does not see this as evidence for an identification of Babylon as Jerusalem. Rather he explains:

it is simply that he [John] was so conversant with the sayings of Jesus that they became incorporated into his pattern and method of thought and expression. In such a case a suggestive word may prompt the allusion to a complete saying, as, for example, the word blood may have done in the passage which we have just discussed.<sup>21</sup>

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17 Bousset, *Die Offenbarung Johannis*, 102-103. Similarly Wainwright, *Mysterious apocalypse*, 125-126.

18 Holwerda, “Ein neuer Schlüssel,” 387. Italics in the original.

19 Black, M. and H. H. Rowley (eds.), *Peake's Commentary on the Bible*. London, 1977. 1054. Quoted from Holwerda, “Ein neuer Schlüssel,” 387-388.

20 Vos, *The synoptic traditions in the Apocalypse*, 162.

21 Vos, *The synoptic traditions in the Apocalypse*, 163.

Vos probably would be right if this was the only aspect of Babylon that is similar to Jerusalem. There are however additional links to the Synoptics which point to Jerusalem rather than Rome. Again Holwerda needs to be quoted at some length:

11,8 wird *Jerusalem* (“die Stadt, wo auch ihr Herr gekreuzigt wurde”) πνευματικῶς mit den Namen *Sodom* und *Ägypten* benannt; Namen also, die eine Stadt und ein Land bezeichnen, aus der (dem) ehemals, als sie (es) der Vernichtung preisgegeben wurde, die Gerechten von Gott herausgeführt wurden. In diese Reihe nun gehört zweifelsohne der Name *Babylon*, der der Dirne an die Stirn geschrieben steht (17:5)<sup>22</sup>.

This however is as far as I am prepared to follow Holwerda. While his case for Rev 6-7 (the seal vision and the multitude before the throne) referring to Jerusalem is not compelling but certainly arguable<sup>23</sup>, Holwerda's interpretation of the seven kings and hills in Rev 17:9-11 is rather far-fetched<sup>24</sup>. This probably is the reason why Holwerda's all too creative “new key” and the dilemma it is supposed to solve are usually “unbeachtet”<sup>25</sup>.

### 6.1.3 Babylon as a code for Rome

Significantly more scholarly attention is usually directed to the view that Revelation's Babylon represents the Roman empire and its Caesars. This has come to be somewhat of a consensus in recent scholarship: “The identification of the Whore with ancient Rome has come to dominate the approach to this chapter [17] in modern historical scholarship”<sup>26</sup>. However, there still is significant variety in this overall approach. Interpretations may emphasize any combination of pagan worship (“the goddess *Roma* is presented as a polluted whore”<sup>27</sup>), emperor worship (13:1-18), persecution of Christians (17:6<sup>28</sup>; 18:24; 19:2), the political system of the Pax Romana (17:2.18; 18:9-10) or its cultural and commercial hegemony (13:16-17; 18:11-19).

All in all there are four aspects of Babylon (and the beasts) on the basis of which it is identified as Rome. These form the foundation of the whole interpretative framework in which consequently Babylon's other aspects are also explained as referring to Rome.

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22 Holwerda, “Ein neuer Schlüssel,” 388. Italics in the original.

23 Holwerda, “Ein neuer Schlüssel,” 388-391.

24 Holwerda, “Ein neuer Schlüssel,” 391-396.

25 Holwerda, “Ein neuer Schlüssel,” 392.

26 Kovacs, Rowland and Callow, *Revelation*, 187.

27 DeSilva, *The hope of glory*, 190. Italics in the original.

28 Giesen, *Johannes-Apokalypse*, 131.



### 6.1.3.1 *The seven hills of Rome*

The most obvious of these foundations is found in 17:9: “The seven heads [of the beast] are the seven hills on which the woman sits.” Naturally, this reminds readers of Rome<sup>29</sup>. Aune writes: “The phrase ‘seven hills’ or ‘seven mountains’ was widely used during the late first century B.C. (after Varro) and the first century A.D. and would be instantly recognizable as a metaphor for Rome.”<sup>30</sup> Similarly Mounce claims that “[t]here is little doubt that a first-century reader would understand this reference in any way other than as a reference to Rome, the city built on seven hills.”<sup>31</sup> However the “little doubt” which Mounce concedes is quite substantial:

- a If the seven hills really did refer to Rome, if indeed “any Roman soldier who knew how to read Greek could find the answer to a conundrum as easy as this one”<sup>32</sup>, then what sense would the first part of 17:9 make: “This calls for a mind with wisdom”? If indeed the answer was as obvious as the seven hills of Rome, “how then does this require any special divine wisdom”<sup>33</sup>? Is it not much more likely that indeed these seven hills need to be interpreted as symbols (like almost everything else in Revelation's visions) which then indeed require divine wisdom to be understood?

This would also do significantly more justice to the fact that it is highly unlikely that the heads of the beast which also are seven kings (17:9-10) are seven actual geographical hills. De Villiers similarly argues for reading “the seven hills” symbolically:

If the hills are taken literally, one has the inconsistency that the same motif, that is, the seven heads are depicted as both a place (Rome) *and* as a group of people. John's interpretation of the heads as “kings” in Revelation 17:9 [more likely 17:10], imply that the accompanying description of seven “hills” need not be geographical. ... In Jeremiah 51:25-26 Babylon is described as a hill that corrupts the earth. John is known to intensify the symbols he takes over from his traditional sources ... In the case of the seven it happens again. ... Babylon is seven fold corruption, being seven hills instead of the one hill of the Babylon in Jeremiah.<sup>34</sup>

In fact, not only do “mountains allegorically refer to world powers in the Prophets”<sup>35</sup>, Revelation itself tells us that indeed the seven hills or mountains are the seven kings over

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29 Bauckham, *The climax of prophecy*, 343.395.

30 Aune, *Revelation 17-22*, 944.

31 Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 315.

32 Caird, *The Revelation of Saint John*, 217.

33 Johnson, *Revelation*, 162.

34 De Villiers, “Rome in the historical interpretation,” 133-134. Italics in the original.

35 Johnson, *Revelation*, 163.

whom the woman rules (17:10.18). Overall this makes significantly more sense than the alternative: That the seven kings are actually the seven hills of Rome.

Some commentators remark on the incompatibility of Rev 17:1 with an identification of Babylon as Rome. Giesen writes “Der Seher benutzt zur Charakterisierung der Stadt die nicht zu Rom passende Wendung ‘die an den großen Wassern sitzt’ (Jer 51,13; Ez 26,17), um so Rom mit dem gottlosen Babylon zu identifizieren”<sup>36</sup>. Giesen then goes on to explain that the phrase is reminiscent of Babylon's system of irrigation canals but now refers to the “Mittelmeer, an dem Rom seinen Handel und Götzendienst treibt.”<sup>37</sup> However, this motif of the whore sitting on many waters refers primarily to Babylon, as Giesen rightly observes, and only by extension might it refer to Rome and the Mediterranean. As 17:15 states, the many waters “are peoples, multitudes, nations and languages”, thus the world over which the prostitute rules (cf. 17:18), not actual waters. While the aspect of ruling over many nations could apply to Rome, it is first of all a fitting description of ancient Babylon. In any case it underlines the *symbolic* nature of the places on which Revelation's Babylon sits (the many waters, the beast and the seven hills, which are the heads of the beast in the first place)<sup>38</sup>. These places therefore need to be identified independently through the image's various other parts and are not in themselves proof for or against the view that Revelation's Babylon is a code for the Roman empire.

- b The Greek word ὄρος appears a further six times (thus seven times altogether!) in Revelation (6:14.15.16; 8:8; 14:1; 16:20; 21:10). While in all other occurrences most translations render it as mountain, in 17:9 (and there only) ὄρος is translated as “hills”<sup>39</sup>. Johnson rightly asks: “Is this a case where previous exegesis has influenced even the best of translations (KJV has ‘mountains’)?”<sup>40</sup> Beale acknowledges that

ὄρος can, in fact, mean “hill” as well as “mountain.” But elsewhere in the Apocalypse it always means ‘mountain’ and is used figuratively to connote strength (so seven occurrences). This usage points beyond a literal reference to Rome's “hills” and to a figurative meaning, “kingdoms,” especially in the light of 8:8 and 14:1. Mountains symbolize kingdoms in the OT and Jewish writings, for example, Isa. 2:2; Jer. 51:25; Ezek. 35:3; Dan. 2:35, 45; Zech. 4:7; *1 En.* 52; *Targ.* Isa. 41:15.<sup>41</sup>

Thus, the suggestion that the seven mountains refer to seven kings, kingdoms or empires which still need to be identified, is more likely. This is not to say that the seven

36 Giesen, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 369.

37 Giesen, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 369.

38 De Villiers, “Rome in the historical interpretation,” 133.

39 Johnson, *Revelation*, 167.

40 Johnson, *Revelation*, 163. Note that RSV/NRSV also translate “mountain”.

41 Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 868.

kings/mountains could not possibly refer to seven Roman emperors, but this is merely one possibility of many. Building on Daniel 7 Beale very appropriately suggests that

rather than seven particular kings or kingdoms of the first century or any other, the seven mountains and kings represent the oppressive power of world government throughout the ages, which arrogates to itself divine prerogatives and persecutes God's people when they do not submit to the evil state's false claims.<sup>42</sup>

This would fit in well with my previous observations that Revelation's visions cannot be limited to dealing with the Roman empire (or any other singularly exclusive matter; cf. 5.1.1). Rather, as God's call to his church urging it to live faithfully wherever and whenever it may find itself, Revelation proves to have a significantly wider scope.

- c Thirdly it ought to be noted that Rome was not the only city of antiquity that was said to be built on seven hills. For example, Lisbon is, like Rome, built on seven hills and thus regularly called “cidade das sete colinas” (city of the seven hills)<sup>43</sup>. There are (unverified) claims that the same applies to Siena (Italy)<sup>44</sup>, Amman (Jordan)<sup>45</sup> and, more interestingly, Athens<sup>46</sup>, to mention just a few of the many ancient cities which supposedly claim to have been built on seven hills. The most interesting candidate is Byzantium/Konstantinopel/Istanbul. Although it appears virtually impossible to obtain direct evidence, there is a strong tradition of Byzantium as a seven hill-city. Oberhummer explains about the hills of Byzantium that

die schematisierende Betrachtung früherer Zeit sich sechs Hügel zurechtlegte, während der zur Vollendung der symbolischen Zahl, in welche die Alten auch geographische Verhältnisse zu zwängen versuchte[n] (vgl. ausser Nil und Septimontium auch Septem maria, Septem aquae u.a.), erforderliche siebente Hügel in dem dreieckigen Ende eines zweiten Höhenzuges erkannt wurde<sup>47</sup>.

Commenting on the city's renaming as Νέα Ῥώμη when it became the new capital of the Roman empire under Constantine, Georgacas notes that “[l]ike Rome, so New Rome also lay on seven hills and thence the epithet ἐπτάλοφος”<sup>48</sup>. It thus is not unlikely that Byzantium was known as the “city of seven hills” to the ancients, particularly in Asia Minor. Though nowhere near her later glory, Byzantium was an important city even at the time of Revelation's writing. Situated at the meeting point of Europe and Asia the city

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42 Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 869.

43 Associação de Turismo de Lisboa, “Esplanadas”.

44 Answers.com, “List of cities claimed to have been built on seven hills”.

45 Wikipedia-contributors, “Amman”.

46 Answers.com, “List of cities claimed to have been built on seven hills”.

47 Oberhummer, “Byzantion,” 1117.

48 Georgacas, “The names of Constantinople,” 354, n 54.

virtually controlled the land routes between the European part of the Roman empire and the eastern parts including Asia Minor and the city was thus very important for “international” trade: “Byzantium's strategic position enabled it to enjoy privileged status under the Roman empire”<sup>49</sup>.

By no means do I want suggest that Revelation should be read as directly referring to Lisbon, Siena, Amman or Athens, or even to Byzantium, but those cities' description as being built on seven hills certainly serves to underline the ambiguity of a direct association of Rev 17:9 to the seven hills of Rome<sup>50</sup>.

- d In *1 Enoch* 24 we find a scene “where seven mountains surround the throne of God”<sup>51</sup> which obviously demands a different explanation than the seven hills of Rome. While I certainly do not want to suggest a dependency of Revelation on *1 Enoch*, this incidence shows that Rome is not the only possible entity that could be linked with seven hills or mountains.

Thus while “Rome's seven hills may have been part of what influenced John”<sup>52</sup>, they are by no means the clear point of reference for Rev 17:9. On the basis of 17:9 alone the assumption that Babylon needs to be seen as referring to Rome cannot be upheld. It will have to be seen whether the other clues provide a more secure foundation for modern scholarship's preferred mode of interpreting the Babylon vision.

#### **6.1.3.2 The number of the beast**

There is one other occasion where wisdom is the explicitly mentioned prerequisite for understanding a symbol. In Rev 13:18 John writes: “This calls for wisdom. If anyone has insight, let him calculate the number of the beast, for it is man’s number. His number is 666.” Thus to know the meaning of the number 666 means to identify the beast on which Babylon rides, whose heads are the seven mountains or kings. Among the myriad of explanations there is one that in particular is seen as supporting the notion that Babylon refers to Rome: “Many modern scholars have attempted to identify the number 666 with Nero. This cannot be calculated in Greek, but the transliteration of Greek *Nerōn Kaisar* into Hebrew does yield

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49 Graham, “Byzantium”.

50 That Jerusalem is also sometimes thought to be built on seven hills is probably largely due to the fact that Revelation's Babylon is sometimes identified as Jerusalem. However this kind of interpretation is largely limited to “independent” interpreters with no affiliation to academic scholarship. Examples include Martin, “The Seven Hills of Jerusalem”, Reckart, “Seven mountains” or Marrs, “Babylon 21 - rise of the Jewish global empire”.

51 Thompson, *Revelation*, 164.

52 Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 869.

666.”<sup>53</sup> Bauckham goes to great lengths to show over 69 pages<sup>54</sup> that “[a]lthough the emperor Nero is not named in Revelation, his name plays a key role in it. For Nero Caesar is the name of the Beast (13:17; 15:2).”<sup>55</sup>

There are however significant problems with this interpretation. One of these has already been mentioned. It would be quite curious if John's audience in Asia Minor were required to translate “Nerōn Kaisar” into Hebrew. Beale comments very appropriately:

(1) The Nero identification assumes a knowledge of the Hebrew language and its system of gematria in John's audience, native Greek readers, though some of those readers were no doubt Hellenistic Jewish Christians.[n. 303] (2) Choosing the name “Caesar Nero” is too convenient for the Nero view, since there were many possible titles and names for Nero. (3) In transliterating a foreign name into Hebrew there is considerable latitude in putting in or leaving out or varying vowel letters, and there are three possible alternative equivalents for the Σ.[n.304] And why would John not use a Greek form instead of a Hebrew form? ... (4) The earliest church fathers were unaware of a Nero identification.[n. 305] (5) John is not calling for intellectual, mathematical prowess in his exhortation that his readers “have a mind to calculate,” but for moral discernment to avoid evil<sup>56</sup>.

This last problem applies to virtually all gematric interpretations of the number of the beast. John says that the number calls for wisdom, not ingenuity. To identify the reality behind the image Revelation's readers require knowledge of the ways of Christ, not creative mathematical cleverness. Thus any of the many suggestions of names which in some way or other add up too 666 (or 616) inevitably are misleading. “The sheer disagreement and confusion created through the years by the gematria method should have long ago warned the church that it was on the wrong track.”<sup>57</sup> Thus Bewes comments very appropriately: “You can get too clever with the book of Revelation. The vision was intended to comfort and prepare us, not to test our ingenuity.”<sup>58</sup>

Furthermore the translation of ψηφισάτω as “calculate” (NRSV, NIV) is somewhat unfortunate. The RSV's “reckon” with its broader field of meaning may be closer to the correct meaning. The word ψηφίζω originates from the stones which were used as votes in an election<sup>59</sup>. It could refer to the casting of votes as well as to counting them and to consequently reaching a conclusion. The word retains its range of meanings throughout its (rare) use in the

53 Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 719.

54 Bauckham, “Nero and the Beast”, 384-452.

55 Bauckham, “Nero and the Beast,” 384.

56 Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 719-720. Footnotes: 303 (“Nevertheless, Bauckham, *Climax of Prophecy*, 384-407, has argued most convincingly for a knowledge of gematria on the part of John and his readership because of its use elsewhere in Jewish and Christian apocalyptic”), 304 (“Farrer, *Rebirth of Images*, 257”) and 305 (“Though see Gentry, *Before Jerusalem Fell*, 203-8, for a response to this objection.”)

57 Johnson, *Revelation*, 138

58 Bewes, *The Lamb wins*, 115.

59 For this and the following see Braumann, “ψηφός,” 600-604.

New Testament where it can mean adding things up as well as coming to a conclusion about something. The verb ψηφίζω occurs four times in the New Testament: Rev 13:18, Lk 14:28, Ac 1:26 (συγκαταψηφίζω) and Ac 19:19 (συμψηφίζω). In Ac 19:19 συμψηφίζω refers to calculating: the financial value of books is added up. The occurrence in Ac 1:26 refers to Matthias being counted among the apostles, of him being considered one of them. Thus the emphasis is not on calculating, despite the relevance of numbers in the case (Matthias is the new 12<sup>th</sup> apostle). In Luke 14:28 ψηφίζω refers to counting the cost before starting a project. Likely this includes some calculating and thus BDAG lists Lk 14:28 under ψηφίζω with the translations “to add up digits and calculate a total, *count (up), calculate, reckon*”<sup>60</sup>. However the emphasis even in Lk 14:28 is on evaluating one's fitness for the task. Numbers are only mentioned by implication. There is no doubt that numbers are involved in Rev 13:18. However BDAG does not list Rev 13:18 under the same meaning of ψηφίζω as Lk 14:28. Rather Rev 13:18 is given as the example of the word's second meaning: “to probe a number for its meaning, *interpret, figure out*”<sup>61</sup>. The point in Rev 13:18 therefore does not seem to be one of mathematical calculations but of identifying the symbolic meaning of the numbers, of reaching a conclusion and of thus knowing what or whom to count as the beast<sup>62</sup>. Ψηφίζω's field of meaning allows for a translation that takes into account that to solve the mystery requires wisdom rather than mathematical cleverness. The readers are called to “figure out” what or whom the number 666 stands for, however not by ingenuity but by the insight God mysteriously gives to his own.

That there are sensible alternative interpretations which do not require gematria only underlines that it is not an appropriate tool to access Rev 13:18. Beale points out that

elsewhere John always uses ἀριθμός (“number”) figuratively of an uncountable multitude (5:11; 7:4, 9 [the cognate verb]; 9:16 [two occurrences]; 20:8). In such cases the number is not meant to be calculated. “The number 666” is likely no exception to John's use of numbers.<sup>63</sup>

Beale then continues to outline a satisfactory explanation which combines a number of aspects of 666's symbolic value to reach a conclusion about its meaning<sup>64</sup>. Just as the number seven stands for completeness so the number six is symbolic of incompleteness<sup>65</sup>. Similarly, based on the days in the Genesis account of creation, six is considered a human number (man was

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60 BDAG, 1098.

61 BDAG, 1098.

62 Contra Braumann, “ψηφός,” 603.

63 Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 721. Square brackets in Beale. Similarly Johnson, *Revelation*, 138.

64 Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 720-728. Similarly Johnson, *Revelation*, 137-139.

65 Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 722.

created on the sixth day) whereas seven is the divine number<sup>66</sup>. Thus not only is 666 “a number common to fallen humanity”<sup>67</sup>, but furthermore “the triple repetition of sixes connotes the intensification of incompleteness and failure that is summed up in the beast more than anywhere else among fallen humanity.”<sup>68</sup> That indeed the number does not have to refer to one exclusive person which would be hidden rather than revealed (Rev 1:1!) by the number 666, becomes obvious upon closer examination of 13:18's ἀριθμὸς γὰρ ἀνθρώπου ἐστίν. As Beale shows this is a generic term (“a human number”) rather than referring to one specific person (“the number of a man”)<sup>69</sup>. Thus it is right to conclude that “the proper spiritual application of the triple six to wicked rulers and compromising institutions, as well as to false teachers, will reveal to believers their seductive and imperfect nature.”<sup>70</sup> Similarly Johnson comes to the conclusion that 666 needs to be interpreted “as a symbolic number referring to the unholy trinity of evil or to the human imperfect imitation of God rather than a cipher of a name”<sup>71</sup>. Likewise Hendriksen exclaims: “The number of the beast is 666, that is, failure upon failure upon failure! It is the number of a man, for the beast glories in man; and must fail!”<sup>72</sup>

Finally, if the number did apply to one specific person, this person would most likely be king Solomon. Beale<sup>73</sup> mentions that 1 Ki 10:14 (and likewise 2 Ch 9:13) reports that Solomon's annual trade profit was 666 talents. As will become obvious, Solomon's trade practices are closely linked to the commercial aspect of the Babylon image (cf. 6.1.3.3 and 6.1.4.14). He would thus be the most likely candidate for identifying the number of the beast. Beale concludes that “the 666 from 1 Kings would have served as an excellent candidate for a number to symbolize the perversion of kingship through idolatry and economic evil.”<sup>74</sup> However, while Solomon likely inspired the use of 666 as the number of the beast, in Revelation as we have noted it is not one specific man's number, not even Solomon's.

It has become obvious that it is not only not necessary to see Nero (or any other particular Roman Caesar) behind the 666, but it also is one of the more unlikely explanations. Consequently it can also not be used to support the idea that the Babylon image refers to Rome in any particularly exclusive way. Only if it is clear from other aspects of Revelation's description of Babylon that it must refer to Rome can the number of the beast be exclusively

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66 Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 724.

67 Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 724.

68 Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 722.

69 Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 723-724.

70 Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 726.

71 Johnson, *Revelation*, 139.

72 Hendriksen, *More than conquerors*, 151.

73 Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 727.

74 Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 727.

linked to one or a number of Roman Caesars. In that case however it merely would not contradict the Babylon-Rome identification, but could certainly not serve as a foundation for that proposal.

### **6.1.3.3 *Rome and the merchants of Rev 18***

Revelation's Babylon is in ch 18 described as a centre of commerce. Most commentators agree that 18:11-17 at the very least draws heavily on the lament about Tyre in Ez 27. For John in Revelation however, it is argued, such extensive trading could only point in one direction: to Rome. Again it is Bauckham who goes to great lengths as he seeks to demonstrate that Rev 18 is an economic critique of Rome. On 46 pages he seeks to demonstrate why

[t]he Book of Revelation is one of the fiercest attacks on Rome and one of the most effective pieces of political resistance literature from the period of the early empire. Its thoroughgoing criticism of the whole system of Roman power includes an important element of economic critique. This condemnation of Rome's economic exploitation of her empire is the most unusual aspect of the opposition to Rome in Revelation, by comparison with other Jewish and Christian apocalyptic attacks on Rome<sup>75</sup>.

Likewise many scholars argue for reading Rev 18 as a critique of the Roman empire's economic system. Kraybill writes that "John referred to Rome as Babylon"<sup>76</sup> and describes John's reasons for using images of Tyre in his depiction of Rome as Babylon:

Invoking the sordid reputation of ancient Babylon, however, did not provide as specific a condemnation of Rome as John sought. An examination of John's sources reveals that another city – though unnamed in the book of Revelation – also served as a prototype for the author's portrayal of Rome. This city was Tyre, the great maritime power that blended cult and commerce in ways repulsive to the prophet Ezekiel. In Revelation 17 and 18 the wicked cities of Babylon and Tyre coalesce into a perverse blend of idolatry, violence, economic exploitation, and political oppression.<sup>77</sup>

There are, however, severe problems with this interpretation of Rev 18. For example, nowhere in Revelation's Babylon image is there any connection drawn between commerce and exploitation. Referring to Provan<sup>78</sup>, Aune acknowledges that "[i]n fact, Rev 18 does not deal with the issue of economic exploitation at all"<sup>79</sup>. Indeed, in all of Revelation the issue of economic (or any other form of) exploitation is not brought up anywhere at all.

To underline the injustices committed by the merchants' trade with Babylon many commentators point to the end of the list of the merchants' goods (Rev 18:12-13) where they

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75 Bauckham, "The economic critique of Rome in Revelation 18," 338.

76 Kraybill, *Imperial cult and commerce in John's Apocalypse*, 142.

77 Kraybill, *Imperial cult and commerce in John's Apocalypse*, 142.

78 Provan, "Foul spirits," 87.

79 Aune, *Revelation 17-22*, 990.



claim to find evidence of Revelation's critique of the merchants. Beale thus writes: "All the trade products in the list in vv 12-13 are good in and of themselves, but the telltale mark of their sinful use is the reference to slaves at the end of the list."<sup>80</sup> However, this may well impose (right!) modern views about the legitimacy of slavery on an ancient author for whom slavery likely was a normal fact of life, and who gives no evidence of disapproving of it in principle<sup>81</sup>. But even if the reference to "bodies and souls of men" were a critical remark against the practice of slavery and slave trading, it is not the image's primary concern. Revelation's Babylon vision, it appears, is not so much interested in concrete injustices, but rather in the attitude which brought these about (cf. 6.1.4.14).

This is not to say that Revelation is indifferent towards wealth and how it is acquired. Quite the opposite is the case: The merchants' wealth is depicted as the result of adulterous engagement with Babylon and their economic success is shown to be the result of dealing with the "mother of prostitutes" (17:5). However, since fornication is often symbolic of idolatry, of unfaithfulness to Christ, the problem indeed appears to be one of religious affiliation rather than of trade practices. This is underlined by the fact that in 21:24.26 the splendour of the kings of the earth and the glory and honour of the nations is said to be brought into the New Jerusalem. It has been pointed out that this signifies the redemption of the kings and the nations (including their merchants)<sup>82</sup>. Those who were once fornicating with Babylon now bring their most valuable offerings to the city of God.

Thus what is problematic is not the fact that they bring their goods and wealth into a city, it is a matter of just which city this particular city is and thus *why* they bring their goods and wealth. Do they bring them to Babylon for the sake of financial gain or do they give them to the kingdom of God, in order to honour the one from whom they have received their abundance in the first place? Giesen provides a very convincing explanation for 21:26's lack of a list of goods (which could have been expected given the links to 18:11-16 and Isa 60): "Der Grund dafür liegt auf der Hand: Es steht von vornherein fest, dass die Gaben der Könige die Pracht der Stadt nicht mehren können, sondern notwendig als Ehrerbietung und Huldigung für Gott und das Lamm verstanden werden müssen."<sup>83</sup> Thus, since the bringing of wealth into

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80 Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 910. Similarly Prigent, *Commentary on the Apocalypse*, 508; Smalley, *The Revelation to John*, 454.456; Thomas, *Revelation 8-22*, 336.

81 Contra Bauckham, *The climax of prophecy*, 370-371; Giesen, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 398.

82 Aune, *Revelation 17-22*, 1173; Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 1097. Note however that Isa 23:17-18 might suggest a different scenario.

83 Giesen, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 472. Similarly Royalty (*The streets of heaven*, 233) writes that "it would have been clear to all that the wealth of the New Jerusalem, unlike that of Babylon, does not derive from commerce with kings and nations but is a pure inheritance for conquering, faithful Christians."

the New Jerusalem is a symbolic image, would it not be sensible to expect the same of the related image of trade with Babylon?

Another problem with identifying Rome as Revelation's Tyre-Babylon is that there are significantly better explanations for the contents of the list of merchandise in Rev 18. Not only are the wares "less suitable for Rome than for Asia Minor"<sup>84</sup>, but as Provan<sup>85</sup> shows, they can be explained fully from the passage's Old Testament background. While the list of Rev 18:12-13 is by no means identical to that in Ez 27, "[t]here *is* substantial overlap ... and where there is not, it is often possible to find another Old Testament passage which may explain the presence of an item in the list just as well, if not better, than its significance in first-century Rome."<sup>86</sup> One of the pertinent examples are the chariots or carriages which are mentioned in Rev 18:13 but not in Ez 27. They do however feature prominently "in another biblical passage which describes at some length the goods that flow into a centre of world power. I refer here to 1 Kings 4 – the description of Solomon's imperial glory centred in Jerusalem."<sup>87</sup> Provan then goes on to explain why these horses were inappropriate for an Israelite king and notes that it is Solomon "of all the royal figures of the Old Testament who is most associated with trade with Tyre"<sup>88</sup> (cf. 1 Ki 5!). Provan also observes that "Solomon is also a king very much associated with slaves, the commodity mentioned alongside horses and chariots at the end of John's list."<sup>89</sup>

The economic aspect of Revelation's Babylon builds entirely on the Old Testament background and it seems determined by a highly theological use of Ezekiel, 1 Kings and probably other passages that combine to form a coherent picture of idolatry which expresses itself in economic terms. This theological adaptation of the Old Testament shaped Revelation's Babylon significantly more strongly and clearly than the contemporary realities of Rome and its empire. This does not mean that in John's time the economic side of the Babylon image could not have served as a critique of Roman consumerism or of the merchants' readiness to sell their soul for money. However, any one such possible application of the image can hardly be seen as determining or exhausting it, unless an examination of both the Old Testament background and the references to the seven messages clearly suggest so<sup>90</sup>. The simple fact that Rome's luxuries, like that of any city in any place at any time, depended

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84 Johnson, *Revelation*, 172; referring to Lilje, *Das letzte Buch der Bibel*, 253.

85 Provan, "Foul spirits".

86 Provan, "Foul spirits," 87. Italics in original.

87 Provan, "Foul spirits," 87-88.

88 Provan, "Foul spirits," 88.

89 Provan, "Foul spirits," 88.

90 Cf. 6.1.4.14.

on merchants selling their exotic wares for quick monetary gain does in no way prove that Revelation's Babylon symbol refers exclusively to the city of Rome and the Roman empire. So far we have found no verification of this assumption.

#### 6.1.3.4 *Babylon and the kings of the earth*

But surely 17:18's claim that "[t]he woman you saw is the great city that rules over the kings of the earth", is proof that indeed Revelation's Babylon is Rome? Which other city could John possibly refer to? Giesen is certain that "[d]ie große Stadt ist ohne Zweifel Rom"<sup>91</sup>. Aune underlines this by claiming that "it was inevitable that the title, either implicitly or explicitly, would be applied to Rome. Rome was called *princeps urbium*, 'the greatest of cities' (Horace *Carm.* 4.3.13), and Aelius Aristides referred to her as ἡ μεγάλη πόλις, 'the great city' (*Or.* 26.3; cf. 26.9)."<sup>92</sup> And indeed, this is the best argument yet for a Roman Babylon.

However, there are some difficulties with this point as well. One problem is that the title "the great city" is applied to Jerusalem in 11:8<sup>93</sup>, thus showing that the link to Rome is not as evident as Aune and Giesen claim. This does not necessarily mean that Babylon is a symbol for Jerusalem, but it makes the identification with Rome somewhat tenuous.

Secondly, it needs to be remembered that Babylon (the great city) as well as the kings of the earth are symbols which are built on a historic reality, which already was history in John's time. Centuries before both Israel and Judah preferred an alliance with the dominant Assyrian or Babylonian empires over forceful integration into these empires. In those cases adultery language like that in Revelation 17 and 18 would not only make sense but was frequently applied by the prophets. In fact Revelation's images quite clearly build on these Old Testament examples. Ezekiel 23 is a particularly vivid description of Israel and Judah prostituting themselves to the powers of their time. Awareness of this background might even suggest Jerusalem rather than Rome as the entity behind Revelation's Babylon. It is Jerusalem, after all, which Ezekiel accuses of prostituting herself to Babylon.

In any case the image of "the great city that rules over the kings of the earth", first of all refers back to historical Babylon, just as does the prostitute which sits by many waters (17:1, see above). Babylon of old ruled over many "kings of the earth", Babylon enticed many of these into an alliance of often mutual benefit, usually including obligatory participation in religious syncretism. See for example Jer 3:6-10 which refers to the same period as Eze 23, but

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91 Giesen, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 386. Similarly Bousset, *Die Offenbarung Johannis*, 410.

92 Aune, *Revelation 17-22*, 959.

93 Aune, *Revelation 17-22*, 959.

emphasizes the idolatry involved: “she defiled the land and committed adultery with stone and wood” (Jer 3:9). For Judah, allegiance with Babylon meant idolatry and thus figuratively speaking adultery from their marriage with Yahweh.

Babylon as the archetypical incarnation of opposition to Yahweh then becomes a symbol of a new reality in John's day, and possibly even of similar realities beyond. Thus it is only in symbolic extension that Babylon may refer to the Roman empire where it happens to act similarly to the archetype. But the old archetype and the new reality would require unambiguous and unquestionable identification before the first can be seen as exclusively referring to the latter. This however is not the case for Revelation's Babylon and the Roman empire.

On the other hand, Revelation's Babylon is a highly powerful and thus influential entity and the kings of the earth represent not beggars and paupers but leaders of some status. This would fit the Roman empire and its client kings to a large degree. They, like Israel's and Judah's kings of old, preferred to remain in power, albeit under the empire's watchful eyes and with severely limited responsibilities, fraternizing with the imperial authorities and effectively submitting to imperial culture and religion<sup>94</sup>. The only flaw in identifying Revelation's “kings of the earth” with client kings in the Roman empire is that in first century Asia Minor there were no extant client kings. The last client king, Attalus III of Pergamum, had before 133 BC bequeathed his kingdom to the Romans<sup>95</sup> who “constituted it as *provincia Asia*”<sup>96</sup> which in John's day was governed by proconsul rather than anyone resembling a king<sup>97</sup>.

That the province “was essentially made up of many city states, some of which remained nominally free under Roman rule”<sup>98</sup>, means that Revelation's term could potentially refer to the local aristocracy which ruled local affairs under the imperial administration and may have similarly engaged in Roman customs and religion in the same way as Israel and Judah embraced Babylon's. Bauckham seems to argue for such a perspective when he suggests that the phrase “kings of the earth” refers “not just to the client kings who put their kingdoms under the umbrella of the Roman empire, but more generally to the local ruling classes whom throughout the empire Rome coopted to a share in her rule.”<sup>99</sup> However it would be very unlikely for the phrase “kings of the earth” to refer to “client kings who put their kingdoms

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94 Braund, “Client kings”.

95 Calder, “Asia, Roman province”.

96 Calder, “Asia, Roman province”. Italics in original.

97 Calder, “Asia, Roman province”.

98 “Asia” (*The Concise Oxford Companion to Classical Literature*).

99 Bauckham, *The climax of prophecy*, 372.

under the umbrella of the Roman empire” since in Asia Minor these kings were mere history for well over 200 years at the time Revelation was written.

Thus while the reference is nowhere as clear as is often claimed, Rev 17:18 could certainly fit the realities of the Roman empire. This is especially relevant since in contrast to the number of the beast or the seven hills it would be extremely difficult to construct any other point of reference in John's own time for the concept of a “great city ruling over the kings of the earth” other than Rome and the empire ruling over client kings or local aristocracy. This then may point to Rome being at least part of what Babylon stands for, although the image certainly cannot be limited to Rome, the city Peter most likely referred to when speaking of Babylon (1 Pet 5:13).

It has become evident that while significant parts of Revelation's Babylon image can be applied to Rome and its empire, there is no textual basis for *exclusively* identifying Babylon as Rome. Rather there are significant hints towards a wider scope of the symbol's relevance. It appears as though Revelation's Babylon represents a typos, a pattern or template. This typos has many aspects and to describe it Revelation thus draws on a number of sources: historical Babylon, Jerusalem, Tyre and possibly some other entities. Likewise its scope cannot be limited to one single entity such as the Roman empire or first century Judaism.

#### **6.1.4 Babylon and the seven messages**

I will now examine the connections of the Babylon image to the seven messages, thus putting my reading strategy to the test. Not surprisingly, particularly considering the breadth of issues touched on in the Babylon image, there are many things connecting Babylon to the seven messages and vice versa.

I list the links between the Babylon vision and the messages by theme, at the same time pointing to the implications of each link for the interpretation of the Babylon image. This list is by no means comprehensive, just as I cannot claim my list of issues raised in the seven messages to be complete. I do however endeavour to systematically find the majority of issues, looking at words common to both parts of Revelation as well as checking main themes (as I have identified them) for corresponding statements in the other part of the book respectively.

#### **6.1.4.1 The exhortation to repent**

Common to both the Babylon vision and the seven messages is the exhortation to repent. While the seven messages say so explicitly and frequently, often even using the imperative (2:5.16; 3:3.19; other verb forms in 2:21.22), there is only one explicit call to repentance in the Babylon vision, also using an imperative but not the word repent: ἐξέλθατε ... ἐξ αὐτῆς (“Come out of her,” 18:4). This exhortation to leave Babylon behind and all that it stands for is “patterned after the repeated exhortations of Isaiah and Jeremiah, especially Jer. 51:45: ‘Come forth from her midst, my people’ (cf. Also Isa. 48:20; 52:11; Jer. 50:8; 51:6).”<sup>100</sup>

Thomas points to the call to leave Sodom (cf. Rev 11:8!) which Lot received (Gen 19:12)<sup>101</sup> and indeed the parallels are striking. Lot is called to leave Sodom, to get his family out of the city, “because we are going to destroy this place. The outcry to the LORD against its people is so great that he has sent us to destroy it.” Likewise the repetition of the call in Gen 19:15 (“Hurry! Take your wife and your two daughters who are here, or you will be swept away when the city is punished.”) resounds in Rev 18:4: “Come out of her, my people ..., so that you will not receive any of her plagues” However while Lot's exodus was hardly a matter of repentance but rather of God keeping his promise to Abraham (cf. Gen 19:29)<sup>102</sup>, Rev 18:4 is a clear call for repentance. As such it serves as a reminder of the vision's parenetic purpose, thus underlining its relevance for the churches.

Johnson rightly points out that “like the warnings in the letters to the churches (chs. 2-3), it is addressed to professing Christians who were being seduced by Satan through the wiles of the queen prostitute to abandon their loyalty to Jesus.”<sup>103</sup> Osborne agrees that “the extent to which this command was addressed to the saints in the cities of Asia would indicate it was also meant to be taken spiritually.”<sup>104</sup> There is a clear link between the call to leave Babylon and the messages' exhortation to repent by leaving the seven churches' various temptations. This link suggests that Babylon the temptress might be an image for these temptations which the churches faced.

#### **6.1.4.2 Babylon as counter-image of the New Jerusalem**

The call to come out of Babylon (18:4) also serves to emphasize Babylon's function as the counter-image to the New Jerusalem. The overcomers in Philadelphia are told that they will

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100 Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 897-898.

101 Thomas, *Revelation 8-22*, 320. Similarly Kraft, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 228-229.

102 Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, 59-60.

103 Johnson, *Revelation*, 171.

104 Osborne, *Revelation*, 638.

never have to leave (ἐξέλθῃ, 3:12) the New Jerusalem (in 3:12 initially represented by its temple in which the overcomer becomes a pillar). Thus the call to repent, the exhortation to leave the old and doomed city of sin, is directly connected to the consequences of heeding the call, namely a permanent home in the new city of God. Not only do those who leave Babylon escape being caught up in her fate (“so that you will not receive any of her plagues”, 18:4), but through the reference to the Philadelphian promise to the overcomer it becomes obvious that the opposite waits for them instead.

This contrast is enforced by the description in 3:12 of the New Jerusalem as “the city of my God, the New Jerusalem, which is coming down out of heaven from my God” (cf. 21:2). That Babylon's relationship with heaven is not as her origin but as the place from which her doom is announced (18:1.4), only underlines the chasm between the two cities.

Note also how the Philadelphian overcomers are promised to never leave the temple whereas Babylon shall never see the light again (18:21-23)<sup>105</sup>. Overcoming as prerequisite for entering the New Jerusalem is not compatible with association with Babylon.

#### **6.1.4.3 *Evil spirits and God's Spirit***

The contrast between the church and Babylon is also pointed to in 18:2. There the angel who had come down from heaven (18:1) declares Babylon to have “become a home for demons and a haunt for every evil spirit”. This probably refers to the three evil spirits of 16:13.14<sup>106</sup>, celebrating their demise with Babylon. But what a stark contrast to the seven spirits (or sevenfold Spirit) of God who appear in the introduction (1:4), in the throne-room scene (4:5; 5:6) and in the message to Sardis (3:1: “These are the words of him who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars.”)! While the seven spirits of God display his glory and serve God's honour and majesty, the evil spirits look like frogs (16:13) and haunt fallen Babylon, thus further emphasizing her downfall.

#### **6.1.4.4 *Babylon's “throne”***

That Babylon is but a shadow, in no way comparable to God and his new city, also becomes evident in the promise to the overcomers in another church. The Laodicean overcomers are promised to sit with Jesus on his throne “just as I overcame and sat down with my Father on his throne” (3:21; cf. 5:6; 7:17; 22:1.3). Babylon too boasts of sitting “as queen” (18:7), but, as John has observed before, she does not sit on anything resembling a throne. She sits on the

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<sup>105</sup> Osborne, *Revelation*, 197, n 32.

<sup>106</sup> Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 894; Thomas, *Revelation 8-22*, 317.

beast (17:3.7), on its heads (the seven hills, 17:9) and on many waters (17:1, “peoples, multitudes, nations and languages”, 17:15). While these may temporarily give her an elevated status, the beast will turn against her to destroy her (17:16), the waters swallow the millstone that symbolizes her downfall (18:21). Her self-declaration as incontestable queen is thus revealed to be self-deceptive (18:8). Her followers therefore are being deceived as well and need to turn from her and seek him who truly reigns. This in turn sheds light on the real (lack of) authority of the throne of Satan in Pergamum (2:13). Just as Babylon's seat of power is fragile, temporary and ultimately even the means of her demise, so the satanic throne in Pergamum (2:13) is defeated and is thus ultimately powerless against Christ and his faithful witnesses (17:14).

#### **6.1.4.5 *Sharing in Babylon's plagues***

The call to leave Babylon is also linked to the promise to the overcomers in Pergamum. While 18:4 implies that those who do not leave Babylon will *receive* of her plagues (cf. *Ex* 7-12), 2:17 in contrast promises that the overcomers will *receive* of “the hidden manna” (cf. *Ex* 16; *Jn* 6), symbolic of true spiritual food, and a white stone with a new name, most likely symbolic of a renewed, holy and blameless identity<sup>107</sup>.

#### **6.1.4.6 *Exotic delicacies and true bread***

The “hidden manna” of 2:17 contrasts with the food in the merchant's portfolio (18:13). At first glance wine and olive oil, fine flour and wheat may sound much more enticing than manna. Within the symbolic horizon of these visions however it becomes obvious that the merchant's delicacies are nowhere near as valuable as the *hidden* manna, the manna which is not available to everyone, but only to those who believe<sup>108</sup>.

#### **6.1.4.7 *Spiritual nakedness***

In a similar contrast, 17:16 parodies Babylon's adulterous impurity by using an image that also features strongly in the seven messages (and in 16:15): In her demise Babylon will be left naked, her shame exposed. The same fate awaits the Laodiceans who are unaware of their spiritual nakedness (3:17). They are therefore called to repent and to “buy” from Christ “white clothes to wear, so that you can cover your shameful nakedness” (3:18). White clothes, however, are also promised to the overcomers in Sardis (3:5), to those who did not defile their clothes and are therefore worthy to walk with Christ in pure white (3:4).

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<sup>107</sup> Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 254; Johnson, *Revelation*, 46.

<sup>108</sup> Cf. *John* 6:31-33 (the true bread – manna – from heaven).



#### 6.1.4.8 *The book of life*

Also in the promise to the Sardian overcomers (3:5), Christ speaks of their names remaining in the book of life. This provides a stark contrast between the overcomers and the inhabitants of the earth who not only “were intoxicated with the wine of her adulteries” (17:2), but who will also find that their “names have not been written in the book of life from the creation of the world” (17:8). Once again the link between the seven messages and the Babylon vision serves to underline the latter's parenetic relevance.

While some scholars<sup>109</sup> mention 3:5 as one point of reference for 17:8's occurrence of the book of life, the vast majority, however, only point to the parallel in 13:8 at the most<sup>110</sup>. Giesen appears to be the only one who actually makes use of this link. He writes:

Das Fehlen der Namen im “Buch des Lebens” seit der Erschaffung der Welt bedeutet keineswegs eine strenge Prädestination, die es ausschließt, von einer realen Möglichkeit der Umkehr zu sprechen (gg. Risse, Hure 59), wie umgekehrt der Name aus dem Buch des Lebens ausgelöscht werden kann (3,5).<sup>111</sup>

#### 6.1.4.9 *The inhabitants of the earth*

The inhabitants of the earth are even explicitly referred to in the message to Philadelphia. There (3:10) Christ announces that the faithful will be spared from “the hour of trial that is going to come upon the whole world to test the inhabitants the earth.” This enforces the point that it is highly undesirable to be counted among this group of Babylon's associates which earlier in Revelation's body have been not only identified as opponents of God and his chosen (6:10; 8:13; 11:10)<sup>112</sup>, but also explicitly linked to the beast (13:8.12.14)<sup>113</sup>. The inhabitants of the earth are one of Revelation's consistent images for a humanity which has been tragically deceived into serving the wrong masters (13:14)<sup>114</sup>. Pattemore notes that “the phrase becomes a standard way of describing humanity which refuses to recognize God and the Lamb.”<sup>115</sup> This is emphasized when in 12:9 Satan is identified as this wrong master by being labelled as “deceiver of the whole world”<sup>116</sup>.

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<sup>109</sup> Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 866; Giesen, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 376; Osborne, *Revelation*, 616; Smalley, *The Revelation to John*, 435.

<sup>110</sup> E.g. Aune, *Revelation 17-22*, 940.

<sup>111</sup> Giesen, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 376.

<sup>112</sup> Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 240; Smalley, *The Revelation to John*, 434-435.

For further discussion on 6:10 and 8:13 see below in 6.2.10.

<sup>113</sup> Giesen, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 307; Thomas, *Revelation 8-22*, 164.

<sup>114</sup> Osborne, *Revelation*, 514; Thomas, *Revelation 8-22*, 176.

<sup>115</sup> Pattemore, *The People of God in the Apocalypse*, 86.

<sup>116</sup> Aune, *Revelation 6-16*, 760; Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 710; Giesen, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 312.

#### 6.1.4.10 *One hour of trial*

It is not unlikely that the hour of trial (3:10) which will test the inhabitants of the earth is the “one hour” in which all of Babylon's glory is brought to ruin (18:10.17.19)<sup>117</sup>. Similar links can be established to 9:15<sup>118</sup> (“the four angels who had been kept ready for this very *hour* and day and month and year were released to kill a third of mankind”), 11:13 (“At that very *hour* there was a severe earthquake ... the survivors were terrified and gave glory to the God of heaven.”), 14:7 (“Fear God and give him glory, because the *hour* of his judgment has come.”) and 14:15 (“Take your sickle and reap, because the *hour* to reap has come, for the harvest of the earth is ripe.”). All these occurrences of hours of divine judgement serve to underline the gravity of the hour of trial of 3:10. This hour brings the destruction of everyone and everything which opposes God and it even brings about the demise of mighty Babylon. It is, therefore, not to be underestimated.

The mentioning of the hour of trial in 3:10, on the other hand, anchors the visions of the hour of God's judgement in the reality of the churches. And it points out that this destruction is not the unavoidable fate of humanity as a whole. Those who hold Christ's word of endurance, those who remain faithful to him will also be held from this hour of trial. As 3:3 notes, however, it will come unexpectedly, not to be foreseen. It is thus paramount not to delay a life of faithfulness, but to repent immediately and to turn to Christ in faith without delay. Otherwise the unrepentant inhabitants of the earth will go down with Babylon, will share in the fall of her who corrupted the earth (19:2) and those who live on it (17:2).

There appears to be a link between the “one hour” of 18:10.17.19 (“Woe! Woe, O great city, O Babylon, city of power! In one hour your doom has come!”) and the “little while” that the eighth king remains (17:10)<sup>119</sup> which in turn appears to have direct links with 12:12 (“He [the devil] is filled with fury, because he knows that *his time is short*.”)<sup>120</sup> and 20:3 (“He threw him [Satan] into the Abyss, and locked and sealed it over him, to keep him from deceiving the nations any more until the thousand years were ended. After that, he must be set free for *a short time*.”). This connection between 18:10.17.19 and 17:10 is supported by the fact that this eighth king is the beast (17:11) which brings about the demise of Babylon (17:16). The one hour in which this fall of Babylon occurs appears to be the *little* while for which the beast will remain. That the ten kings along with the beast receive authority as kings *for one hour* (17:12)

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117 Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 290.292.

See also 18:8 (“in one day”) which refers to the same events (Johnson, *Revelation*, 171).

118 Contra Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 240.

119 Aune, *Revelation 17-22*, 997-998; Osborne, *Revelation*, 622.

120 Thomas, *Revelation 8-22*, 299.

underlines this understanding<sup>121</sup> and at the same time emphasizes that their authority is limited. That their authority is limited and that it has been temporarily granted by a significantly higher authority points to the fact that someone else is ultimately in control. That both the beast and its ten kings can only do what God has allowed them, that they thus are subject to his authority leaves them as mere puppets in God's judgment (17:17)<sup>122</sup>. It also explains how, despite Babylon being brought down by the beast and his followers, still Christ is the one who announces the hour of trial (3:10), still God is the one who receives worship for bringing about the fall of Babylon (18:20; 19:1-3).

Although in 17:12 the emphasis of “one hour” is on the limited time, the “little while” (17:10), for which the beast and its kings are in power, does not require that the meaning of the “one hour” of 18:10.17.19 be limited to this aspect. Rather in those instances the emphasis is on the aspect of unexpected suddenness<sup>123</sup>. Aune explains that “[t]he phrase is a figure of speech for an unexpectedly quick destruction”<sup>124</sup>. The “hours” in 9:15, 11:13 and 14:7.15 on the other hand emphasize the fact that the specific time for the events was appointed by God<sup>125</sup>, an idea that also underlies the word's use in 3:10 as well as in chs 17 and 18.

#### **6.1.4.11 The church and God's judgment**

That the hour of judgment was appointed by God is underlined in the message to Thyatira (2:23). There the announcement of God's judgment of Jezebel and her followers (“children”) is followed by the declaration that as a consequence of this judgment “all the churches will know that I am he who searches hearts and minds, and I will repay each of you according to your deeds.” The announcement of God's dealing with Jezebel and her followers thus serves to alert the other churches to the reality of God's judgment as a reality not only for the world but for the unfaithful church as well. This underlines the messages' overall parenetic outlook, especially at this central position within the corpus of the seven messages (cf. p. 119, 4.1).

The fulfillment of this announcement is described in parts of the Babylon vision. In both 18:20 and in 19:1-4 the church, represented by “saints and apostles and prophets” (18:20), a “a great multitude in heaven” (19:1-3) and “the twenty-four elders” (19:4), has indeed come to realize and therefore know that God's judgments are “true and just” (19:2), that he “has judged her for the way she treated you” (18:20). There is no indication in these passages by

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121 Johnson, *Revelation*, 164.166.

122 Aune, *Revelation 17-22*, 951-952.

123 Aune, *Revelation 17-22*, 952; Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 907-908; Giesen, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 397.399; Osborne, *Revelation*, 622.652; Thomas, *Revelation 8-22*, 329.

124 Aune, *Revelation 17-22*, 998. Similarly Osborne, *Revelation*, 622 (“virtually instantaneous”).

125 Aune, *Revelation 17-22*, 952.

themselves that the unfaithful church is included in the judgment, however this is the very contribution of 2:23 to this celebration of Babylon's demise: the acknowledgement that Babylon is not just the pagan society but the unfaithful church as well.

Another aspect that strongly connects 2:23 to God's judgment of Babylon (as well as all of humanity: 20:12.13)<sup>126</sup> is the emphasis on deeds being the basis for judgment. While deeds play an important part in the evaluation of each church (cf. 2.4.2 and 4.2.3), it is in 2:23 that they are explicitly linked to God's judgment. In the Babylon image this reciprocity between deeds and judgment (“lex talionis”) is evident mainly in 18:6-8 (V 6: “Give back to her as she has given; pay her back double for what she has done. Mix her a double portion from her own cup.”)<sup>127</sup> and 18:20 (cf. above)<sup>128</sup>. Again the link serves to emphasize the consequences of both faithfulness and rebellion against God.

#### **6.1.4.12 *Babylon's satanic and corrupting influence***

That Babylon's influence corrupted both the earth and those who live on it (18:3; 19:2) may reflect the identification of Pergamum as the place where Satan lives (2:13). As Babylon rules over the kings of the earth (17:18) and intoxicates its inhabitants (17:2), so Satan corrupts both the ruling aristocracy in Pergamum and the town's citizens, particularly so the Jews (cf. 2.2.3). As Satan actively opposes the church in Pergamum, so Babylon persecutes and murders “those who bore testimony to Jesus” (17:6). To the church in Pergamum at the very least, Babylon is, in part if not completely, an image for “their” Satan, whichever concrete reality in Pergamum earned itself this designation as satanic (cf. 2.2.3).

#### **6.1.4.13 *Persecution of the faithful***

The seven messages explicitly link the person of Satan with the persecution of Christians (cf. 2.2.3). As I have argued, persecution is a very real and important theme in the seven messages (cf. 4.2.3). It is also one of the three major themes of the Babylon vision. John describes the woman on the beast as “drunk with the blood of the saints, the blood of those who bore testimony to Jesus” (17:6)<sup>129</sup>. Similarly the angel who throws a millstone into the sea in an analogy to Babylon's downfall (18:21) proclaims that in the great city “was found the blood of prophets and of the saints, and of all who have been killed on the earth” (18:24)<sup>130</sup>. This comes

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126 Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 206.993; Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 89, n 27; Osborne, *Revelation*, 161-162.

127 Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 206.993; Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 89, n 27; Osborne, *Revelation*, 161-162.641.655; Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 224; Thomas, *Revelation 8-22*, 324.

128 Osborne, *Revelation*, 655.

129 Aune, *Revelation 17-22*, 937-938; Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 860-861; Johnson, *Revelation*, 161; Smalley, *The Revelation to John*, 432.

130 Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 923-924; Johnson, *Revelation*, 172-173; Osborne, *Revelation*, 658-659.

after 18:20 where the saints, apostles and prophets are called to rejoice because “God has judged her for the way she treated you,”<sup>131</sup> implying that they suffered persecution from Babylon<sup>132</sup>. Effectively responding to this call to rejoice, the great multitude of 19:1 praises God for his judgment over Babylon (19:2): “He has avenged on her the blood of his servants.”<sup>133</sup> There can be no doubt that Babylon is accused of persecuting the faithful, that she is responsible for the murderous death of the saints.

The witness motive provides a particularly important illustration of Babylonian persecution and its parenetic implications. Both the seven messages and the Babylon vision (as well as the rest of Revelation's body) link faithful witness with the giving up of one's life (cf. 2.5). The messages and the Babylon vision are clear in both the expectation that faithful witness will draw after it persecution even to the point of death and in the implicit or even explicit exhortation to maintain faithful witness despite this threat.

The theme of Babylon's persecution of the faithful corresponds with the announcement to the church in Smyrna that the devil will throw some of them into prison and the exhortation to remain faithful in their suffering (2:10). Apparently the church in Pergamum had already suffered a similar fate (2:13). Again the link to Satan as instigator of persecution is clear: Antipas, the faithful witness, was killed “where Satan lives.”

This indicates that Babylon is at least of satanic origin, if not an incarnation of Satan himself. Babylon ultimately proves to be satanic through her general opposition to God, particularly however, in her persecution of the followers of the Lamb. It is Satan who desires the destruction of the church and he attempts it, among other things, with violence. Thus Babylon “is drunk” with blood, the blood of those who maintained their faithful witness (17:6).

The occurrence of the satanic persecution theme in the Babylon vision has further implications when considering how the messages link satanic persecution with the pseudo-Jews (cf. 2.2.3). This could well point to the likelihood of Christians in Smyrna and Philadelphia interpreting Babylon as an image for the “synagogues of Satan” (2:9; 3:9) with which they are faced. The interpretative results of reading (parts of) Revelation's Babylon as a symbol for the Jewish instigated persecution of Christians are twofold in that they concern the interpretation of both the Babylon vision and the messages to Smyrna and Philadelphia. The

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131 Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 916.

Cf. 18:6: “Give back to her as she has given; pay her back double for what she has done. Mix her a double portion from her own cup.”

132 Osborne, *Revelation*, 655.

133 Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 927-928; Smalley, *The Revelation to John*, 478.

threat is not of Roman origin but rather Jewish, although, as Duff points out, in Smyrna “the threat comes from either civic or imperial forces”<sup>134</sup>, “because the threat involves the reference to prison.”<sup>135</sup> Yet this “official” hostility most likely results from Jewish accusations, and Duff’s rejection of any hostility between the churches (particularly in Smyrna and Philadelphia) and the non-Christian Jews is another unconvincing attempt to restrict Revelation to internal matters of the churches<sup>136</sup>.

The Babylon vision more than illustrates the messages to Smyrna and Philadelphia, it gives them a new dimension of depth and enhances their ultimate eschatological perspective. It clarifies that suffering in persecution is an unavoidable reality of Christian existence in this world which is dominated by Babylon and the beast and that this will not change until Babylon’s eschatological fall. But it also emphasizes that God will finally bring about justice, that Babylon will receive what she has earned through her opposition not only to God himself but to his people. But God’s justice does not only pay the persecutors what they deserve, it also vindicates the victims of that persecution. God – and nobody else – avenges the suffering which his faithful ones had to endure, exactly as Paul implies when he quotes from Dt 32 in Rom 12:19: “Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written: ‘It is mine to avenge; I will repay,’ says the Lord.” The vision of Babylon’s demise thus underlines that the faithful response to persecution is not forceful defense or even retaliation, but faithful witness in suffering. This is how the Christians in Smyrna and Philadelphia had been practicing their faith in the past and it is how they (and along with them the Christians in the other churches) are exhorted to keep practicing it in the future when they may face even more severe suffering.

The messages to Smyrna and Philadelphia in turn determine and define the focus of the related parts of the Babylon vision. A reading that sees Babylon serving as an image for the “synagogues of Satan” (2:9; 3:9), for the reality of persecution in these cities, provides a good explanation for the references that link Babylon to Jerusalem in the account of the two witnesses (11:7-8: “the beast ... will attack them, and overpower and kill them. Their bodies will lie in the street of the great city ... where also their Lord was crucified”<sup>137</sup>) and in the Babylon vision. As I have mentioned before (6.1.2) Vos<sup>138</sup> points out that in both Matthew 23 and Luke 11 Jesus lays a charge against Jerusalem that is very similar to what the angel says

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134 Duff, *Who rides the beast?*, 43.

135 Duff, *Who rides the beast?*, 147, endnote 38 (referring to p. 43).

136 Duff, *Who rides the beast?*, 49-51.

137 Cf. 6.1.2

138 Vos, *The synoptic traditions in the Apocalypse*, 162.

about Babylon in 18:24 (“In her was found the blood of prophets and of the saints, and of all who have been killed on the earth.”). Luke 11 needs to be quoted at some length:

Woe to you, because you build tombs for the prophets, and it was your forefathers who killed them. So you testify that you approve of what your forefathers did; they killed the prophets, and you build their tombs. Because of this, God in his wisdom said, “I will send them prophets and apostles, some of whom they will kill and others they will persecute.” Therefore this generation will be held responsible for the blood of all the prophets that has been shed since the beginning of the world, from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah, who was killed between the altar and the sanctuary. Yes, I tell you, this generation will be held responsible for it all.<sup>139</sup>

I suggest that the persecution in Smyrna and Philadelphia which was instigated by Jews is probably behind those parts of the Babylon image that link it to Jerusalem. This also is in accord with the observation that the beast's blasphemous nature (13:1.5.6; 17:3) is mirrored in the seven messages only by the blasphemy of the Smyrnan synagogue of Satan (2:9)<sup>140</sup>.

Rome looms in the background since the persecution was executed by the Roman authorities, but Revelation's interest, it seems, is with those who instigate the suffering of the faithful by denouncing them to the authorities. Those “who say they are Jews and are not” (2:9) are responsible for the death of the saints, they are charged with murdering the prophets. This does not mean that Revelation is indifferent to the Roman empire and its role in the Christians' suffering but it sees the source of the violence against the faithful somewhere else.

The parenetic purpose of the persecution theme in the Babylon image is clarified by the link to the only two churches in which nothing needs to be corrected. Faithful witness even to the point of death meets Christ's unconditional approval. God will ultimately vindicate those who suffer for his name's sake, but for now they are to suffer, they are to live distinct lives of witness even if this most likely leads to their death. And it reminds those Christians who do not suffer persecution that what is demanded of them as acts of faithfulness in their unchallenged environments is not demanding very much at all.

#### **6.1.4.14 *Commercial aspects of the Babylon image***

The issue of commerce is another major part of the Babylon image. However the commercial aspect of Revelation's Babylon draws neither from the image of historic Babylon nor from that of Jerusalem, but from the image of a third city which much more than Jerusalem or even

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139 Lk 11:47-51.

140 Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 241; Giesen, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 108; Osborne, *Revelation*, 131.

Babylon was known for its trade with suppliers and customers from around the known world, the Phoenician city of Tyre. Bauckham writes:

If Rome [for which Bauckham considers Revelation's Babylon to be a cipher] was the heir of Babylon [of old] in political and religious activity, she was also the heir of Tyre in economic activity. For Tyre was the greatest trading centre of the Old Testament period, notable not, like Babylon, for her political empire, but for her economic empire.<sup>141</sup>

As I have noted before, Revelation's Babylon draws heavily on the lament over Tyre from Ezekiel 27 (cf. 6.1.3.3). Also, as Beale points out<sup>142</sup>, Isa 23, another passage about the wealth and demise of Tyre, provides a likewise important OT reference. A similar albeit significantly shorter reference to Tyre can also be found in Zech 9:1-6. Historic Babylon cannot provide the symbolic language for what Rev 18 seeks to convey, at least not to the degree required. Thus, although it is not explicitly named, Tyre becomes the archetypal model for one of Babylon's main aspects as Revelation presents this. This underlines my earlier observation that Revelation deals with a broad set of issues, so broad in fact that recourse to a number of archetypes becomes necessary. Ancient Babylon in all its strength as a symbol of political, cultural, religious and commercial importance will not suffice as one singular overarching symbol without being complemented by both Jerusalem (cf. 6.1.4.13) and Tyre.

Babylon alias Tyre, like Babylon alias Jerusalem, has a clear counterpart in the seven messages. Laodicea's reliance on wealth and worldly riches corresponds directly with the merchants of Rev 18<sup>143</sup>. The worldly possessions of the Christians in Laodicea not only make them blind to their spiritual poverty but also give them a false sense of security. "I lack nothing" (3:17) has become their credo. Not only does this remark bear a striking resemblance to Babylon's defiant stubbornness in the face of her demise, as evident in 18:7 ("I sit as queen; I am not a widow, and I will never mourn."), it also foretells the rudeness of their awakening which will match that of the merchants at Babylon's fall. The merchants' lament is ultimately not for Babylon but for their own wealth which they lost through Babylon's destruction: "Die Großhändler sind entsetzt darüber, daß sie nach der Zerstörung der Stadt niemanden finden, der ihnen die Fracht abkauft. Darin liegt der eigentliche Grund ihrer Klage."<sup>144</sup> Aune agrees: "The reason for the weeping and wailing of the merchants is not pity for the fate of Babylon but the self-pity of those who have lost their best customer."<sup>145</sup> Their affluence depended on

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141 Bauckham, *The climax of prophecy*, 346.

142 Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 758.849.850.885.895.921.

143 Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 304-305.

144 Giesen, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 398. Similarly Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 909.914; Osborne, *Revelation*, 647; Smalley, *The Revelation to John*, 453.

145 Aune, *Revelation 17-22*, 998.



Babylon's ability to buy their wares. With this basis of their wealth gone, they find themselves “wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked” (3:17). Thomas notes the irony of their inability to trade by pointing out that “these merchants belonged to a system that denied the right to buy or sell to anyone who refused to accept the mark of the beast (13:17). Now the merchants themselves are denied that right to buy”<sup>146</sup>.

Note also the contrasting situation of the church in Smyrna (2:9). The Christians in that city are told that Christ is well aware of their material poverty. Spiritually, however, they are rich, their witness is alive and active, they are not wretched, but can expect to wear “the crown of life” (2:10). This situation is the exact opposite of Laodicea<sup>147</sup>. It is perhaps relevant that the cause of Smyrna's material poverty may be the persecution the church suffered. This would mean that the Laodiceans in their unfaithfulness in fact entered into a pact with the same force that caused the persecution of the faithful ones in Smyrna and Philadelphia.

The thematic links between the message to Laodicea and Rev 18:11-19 constitute an interpretative dependency which demands that the merchant's lament of Rev 18 be consequently interpreted as a divine commentary on the Laodicean problem. The interpretative dependency is in fact an interdependency. The message to the church in Laodicea gains depth when read in light of the merchant's lament. For 3:17-18, the Babylon image provides ample illustration of the despair and loss which is the ultimate consequence of the Laodicean's attitude to material things, to money in particular. It suggests that when Babylon falls the consequences of their spiritual poverty will become obvious, their nakedness will be on public display (3:18). It also suggests that the Laodicean's wealth is actually acquired by compromising their faith for the sake of economic gain. It is the merchants' goods which adorn Babylon in her fake majesty (purple, scarlet, gold, precious stones, pearls; 18:12 and 17:4; 18:16)<sup>148</sup>. While the merchants are never directly accused of adultery with Babylon, their commercial involvement with her is in fact an act of unfaithfulness towards God and thus identified as metaphorical, spiritual adultery. As this illustrates the realities in Laodicea, the term “nakedness” (3:18: γυμνότης; note that the adjective γυμνός is used in both 3:17 and 17:16) with its implications of adultery and its consequences (17:16) is even less surprising.

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146 Thomas, *Revelation* 8-22, 330.

147 Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 305.

148 Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 909. Similarly Osborne, *Revelation*, 648; Smalley, *The Revelation to John*, 430.454; Thomas, *Revelation* 8-22, 338.

As for the merchant's lament, the link to the message to Laodicea has more far-reaching implications. As a divine commentary on the Laodicean problem the Tyre-part of Revelation's Babylon vision first and foremost needs to be read and interpreted not in the context of any of the possible greater contemporary issues of trade and wealth, but in the context of Christ's diagnosis of the situation of the church in Laodicea.

So what exactly is the problem in Laodicea? And what does that consequently mean for an intra-textual reading of Tyre-Babylon? As I have pointed out in 4.2.3 the church in Laodicea is rather wealthy. Lack of financial resources is not a concern for the local Christians. However this financial strength seems to have provoked spiritual complacency<sup>149</sup>, which in turn compromised the church's witness. In no way is their life different from that of their pagan neighbours<sup>150</sup>. So while they are financially rich they are spiritually poor<sup>151</sup>. It is not entirely impossible that the Balaamite teaching of Jezebel also played a role in Laodicea as well, particularly so when considering that the original Old Testament figure Jezebel, wife of Israel's king Ahab, hailed from Tyre<sup>152</sup> (1 Ki 16:31<sup>153</sup>). However this is not the focus of Christ's advice to that church. While rationalizing participation in the pleasures of pagan society would indeed have severely limited the church's witness (cf. 6.1.4.15), this is not the main problem in Laodicea. Rather the problem lay in the local Christians' submission to the general human tendency towards acquiring money. Financial gain has become more important than faithfulness in life and witness for Christ.

In a footnote Vos rightly draws the connection from Laodicea to Jesus' remarks to the same effect in the synoptic Gospels<sup>154</sup>. In Mt 6:24 and Lk 16:13 Jesus states that "No servant can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon." Obviously the Laodiceans attempt just that and need to be told that ultimately this attempt means a decision for money and consequently against Christ. Even closer to Revelation's line of argument is the "parable of the rich fool" in Luke 12<sup>155</sup>. There Jesus points to the perishable nature of material wealth and its uselessness when faced with the eternal God. Thus in light of Revelation's

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149 Osborne, *Revelation*, 206.

150 Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 305.

151 Smalley, *The Revelation to John*, 98-99.

152 Stieglitz, "Tyre," 1342.

153 While in 1 Ki 16:31 Jezebel is described as "daughter of Ethbaal king of the Sidonians", Viviano ("Ethbaal," 645), explains that Ethbaal was "King of Tyre, ... After the kingdom of Tyre had grown to include the port city of Sidon, Sidon became a general name for the people of the area, hence the designation 'king of the Sidonians' in the biblical text."

154 Vos, *The synoptic traditions in the Apocalypse*, 193, n 391.

155 Smalley, *The Revelation to John*, 99.

expectation of the imminent parousia, the Christians in Laodicea are reminded that their wealth may well be an impediment to being ready for Christ's arrival. It may even deafen their ears to hear his knock on their door when he comes to commune with them (3:20).

Also referring to Luke 12 Mounce writes: "Like the farmer in Jesus' parable ... the Laodiceans felt they were secure in their spiritual attainment."<sup>156</sup> He seems to think along similar lines as Aune who writes that "[t]he claim that they are rich indicates pride in the possession of salvation"<sup>157</sup>. Likewise Thomas claims that the reference to spiritual poverty demands that the Laodiceans saw themselves primarily as spiritually rich<sup>158</sup>. However this is somewhat arbitrary and has no evidence in the text. As in Smyrna (2:9) the contrast is between material wealth or lack thereof on the one hand and spiritual wealth or poverty on the other hand. This does not exclude the possibility of the Laodiceans considering themselves rich in both material and spiritual terms, but their supposed wealth cannot be spiritual only. Rather, it appears, the Laodiceans saw in their material affluence a sign of spiritual wealth<sup>159</sup>. Giesen thus comments: "Dabei dürfte ... ein Zusammenhang zwischen wirtschaftlichem Wohlergehen und religiöser Selbstgewißheit im Blick sein."<sup>160</sup>

That the problem behind the Laodicean church's lack of witness lay in its self-deceptive reliance on material wealth is underlined by at least two of the Old Testament prophecies about Tyre which form the background to the merchant's lament of Rev 18. Both Isa 23 and Ez 26-28 give one main reason for God's judgment of the city: "economic self-idolatry"<sup>161</sup>. In Ez 28:2-9 we find a good summary of what Tyre is accused of:

In the pride of your heart you say, "I am a god; I sit on the throne of a god in the heart of the seas." ... By your wisdom and understanding you have gained wealth for yourself and amassed gold and silver in your treasuries. By your great skill in trading you have increased your wealth, and because of your wealth your heart has grown proud. Therefore this is what the Sovereign LORD says: Because you think you are wise, as wise as a god, I am going to bring foreigners against you, the most ruthless of nations; they will draw their swords against your beauty and wisdom and pierce your shining splendour. They will bring you down to the pit, and you will die a violent death in the heart of the seas. Will you then say, "I am a god," in the presence of those who kill you? You will be but a man, not a god, in the hands of those who slay you.

This is strong testimony of pride in the material results of human cleverness which leads to complacent and ultimately idolatrous self-reliance. The parallel to Solomon is clear: like Tyre,

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156 Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 110.

157 Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 259.

158 Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 310.

159 Johnson, *Revelation*, 62; Osborne, *Revelation*, 206.

160 Giesen, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 141.

161 Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 921. Similarly Osborne, *Revelation*, 658.

supreme wisdom and unprecedented wealth lead him into complacency and idolatrous self-reliance (1 Kings 11). This parallel supports Provan's suggestion that the Solomon accounts complement Tyre in the list of the merchant's goods in Rev 18:12-13<sup>162</sup>.

Beale points to “the parallel of Hos. 12:8 with Rev. 3:17”<sup>163</sup>, which hints at some degree of unfair trade in Laodicea. In Hos 12:8 Israel boasts his wealth (“I am very rich; I have become wealthy. With all my wealth they will not find in me any iniquity or sin.”) which in the preceding verse (Hos 12:7) has been identified as the result of fraudulent trade: “The merchant uses dishonest scales; he loves to defraud.” Consequently the prophet's reply is rather sharp (Hos 12:14)<sup>164</sup>: “Ephraim has bitterly provoked him to anger; his Lord will ... repay him for his contempt.”

Likewise in Ezekiel's prophecy against Tyre, when in Ez 28:18 the following accusation is raised against the city: “By your many sins and dishonest trade you have desecrated your sanctuaries.” But the preceding verse (Ez 28:17) tells of the cause of these sins, the source of Tyre's corruption: “Your heart became proud on account of your beauty, and you corrupted your wisdom because of your splendour.” It is necessary to quote Provan at some length when he writes about the general prophetic criticism against Tyre, Solomon and ultimately Revelation's Babylon. He states that this

general criticism is much more about religion than it is about economics; or to put it another way, economic sins are only ever a function of idolatry, so far as the Old Testament is concerned, and it is on the idolatry that the emphasis falls, rather than upon the economics.

The stereotypical world ruler of the Old Testament is one who has arrogated to himself the prerogatives of divinity, and think of himself as a god. The claim to be the provider of prosperity and good to the peoples of the empire is one aspect of his hubris and descriptions of things economic are important, not in themselves, but for what they have to say about the idolatry.<sup>165</sup>

The situation is similar in Isa 23:15-18 where Tyre is called a prostitute (NIV). She is accused of “selling herself to the highest bidder, doing anything with anyone – promiscuous with all the kingdoms of earth – for a fee.”<sup>166</sup> Again the problem is not her trade as such, but the fact of her pride (Isa 23:7.9) and the fact that she traded not to honour God and to do good to his people (Isa 23:18, cf. Rev 20:24.26) but to nourish her own pride. In her wealth Tyre has

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162 Provan, “Foul spirits,” 88. Cf. 6.1.3.3.

163 Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 304. Similarly Smalley, *The Revelation to John*, 99.

164 Smalley, *The Revelation to John*, 99.

165 Provan, “Foul spirits,” 88-89.

166 Isa 23:17 (The Message).

become complacent. In this, as well as in her downfall, she becomes a model for Revelation's Babylon and for the reality of the church in Laodicea. Note in particular the parallel between Isa 23:4 ("I have neither been in labour nor given birth; I have neither reared sons nor brought up daughters.") and Rev 18:7 ("I sit as queen; I am not a widow, and I will never mourn."). Revelation's Babylon chooses to boast, ignoring the reality which is ascribed to Tyre and which will hit Revelation's Babylon as well.

I suggest then that the problem in Laodicea as well as in Tyre is not their wealth as such, nor even the means by which they became wealthy, despicable as these may or may not be, but the attitude behind their economic endeavours, ultimately a spiritual attitude of idolatry<sup>167</sup>. Thomas comments on the merchants: "They had made money their God, using unscrupulous means to accumulate material goods and placing their whole confidence on this centre of commerce."<sup>168</sup> Where they should have sought to faithfully witness to Christ and to use their wealth to honour him, the Laodicean Christians indulged in idolatrous self-reliance, in proud money-worship. The commercial aspect of Revelation's Babylon deals with the very same issues. Its symbols do not primarily refer to some imperial injustice, to the empire's exploitative economic system or to a perceived incompatibility of global trade with the Christian faith, but to the basic human desire for wealth, for material gain as the means to self-gratification and self-sufficiency. The primary focus of Rev 18 is on reminding everyday Christians that they can only serve one master: Mammon as a symbol for idolatrous self-reliance and self-gratification or Christ who indeed demands willingness to self-denial even to the point of death. The economic aspect of Revelation's Babylon is thus not concerned with an external threat to the church but with an enemy that works from within the church, an enemy that has a hold on the very hearts of the individual Christians.

#### **6.1.4.15 Jezebel and Babylon**

There is one more major theme that links Revelation's Babylon vision to some of the seven messages, namely the language of sexual misconduct or fornication. In the Babylon image references to her adulterous nature abound, from the title on her forehead (17:5: "the mother of prostitutes") to the references to people who commit adultery with her (17:2; 18:3.9), Revelation's Babylon is "the prostitute" (17.1.15.16), her adulteries a defining aspect of her identity (17:4; 19:2).

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167 Osborne, *Revelation*, 207.

168 Thomas, *Revelation 8-22*, 329.

In the seven messages the fornication-theme occurs in the messages to Pergamum (2:14) where the teaching of Balaam is said to lead to sexual immorality. There may also be a hint towards (spiritual) adultery in the Laodiceans' nakedness (3:17-18; cf. 6.1.4.14). But the one prime example of fornication-language in the seven messages is Jezebel of Thyatira. Probably this is the single most obvious link between the Babylon vision and the seven messages. Not surprisingly most commentators mention it in some way. For example Thompson refers to the parallel between Babylon and Jezebel of Thyatira: "Her [Babylon's] fornication echoes the prophetess, Jezebel, at Thyatira, who beguiles Christians 'to practice fornication' (2:20)."<sup>169</sup>

The parallels between these two female figures are numerous and largely clear. Like Babylon, Jezebel is accused of adultery, most clearly in the statement that "she did not want to repent from her fornication" (2:21) and in the reference to "those who commit adultery with her" (2:22; cf. 17:2; 18:3.9). That those followers of Jezebel are called her children (2:23) is echoed not only in Babylon's title of "mother of prostitutes and of the abominations of the earth" (17:5) but in her ignorant boasting as well (18:7: "In her heart she boasts, 'I sit as queen; I am not a widow, and I will never mourn.'"). In 2:20 the reader is informed that Jezebel has gotten her children by leading astray the servants of God with her false teaching as self-appointed prophetess, much like Babylon gathered her followers (18:23)<sup>170</sup>: "By your magic spell all the nations were led astray." Commenting on the use of *πλανάω* in 12:19, 13:14 and 20:10 McIlraith writes that "[t]he evil of Jezebel lies in her participation in this Satanic activity [deception] of separating people from Jesus and thus building up Babylon."<sup>171</sup> Beale adds: "Those in the church who are guilty of such deception (2:14, 20) [that is Balaam and Jezebel] should take warning lest they suffer Babylon's fate."<sup>172</sup> And indeed, even in their demise the two are alike: The same verb (*βάλλω*) is used in the Greek text to describe that Babylon will be *thrown* down like a millstone *thrown* into the sea (18:21) and to describe that Jezebel will be *thrown* down on her bed (2:22).

In Revelation's Babylon image there also are a number of references to the death of the Old Testament queen Jezebel. That in 17:16 the beast and the ten horns are said to eat Babylon's flesh is a clear reference to the end of Ahab's wife as described in the Old Testament<sup>173</sup>. In 1 Ki 21:23 Elijah predicts that "dogs will devour Jezebel by the wall of Jezreel." Elisha repeats

169 Thompson, *Revelation*, 38. Similarly Smalley, *The Revelation to John*, 364.

170 Osborne, *Revelation*, 658; Smalley, *The Revelation to John*, 74.

171 McIlraith, "'For the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints'", 519.

172 Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 919.

173 Aune, *Revelation 17-22*, 957; Smalley, *The Revelation to John*, 440.

this as he anoints Jehu king following Ahab's death (2 Ki 9:10). Fulfillment is quick to occur as Jehu comes to Jezreel (2 Ki 9:36).

Aune points out that Revelation's Babylon vision has another point of reference in the words of Elisha as he anoints Jehu king. On that occasion Elisha tells Jehu the decree of God (2 Ki 9:7): "You are to destroy the house of Ahab your master, and I will avenge the blood of my servants the prophets and the blood of all the Lord's servants shed by Jezebel." This is echoed in Rev 19:2 where the great multitude praises God for avenging the blood of his servants<sup>174</sup>. Aune comments: "Though John eliminates the name 'Jezebel' from his allusion, it is nevertheless clear that he saw a parallel between the infamous 'Jezebel' of Thyatira and the great whore"<sup>175</sup>.

These links between Revelation's Babylon and Jezebel of Thyatira are hard to ignore but there are surprisingly many commentators who do not mention any of them, among others Prigent, Roloff, Schüssler Fiorenza and Thomas. However while most commentators make mention of at least some of the links between Babylon and Jezebel, I nevertheless have the impression that the majority of them still fall prey to what I generally identified as the second shortcoming of most scholarly practice in regard to the links between the seven messages and Revelation's body (cf. 5.2.3, p 172): the links remain largely unused and thus irrelevant in the interpretation of the texts which they connect.

Aune is one example of a scholar who practically ignores the links between Jezebel and Babylon. In three instances he notes similarities, but they seem to have virtually no impact on his exposition. Commenting on 17:16 he notes that "[t]he author of Revelation has a particular interest in Jezebel (cf. 2:19-29)" and then continues to argue that this "suggests that this phrase might have been added when the final edition of Revelation was completed."<sup>176</sup> However, given Aune's theories about the genesis of Revelation, it probably is not surprising that this is the furthest he ventures towards my reading strategy.

In a footnote Mounce mentions that there are four women in Revelation: "Jezebel (2:20), the radiant woman of chapter 12, the infamous prostitute of chapters 17-18, and the bride of Christ (chaps. 19-20). Talbert notes that two are faithful and two unfaithful (86-87)."<sup>177</sup> Unfortunately this is all that he has to say about the relationships between these two unfaithful women.

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174 Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 928; Lohmeyer, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 150.

175 Aune, *Revelation 17-22*, 1026.

176 Aune, *Revelation 17-22*, 657.

177 Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 347, n 6.

More typical is Osborne's approach. He notices a number of themes that link Jezebel of Thyatira to the Babylon vision, among them the fact that both deceive their followers<sup>178</sup>, the lex talionis principle applied in the judgment of both<sup>179</sup> and the fact that the saints participate in the judgment of both figures<sup>180</sup>. But when faced with the question whether Jezebel of Thyatira could thus be the basis for Babylon's adulterous aspects, he rejects her in favour of the goddess Roma<sup>181</sup>. Not surprisingly then the interpretative impact of the Thyatiran Jezebel on the Babylon vision remains marginal.

Beale goes a step further by applying to Babylon what the message to Thyatira says about Jezebel and vice versa. He sees the allusion to the Old Testament figure Jezebel in both the Babylon vision and the message to Thyatira<sup>182</sup>. Beale also sees a common inclination to commercially motivated participation in pagan cults behind both the idolatry accusation and the adultery accusation, which he interprets as primarily figurative for spiritual compromise<sup>183</sup>. He links the esoteric knowledge of "the depths of Satan"<sup>184</sup> (2:24) to the abyss from where the beast rises (17:8). Beale also shows that both Jezebel and Babylon are guilty of deceiving their followers<sup>185</sup>, and both shall fall like a millstone (18:21)<sup>186</sup>. "The forecast of judgment on Jezebel and her followers may be an anticipation of the judgment narrated in ch. 18."<sup>187</sup> For Beale the two figures are linked and refer to one another. But despite these close links Beale does not allow for the possibility of Jezebel determining the meaning of the parts of the Babylon vision describing the city as the great prostitute. If anything, he sees Rome in Babylon and proceeds to project that onto Jezebel in Thyatira: "The idolatrous facets of Roman society with which Jezebel was encouraging association are thus portrayed later in the book."<sup>188</sup> So while allowing both the Jezebel discourse in the message to Thyatira and the Babylon vision to illustrate each other, Beale does not go the final step of interpreting the prostitution aspect primarily as an expression of the reality of the church in Thyatira.

The case is similar for Caird. He writes that "the great city ... turns out to be the great Jezebel, the mother of harlotry (xvii. 4-5)."<sup>189</sup> Likewise when commenting on 17:2 he holds it

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178 Osborne, *Revelation*, 157.658.

179 Osborne, *Revelation*, 162.655.

180 Osborne, *Revelation*, 167.170.623-624.629.

181 Osborne, *Revelation*, 608.

182 Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 862.928.

183 Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 262.849.856.905.910.922.

184 Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 266.

185 Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 262.919.

186 Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 919.

187 Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 262.

188 Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 262.

189 Caird, *The Revelation of Saint John*, 45.



“probable that Jezebel was the queen who sat for the portrait he [John] is now painting.”<sup>190</sup> Caird also suggests that Babylon's golden cup of obscenities and adulterous filth tempts “the people of Thyatira to make themselves drunk with the influence of their local Jezebel.”<sup>191</sup> However, like Beale, this does in no way help to determine the identity of Babylon. If anything Caird also uses these connections to impose onto Jezebel his identification of Babylon as Rome<sup>192</sup>. Thus in my view unfortunately the most important aspects of these links' interpretative potential are lost.

One might expect feminist scholarship's attention to Revelation's female figures to encourage recognition of their contrasts and similarities. And to some degree this is the case. McKinlay, like Pippin<sup>193</sup>, traces the rhetorical use of women figures in Revelation<sup>194</sup>: Jezebel, the woman clothed with the sun (Rev 12), Babylon and the New Jerusalem as the bride of the Lamb. They all play a vital role in the book's rhetorical strategy, either as positive examples or as negative, deterrent examples. However while both scholars rightly pay significant attention to the contrast between Babylon and the New Jerusalem<sup>195</sup>, the link between Jezebel and Babylon is hardly explored. McKinlay writes:

I am suggesting that a case can be made for the four female characters each having significant roles in a decolonizing text. While Jezebel, with her historical referent plays a smaller part in the negative Othering of this theo-political work, Babylon, the Great Whore, is, along with the Beast, one of the symbols of the imperialist power and therefore a most powerful negative symbol.<sup>196</sup>

Such a reading does not encourage an approach where Jezebel interprets the Babylon vision to the point of determining the image's meaning. Pippin gives an important clue about the reasons for this. She writes: “The Whore of Babylon is made to symbolize all the evil of the Roman empire ... Yet the focus of my concern here is not with what the image symbolized. Rather, I am concerned with the way in which this image of a prostitute is portrayed and used as a female symbol.”<sup>197</sup> In my own words: Whom these images represent is seen as secondary to how they do so. Pippin is not so much concerned about what the Babylon image stands for, but about the language and images used and what these say about John's attitude towards women. Regardless of whether or not such an approach does justice to the text, it naturally has

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190 Caird, *The Revelation of Saint John*, 213.

191 Caird, *The Revelation of Saint John*, 214.

192 Caird, *The Revelation of Saint John*, 45.213.

193 Pippin, *Death and desire*.

194 McKinlay, “Decolonizing the Goddess”.

195 e.g. Pippin, “The heroine and the whore,” 133-134.

196 McKinlay, “Decolonizing the Goddess,” 151.

197 Pippin, “The heroine and the whore,” 137.

little inclination towards identifying the concerns behind the images and thus has little use for tools that seek to determine these concerns.

Humphrey, on the other hand, another female scholar who examines the role of the women/city figures in Revelation's discourse, chooses a different mode of inquiry. She is not so much concerned with the images as such and the question of how they might speak about gender identities and roles. Rather, she argues that an attempt must be made to waive "social, political and religious presuppositions ... so that the text may be heard and not simply reacted against."<sup>198</sup> Clearly, Humphrey asserts, Revelation divides its female figures in good, pure, heavenly wives or brides on the one hand and evil, impure, destructive whores on the other hand. However she goes on to say that "[i]f we stay with such readings, then perhaps we have forgotten that the Apocalypse paints its pictures not only for women, but also for men – indeed for both together as a group, and not separately."<sup>199</sup> It is the purpose of these pictures which are painted for both men and women ("There is as much scandal for the male reader of the Apocalypse ... as for the female reader"<sup>200</sup>) that Humphrey is interested in. Thus, not surprisingly, she frequently draws the connecting lines between Jezebel and Babylon and sees Jezebel as "a local manifestation of 'Babylon'"<sup>201</sup>. But still Babylon and even Jezebel remain quite vague, they appear as symbols that maintain their ambivalence, that cannot be fully grasped. I am sympathetic to retaining the "mystery" (17:5) especially of the Babylon image and Humphrey's concluding questions<sup>202</sup> show that not all of Revelation's details need to be explained for the book to effectively communicate its message. However scholarship has to venture further if it wants to unearth more of the immense treasure of theological thought that is present in Revelation's visions, discourse and rhetoric. This does not mean that all mysteries can be "solved" by analysis, but it indicates that while there is a place for stopping where Humphrey stops, there also is a context for moving further and for seeking to identify Jezebel and Babylon more clearly while acknowledging that absolute clarity will probably be as little possible to achieve as it is desirable.

There is one example in particular of a scholar who does make use of the interpretative potential which the links between Revelation's two parts provide. Unfortunately, it seems, he only includes the links between Jezebel of Thyatira and the Babylon vision into his interpretative efforts in order to exploit them in support of his particular agenda. Duff rightly

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198 Humphrey, *The ladies and the cities*, 170.

199 Humphrey, *The ladies and the cities*, 170.

200 Humphrey, "A tale of two cities and (at least) three women," 93.

201 Humphrey, "A tale of two cities and (at least) three women," 84.

202 Humphrey, "A tale of two cities and (at least) three women," 95-96.

identifies Babylon as an enlarged illustration of Thyatira's Jezebel<sup>203</sup>. He argues that their likeness is deliberate and explains why he thinks John linked the two figures. "By setting up a close comparison of 'Jezebel' and 'Babylon' he [John] can indirectly attack the former"<sup>204</sup>. While the title of his book ("Who rides the beast?") suggests that it deals with Babylon, he argues that indeed Jezebel is the key figure of the book's discourse, that she is the woman who rides on the beast. Duff explicitly draws the connecting lines in chapter 7 of his book ("The Women of Revelation. Binding 'Jezebel' to 'Babylon'"<sup>205</sup>) and argues for "equivalence"<sup>206</sup> between Babylon and Jezebel. The problem with this approach however is that it reduces not only the Babylon vision but also the entire text of Revelation to the supposed conflict between Jezebel and John. As I have shown before (cf. 2.2.2 and 4.2.3), the argument is flawed. It has no support in the text of the seven messages on which Duff largely draws and does little justice to the diversity of issues present in both the seven messages (cf. 4.2.3) and the body (cf. 5.1.1).

In my view, Duff is correct in that there is an interpretative dependency between Thyatira's Jezebel and the Babylon vision. To the church in Thyatira, and probably to some degree in Pergamum, Babylon is a symbol for Jezebel and her teaching. Thus Jezebel's identity and teaching determine the meaning of at least the directly corresponding parts of the Babylon image. But since Duff's overall thesis is to be rejected, the question remains what Jezebel does say about Babylon and what Babylon does say about Jezebel.

The effects of the Babylon vision on the message to Thyatira centre around illustrating and thus enforcing the parenetic implications of the message as such. The Babylon image labels Jezebel's teaching as blasphemous. It also declares her a prostitute, her adultery certainly figurative, that is symbolic for idolatry through spiritual syncretism, but most likely literal as well (cf. 2.2.1.3 and 4.2.3). By identifying her with Babylon, Revelation pictures Jezebel as guided by the same forces that persecute the faithful witnesses. Her teaching which rationalizes participation in the carnal pleasures of pagan society and religion, reduces her witness and that of her followers to virtually nothing.

In 17:2 the inhabitants of the earth are portrayed as "intoxicated with the wine of her adulteries." The same applies to all the nations (14:8 and 18:3: πάντα τὰ ἔθνη) and the earth itself (19:2). The inhabitants of the earth are often used as symbols of humanity in opposition

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203 Duff, *Who rides the beast?*

204 Duff, *Who rides the beast?*, 96.

205 Duff, *Who rides the beast?*, 83-96.

206 Duff, *Who rides the beast?*, 89.92.

to God (cf. 6.1.4.9). This places the followers of Jezebel among the corrupted and anti-Christian nations, the very nations over whom Thyatira's overcomers will be given authority to rule, even to smash them with an iron scepter (2:26-27).

Since they are hardly recognized as Christians, persecution is not an acute problem for Jezebel and her followers. Her problem like that of her “children” is the judgment of God which her teaching and life entail. Like that of Babylon and her playmates, Jezebel's demise and that of her playmates will be devastating. The call for repentance in 18:4 illustrates the statement of 2:22 that “if they do not repent” her partners in her sin will face the same fate as the prostitute who is their lover. The Babylon vision intensifies the parenetic substance of the message to Thyatira. It provides a disturbingly lively illustration of the consequences of following Jezebel's lead into the spiritual adultery of her religious and ethical syncretism.

Questions of authority and power are another strong aspect of the Babylon image which is closely linked to the fornication theme. Even more important than Babylon's fornication with the inhabitants of the earth is her adulterous involvement with the kings of the earth (17:2.18; 18:3.9). If this also relates to Jezebel of Thyatira, it means that she not only has followers whom she deceives by her pseudo-prophetic teaching but that she also is in a position of authority over other leaders. Two scenarios are possible: The kings of the earth could refer to other local leaders throughout Asia Minor of the same “Balaamite” movement of which Jezebel was a leading teacher or prophetess. Their willingness to relate her leadership to their local followers would thus constitute the adulterous relationship which is symbolized by that between Babylon and the kings of the earth.

The other possibility is that Jezebel could be in a position of leadership in the wider society of Thyatira. Not only would her pagan environment tolerate her despite being a Christian, she would even be well respected among local businessmen as well as among the pagan priests. Could she be a leading priestess in the pagan cult herself, maybe even engaged in cultic prostitution? Could she then somehow have been attracted to the church and now see no problem in combining her old religion with her new faith? This would certainly offer an explanation for the origin of the reference to “the deep things of Satan” (2:24).

Either explanation would do justice to the close links between the kings of the earth and the inhabitants of the earth (17:2) and to how closely the inhabitants of the earth on the other hand correspond to Jezebel's followers, as is evident in the deception that both groups fall victim of. However, the latter option which sees Jezebel as a leading figure in non-Christian Thyatira as

well as in the local church is more likely, particularly considering that Jezebel apparently was known only locally rather than throughout Asia Minor (cf. 2.2.1.3).

As in the case of Babylon's economic aspects, the implications of the respective message to a church on the interpretation of the Babylon image are more far reaching than the other way round. That the fornication theme and language in the Babylon image primarily serve to illustrate the person, teaching and practice of Jezebel of Thyatira, means that this will have to be the primary framework of interpreting the fornication theme in the Babylon image. Babylon's adulteries are thus primarily an expression of the Balaamite teaching as promoted by Jezebel. Only by extension or where the image goes beyond what can be reasonably ascribed to Jezebel, can Babylon be applied to a wider context. Thus only where Jezebel shows traits otherwise typical of the Roman empire or where Babylon deliberately goes beyond dealing with Jezebel and explicitly refers to aspects of the empire, is it prudent to apply the symbol of Babylon the prostitute to Rome, its empire and emperors.

For the fornication theme this could possibly apply to Babylon's often adulterous involvement with the various kings, particularly the "kings of the earth" (17:2.18; 18:3.9). As I mentioned before (cf. 6.1.3.4), these may indeed refer to local aristocracy and its involvement with the empire and thus could be viewed as unrelated to Jezebel. However this does not mean that Jezebel could not be involved. As I have mentioned above, Jezebel may be a leading priestess in the pagan temple. Very likely the local aristocracy would be involved with her, be it in idolatry alone (with fornication symbolic of that same idolatry) or in actual cultic prostitution. The empire looms in the background, represented through worship of both the goddess Roma and the emperor, although it does not appear as the main concern.

The background of Jezebel's Balaamite teaching for Babylon's fornication theme primarily means that this theme refers to spiritual adultery through participation in the pleasures of pagan cults, possibly including actual physical fornication. This aspect of Babylon thus stands for religious and ethical syncretism and the teaching which rationalizes this syncretism as not only compatible with the Christian faith but as a vital ingredient in a deeper and true knowledge of spiritual realities, as a higher level of faith (cf. the reference to "the deep things of Satan" in 2:24). Whether this view is similar to what Paul deals with in Romans 6:1 ("Shall we go on sinning, so that grace may increase?") is unclear, but it is not entirely impossible. Whatever the line of reasoning of Jezebel's teaching, Revelation's Babylon vision exposes it as not only flawed but in fact deliberately deceptive. All the glamour that may surround Jezebel's person and teaching (17:4) is exposed as hollow and worthless. In her conceited self-deceit

(18:7) she idolizes herself, assuming for herself the place of God and thus leading her followers into twofold idolatry, by indulging in the worship of pagan deities as well as by accepting her, an “earthen pot” (2:27), as their highest authority in place of “the Son of God, whose eyes are like blazing fire and whose feet are like burnished bronze” (2:18) and who received true authority from the father (2:28).

Clearly then the fornication-theme in Revelation's Babylon vision deals not primarily with external threats to the faithfulness of the church but with subversive threats from within. The problem is not outside pressure, but the fact that sinful desires within the individual members of the church are not confessed but rather encouraged and declared pure. The focus is not on the bad and ungodly world outside the church but on the unfaithfulness in teaching and practice which is harmfully present inside the church. This is hardly surprising, considering that the whole book is addressed to the church, not to the world. Revelation seeks to exhort Christians to faithful living. This does not mean that the book is necessarily indifferent to the sinfulness of the world outside the church, but the unbelieving world is not Revelation's primary focus. Rather, as deSilva writes “John does not allow believers to see themselves as victims of society but gives them an active role in their encounter with the dominant culture. Accommodation will mean defeat and shame; treading the path of fidelity to God will constitute honorable victory over the world.”<sup>207</sup>

### **6.1.5 Conclusions regarding Babylon**

In my view, a general identification of Babylon as Rome or any other single entity is not the solution. Also, despite giving its name to the city/woman-figure of the vision, ancient Babylon is not the only point of reference. Rather the text draws from a variety of sources and the first readers would thus have identified in the image a variety of different persons, powers or issues. Temptations of pleasure and wealth seem to stand out and are associated with ancient Babylon and Tyre, respectively. Likewise the threat of persecution draws from Old Testament images of Jerusalem. Commenting on the relationship between Revelation's Babylon and the New Jerusalem Humphrey remarks:

The function of Babylon as a foil to the righteous city makes it quite beside the point to enter into a debate regarding the intended historical identity of the city as Rome (the usual view) or Jerusalem ... Her description as a *μυστήριον* (17.5), in which image is piled upon image, is reminiscent of Babel, Babylon, Rome and apostate Jerusalem – she is the archetypal city set up as an alternative to the protection of God. That is, Babylon is a true

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207 DeSilva, *The hope of glory*, 196-197

symbol, and not merely a cipher. As such she is a foil to the New Jerusalem, but also can be depicted as a temptation to the people of God.<sup>208</sup>

Indeed Revelation's Babylon appears to be an archetype, a typical pattern, a τύπος of the satanic powers which – often in disguise – threaten or tempt the people of God – the church – to leave its Lord. This τύπος necessarily has models in concrete persons or institutions of the late first century or before. The two Jezebels, Tyre, Jerusalem, Babylon, Rome and possibly even some other figures (Mammon?) are combined into one vision which seeks to alert the churches to the consequences of both faithfulness and unfaithfulness in a variety of matters, from the threat or reality of persecution to moral license or worship of money, to mention the most prominent issues. Babylon thus is an archetype for the satanic power behind all authorities (political, religious or otherwise), all teachings and temptations which try to compromise the faithful relationship between the followers of the lamb and their Lord. Thus while for Thyatira the Babylon image is primarily embodied by Jezebel, for the other six churches the image represents the specific threats and temptations they face respectively.

It is interesting that Hendriksen views “the great harlot, Babylon” to be “in John's day ... the city of Rome”<sup>209</sup>, implying that at other times it will be something different<sup>210</sup>. The τύπος transcends its models by far, using them to give the readers' imagination a framework to fill with visions based on their own realities. “John creates his visionary scenes from images that both refer to concrete things and open to something ‘more.’”<sup>211</sup>

Wherever the church is faced with any of the variations of this τύπος it is advised to remember what the spirit says to the churches, it is encouraged to turn to Revelation's parenesis and follow it. In order to be prepared for this imminent event, the churches are advised to resist the manifold manifestations of the τύπος in the expectation of their Lord's arrival. Whether or not this will occur in their lifetime is not the issue. Whether or not it will be preceded by a final eschatological Babylon, by a rule of one particularly great beast and one particular false prophet, is not what Revelation's visions are concerned about<sup>212</sup>. What Revelation, through its visions and images, seeks to parenetically teach the church, is how to deal with any temptations of pleasure, power and money or with any threats of violence, all of which the church will experience in varying degrees throughout its history, not just towards the end of history. Whether or not these temptations and threats are any stronger towards the

208 Humphrey, *The ladies and the cities*, 115, n 97.

209 Hendriksen, *More than conquerors*, 30

210 See also in Hendriksen, *More than conquerors*, 20: “At that time the harlot revealed herself as the city of Rome.”

211 Thompson, *Revelation*, 43

212 Contra Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 30.

end of history or not, is irrelevant. This is so because they would still be the same temptations and threats which therefore would require no other preparation than at any other time. For Revelation's parenetic message the intensity of the challenges which the church faces makes no difference. The church needs to recognize temptations and threats for what they are, at any time, in any guise and in any intensity, and to follow Revelation's parenesis to remain faithful.

Throughout the centuries incarnations of the τύπος Babylon will have threatened or tempted the church in a variety of “disguises”. The worship of money, as symbolized in the commercial references of the Babylon vision drawing mainly from Tyre, will have to be seen as a vital form of Babylon's appearance. Gilbertson suggests that “the account of the destruction of Babylon in 18:1-24 could function as an effective critique of, and challenge to, the modern West.”<sup>213</sup> This idea finds unexpected support from PUR, one of Germany's mainstream Bands of the 1990s. In a remarkably theological statement PUR sings: “Die Gier, Hass, Neid und Rachsucht sind die Seuchen dieser Welt. Das Immunsystem verlässt sich auf den Waren-Gott, das Geld.”<sup>214</sup>

Persecution of the church, symbolized by Babylon's thirst for the blood of the saints, is a constant reality throughout the church's history. Christians suffered persecution, often to the point of death, from the Roman emperors in the first centuries A.D., from the papacy in the reformers' time<sup>215</sup> and from the Third Reich in its intolerance of any higher authority than the Nazi leadership. Today the reality of Christians in the Islamic world is probably closest to the persecution theme in Revelation. Yet in all these circumstances the church is called to remain faithful in its witness and in its suffering. And, surprisingly probably only to those who – like myself – have never experienced true opposition due to their faith, this is the one challenge to which the church has consistently risen more clearly than to any of the others.

The adultery language of the Babylon vision refers to a church which compromises with its pagan environment to the point of no longer being distinguishable as Christian. Identifying indisputable examples of this problem is difficult, not the least because it requires treading the fine line of contextualisation between the extremes of cultural irrelevance and syncretism and because any examples are therefore necessarily subject to debate. However, I will identify a

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213 Gilbertson, *God and History in the Book of Revelation*, 61

214 PUR, “Neue Brücken”, 1993. Note the probably deliberate homophony of “Waren-Gott” (god of commerce) and “wahren Gott” (true/real god).

215 Please note that I do not agree with a general damnation of the catholic church as satanic. But unfortunately some aspects of catholic church history resemble Revelation's Babylon. Among them is that Luther even had to fear for his life, not to mention Jan Hus, who in 1414 was killed in Constance where he had come to discuss his ideas after being “granted” safe-conduct (cf. Fudge, “Hus”). Sadly enough, only too soon far too many protestants showed the same complacent ruthlessness towards their catholic neighbours.



few potential fields where the church in the west might have to examine its perspective, as one example in which, at the very least, the potential to this problem is present.

The charge of compromising with the values of the secular world and indulging in its temptations could potentially apply to much of the church in the western world. In my view the underlying issue probably is the fact that individualism as the central consensual value is growing stronger not only in society at large but in the church as well. This leads to all sorts of issues in terms of sexual ethics (including extra-marital relations of all kinds as well as homosexuality), consumerism and fair trade, workplace ethics and shareholder value, environmental concerns and instant gratification, cultural diversity or adaptation and nationalism or racism. The list probably could be much longer. The question must be asked whether the church in the west actually is any different to the secular world around it and whether in assimilating to the values of society at large we (yes, I do include myself) are actually fornicating with Babylon, engaging in Jezebel's self-idolatry rather than living in faithful witness. Could it be that the church in the west is not persecuted because its witness is diluted, because it cannot be distinguished from the secular humanism of the world around it?

The advice to the church in each of these manifestations of the Babylonian archetype is again found in the seven messages as well as in the Babylon image. Churches under persecution are exhorted to hold on, those compromising with their pagan environment are called to repent and return to him who originally called them, and those putting their trust in money are told to repent and “store up treasures in heaven”<sup>216</sup>.

Another aspect of the Babylon vision's parenetic function lies in its contrast to the New Jerusalem. Babylon is a generic counter-image for the New Jerusalem. This is obvious in the many contrasting aspects which separate the two images. Thompson writes: “As a contrast to Mount Zion (14:1) and the 144,000, ‘Babylon’ is an antonym to all that they represent, just as her *thymos* [14:8] contrasts with the *thymos* [14:10] of God.”<sup>217</sup> Babylon is where one does not want to be found, not only because nobody would want to be caught up in having to share in her judgment, but because even before her demise she is abominable beyond imagination. In comparison to the New Jerusalem she is poor, dirty and utterly unappealing. The New Jerusalem on the other hand is the heavenly home that awaits the faithful. It is everlasting, healing and life-giving, it shines in the glory of God, its pure beauty is beyond comparison and to live there is the fulfillment of every desire which God planted in a human heart. In contrast

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216 Matthew 6:20 (NIV), an interesting parallel in content to Rev 3:18. Cf. Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 163, n 25.

217 Thompson, *Revelation*, 146

Babylon symbolizes the deadly reality of a life apart from the creator. The cheap glitter with which she adorns herself can only barely cover the shame of her nakedness. That the light of a lamp will never shine in her again (18:23) does not imply that lamps will never be needed in her again, as is the case in the New Jerusalem (21:23). Rather it means that lamps would be desperately needed because she will forever remain in darkness.

Thus as symbols of the consequences of faithfulness on the one hand and giving in to threats or temptations on the other hand, the New Jerusalem and Babylon unfold their parenetic effects evocatively, by painting images which may be modelled on past and present realities, but which ultimately point far beyond these models. The New Jerusalem does not symbolize any earthly reality, is not a cipher for any entity in this world. Rather it is a humanly imaginable description of the unfathomably greater eschatological reality which God creates for his own. That a life in faithfulness foreshadows some of this reality in the here and now does not contradict this. The New Jerusalem is primarily eschatological but its citizens are recognized by living as its faithful citizens even in the here and now, even in a world dominated by the forces which stand behind Babylon.

By analogy then, Revelation's Babylon is not in itself a cipher for some earthly reality, not a description of any one particular entity in this world. It also is a humanly imaginable description of a greater eschatological reality, of the ultimate reality of existence without God. Its deadly adultery is the result of Satan's creativity. Not surprisingly, life in unfaithfulness to God foreshadows the same deadly (self-) idolatry, as not only the Christians in the seven historic churches had to experience. Babylon is a reality far beyond the concrete events of late first century Asia Minor. Ultimately it is an image for all satanic opposition to God and his own as well as for the consequences of being part of this opposition.

## **6.2 The seals, trumpets and bowls as ἡ ὥρα τοῦ πειρασμοῦ**

I shall now give a slightly briefer second example of how my reading strategy might be applied in the concrete exegetical work with the text of Revelation. Major parts of the book's body are taken up by the series of the seven seals, trumpets and bowls. Chapters 6, 8, 9 and 16 and significant portions of chapters 11 and 15 are concerned with the seal, trumpet and bowl visions as such. And it is to these series of sevens as such that I shall limit my efforts here. These series are an organic part of the surrounding visions and can hardly be separated from the larger vision that makes up Revelation's body. For example, the opening of the first seal in 6:1 happens within the setting of what is described in the two preceding chapters<sup>218</sup>. Similarly,

<sup>218</sup> Johnson, *Revelation*, 76; Osborne, *Revelation*, 269.275; Smalley, *The Revelation to John*, 145-146;

the end of the bowl vision introduces the Babylon image, as is obvious not only from the occurrence of Babylon in 16:19<sup>219</sup>, but also from the fact that the Babylon image is presented to John by one of the seven bowl angels (17:1)<sup>220</sup>. On the other hand, however, the series of sevens are very distinct in their form and content. For the sake of brevity I shall examine them on their own, while remaining alert to the references to their (immediate) co-text.

Significant debate revolves around the question of whether the series of sevens are to be read as depicting a linear development<sup>221</sup>. Alternative readings see the same series of events as being described from three different perspectives<sup>222</sup>. What these and other related schemes have in common is the assumption that the series of sevens predict future events, usually associated with eschatological judgment. The increasing intensity of destruction both within the single series and from one series to the next are seen as evidence of intensifying conflict and tension which culminates in the seventh bowl (16:17-21). The various resulting views are aptly discussed by Beale<sup>223</sup>.

The question needs to be asked, however, whether any sort of chronology is actually inherent in the text and whether such a possible chronology would have any impact on the parenetic message of the visions. Is John shown a sequence of chronological events, and if so, is the fact of this chronology the actual point of John seeing and recording the events?

It is most likely that John in his vision sees the sevens in sequence. The clearest clues for this are in the interlude of chapter 7. There John twice refers to the chronology of his vision when he writes “after this I saw...” (7:1) or “after this I looked” (7:9). This obvious sequence within the vision most likely refers not only to chapter 7 but to the surrounding series of seven seals as well. The ὅτε (ὅταν in 8:1) on the other hand, which marks each of the seals, does not imply any kind of sequence at all. Rather, it merely ties the events described within each seal to the opening of the respective seal. It merely states that whatever took place in the vision, happened when or as the respective seal was opened. So in theory at least the first six seals could have been opened at once. Each of them would then have brought with itself the plagues associated with it. While this is only theoretical, and while the numbering alone suggests otherwise, it points to the fact that only the vision as such is necessarily chronological (in order for John to view it), whereas the events described in it need not necessarily be. Rather,

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Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 414; Thompson, *Revelation*, 100.

219 Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 843; Johnson, *Revelation*, 156.

220 Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 847-848; Giesen, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 367; Johnson, *Revelation*, 158; Osborne, *Revelation*, 607.

221 Thomas, *Revelation 8-22*, 3-5.525-543

222 Osborne, *Revelation*, 269-270.

223 Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 116-126.

they could well all happen at the same time. Thus the proposed chronology of events is not inherent in the text and other non-chronological interpretations are therefore just as possible as those seeing linear development<sup>224</sup>.

The key question in the quest to identify the most adequate understanding of the series of sevens concerns their parenetic effect. Their parenetic effect needs to be identified to reveal the series' rhetorical function within their larger context. This in turn will be a vital part in determining which events are described in the series of sevens or whether there are any specific events to be determined at all. I suggest that the most adequate way of accessing the visions' parenetic effect is to relate them to the reality of the parenesis' intended audience, to their "Sitz im Leben", that is to the seven messages (cf. 5.2.3).

### 6.2.1 The number seven

The links connecting the series of sevens to the seven messages are nowhere near as many as to the Babylon vision, but they are still plentiful, with the most obvious the fact that the seven messages really are a series of sevens as well. I cannot discern any *specific* links between *specific* churches and *specific* seals, trumpets or bowls. I once set up an experimental scheme of associating the first message (Ephesus) to the first seal, trumpet and bowl, the second message to the second part of the series, and so forth. But if any links could be drawn at all, they were mostly rather forced and certainly not unambiguous. Thus this particular enquiry was quickly abandoned. No direct lines between individual messages and the respective parts of the series of sevens can be drawn. On the other hand, the number seven in itself is a clear marker in Revelation's rhetoric. Just as the choice of seven churches indicates that the church at large, the complete church, is addressed by the messages and thus by the whole book (cf. 2.1), so the fact that it is *seven* seals, trumpets, thunders (10:3-4) and bowls is hardly accidental. Rather it suggests that their impact is not limited to what is explicitly mentioned but is rather all-encompassing and complete. Beale writes that "the seven seals, seven trumpets, and seven bowls, ... are so numbered in order to underscore the completeness of God's worldwide judgment."<sup>225</sup> The destruction brought upon the earth in the seals, trumpets and bowls is universal, not limited by location or social status (6:15) but only by proportion:  $\frac{1}{4}$  in the seal series,  $\frac{1}{3}$  in the trumpet series and apparently completely in the bowl series (which might suggest that it was  $\frac{1}{2}$  in the not detailed thunder series. However this remains

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224 Contra Thomas, *Revelation* 8-22, 4.525-543.

225 Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 59.

speculation). Also those who had the seal of God on their foreheads (9:4) seem to be spared direct destruction, although they too will suffer the effects from the destruction around them.

### 6.2.2 The role of the church

Remarkably, the churches and the Christians who form them feature within the series of sevens as such primarily by exclusion. Unlike Beale who sees traces of the persecution of the faithful in the four horsemen of 6:1-8<sup>226</sup>, I cannot determine any evidence which would point in that direction. Giesen likewise observes “daß die Plagen die treuen Christen aussparen”<sup>227</sup>. Not only would it be very strange for the Lamb to initiate the persecution<sup>228</sup>, as would then have to be the case since he is the one to open the seals, also the horsemen aim at “the earth” (6:4.8) as the home of the inhabitants of the earth. While the faithful feature in some form in each of the series they certainly never are objects of the action, at least not in the series as such.

In the series of seals the souls under the altar – the Christian martyrs – ask for God's judgment to come and avenge their blood (6:9-10)<sup>229</sup>. So while they had previously been subject to violence from the very inhabitants of the earth who are now the objects of the series' plagues, the faithful Christians are actively calling for these plagues rather than being subjected to them. Similarly in 16:5-6 the angel (along with the altar, 16:7) declares the judgments brought by the bowls to be true and just, because the judged are guilty of shedding the blood of the saints and prophets. The twenty-four elders (11:16-18), whether they are to be seen as part of the church or not, agree with this verdict.

The martyrs do receive white robes (6:11) as a sign of their faithful witness (cf. 2.5) and are thus declared pure. However this is not part of the remaining action which takes place on earth, and it certainly is not a plague. The reference to those who are yet to experience martyrdom (6:11) points beyond the series of seals. They die not through the action unleashed through the opening of the seals but through the acts of those who are the target of this action. Likewise in the series of trumpets, the followers of the Lamb are only mentioned in order to explicitly exclude them from those who are subjected to the effects of the trumpets (9:4).

The only other occurrence of Christians (here: “the saints”) in the series of sevens as such is in the throne room scene of the seventh seal which introduces the first trumpet (8:3-4). However, the saints do not play an active role in this scene as they are not there in person but only

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226 Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 370.389. Similarly Johnson, *Revelation*, 77-78.

227 Giesen, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 179. Similarly Osborne, *Revelation*, 283, n 18.

228 Giesen, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 180.

229 Pattemore, *The People of God in the Apocalypse*, 76-86.

represented in their prayers which rise to God. If this is related to any of the series' action at all, it would have to be the cry for justice from the souls under the altar. Osborne comments on 8:3-4: "The prayers here most likely refer specifically to the imprecatory prayers for vengeance and justice in Rev. 6:9-11"<sup>230</sup>. Thus this also is not about Christians being subjected to the series' plagues but rather about them actively demanding the judgment of the inhabitants of the earth.

This focus on the "inhabitants of the earth" (cf. 6.2.10) rather than on the churches or the Christians does not mean that the seal-, trumpet- and bowl-visions are irrelevant for the churches. In the words of Giesen:

Wenn die Plagen die Christen nicht treffen, warum schildert der Seher sie dann überhaupt? ... Die Plagen haben für die Christen neben ihrer Funktion als indirekte Heilszusagen ein paränetisches Ziel: Sie sollen dazu anspornen, den Glauben in schwerer Zeit nicht aufzugeben und so zum Lager derer überzuwechseln, die die Plagen treffen. Die Plagen ermahnen also eindringlich zur Treu gegenüber Gott und seinem Gesalbten.<sup>231</sup>

Not surprisingly, there are significant links between these series of sevens and the seven messages which make the seals, trumpets and bowls parenetically relevant for the churches. These links serve as a major aid in interpreting the series of sevens by pointing out their specific parenetic message.

### 6.2.3 Persecution

One of the major themes in both the seven messages and the Babylon vision, the persecution of the church, is also mentioned in the series of sevens. As indicated in 6.2.2 this is the only context in which the church directly features in the seals, trumpets and bowls. Three aspects are evident in the text, namely the link between faithful witness and martyrdom as evident in the white robes of the souls under the altar (6:11; cf. 2.5), the fact that there appears to be a certain number of martyrs that either needs to be reached or cannot be exceeded (6:11), and the expectation and promise of judgment on the murderers of the faithful witnesses (6:10; 16:5-7).

In the seven messages the link between faithful witness and martyrdom is most evident in the case of Antipas, ὁ μάρτυς μου ὁ πιστός μου, who was killed in Pergamum because of his faith – as is clearly implied (2:13)<sup>232</sup>. The implications are obvious (2:10): "Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life."<sup>233</sup> Thus this aspect of the series of

<sup>230</sup> Osborne, *Revelation*, 345.

<sup>231</sup> Giesen, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 180.

<sup>232</sup> Osborne, *Revelation*, 132.289.

<sup>233</sup> Pattemore, *The People of God in the Apocalypse*, 89.

sevens serves to underline the expectation that the call to faithfulness in their witness implies the Christians' readiness to die for their faith. Pattemore's comments need to be quoted at some length:

The real addressees have already been identified, alongside John, as God's slaves (1:1) and with John as ἀδελφοί with whom he shares in suffering (1:9).<sup>234</sup> For the audience to find an identity as σύνδουλοι and ἀδελφοί of the martyrs involves being prepared to be killed like them for the sake of the word of God.<sup>235</sup> While they cannot be part of the company of martyrs who have already been slaughtered, they are challenged to become part of those 'about to be killed'. In this way they too, like the martyrs under the altar, will be identified with the Lamb. As his being slain is the obverse side of the coin of victory, so the completion of the number of martyrs will result in their vindication and eternal life.<sup>236</sup>

The fact that there is a set total of martyrs can theoretically be meant to emphasize two quite different things. On the one hand, it could imply that God will only judge the murderers of the martyrs<sup>237</sup> once this total "number of their fellow servants and brothers" (6:11) is reached. The emphasis would thus be on God waiting for the completion of the number of martyrs. On the other hand, the emphasis could be on the fact that the number of martyrs is limited and that contrary to appearances God will not just sit back and watch as more and more of his followers are murdered. God will not forever allow the slaughtering of his faithful ones. While presently he allows the satanic forces to wreak havoc among the church by killing some of the faithful, these very satanic forces are severely limited in their power. They have but a little while. Thus the θλίψις of the church will also be limited to a short time (6:11). However this short time is not to be mistaken with the one hour for which the beast and ten kings will have power to destroy Babylon and which probably is referred to in 3:10 as the τῆς ὥρας τοῦ πειρασμοῦ (cf. 6.1.4.10 and 6.2.11).

More likely this "little while" is mirrored in the "ten days" for which the ordeal of the faithful ones in Smyrna is predicted (2:10). These ten days, like the little while of 6:11, are a time of persecution and even martyrdom rather than judgment (as in the "one hour"). It is then reasonable to assume that the ten days of 2:10 and the little while of 6:11 point to the same reality of the church's suffering for a limited time. I therefore suggest that, just as in the message to Smyrna, the emphasis in the fifth seal is on the fact that God will limit the number

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234 Footnote 100 in Pattemore, *The People of God in the Apocalypse*, 89: "A strong relevance-based case can be made for identifying the unmarked δούλοι of 1:1 (and elsewhere) with the whole of John's audience ... rather than just the prophets".

235 Footnote 101 in Pattemore, *The People of God in the Apocalypse*, 89: "I take the καί between the two groups [in 6:11: σύνδουλοι and ἀδελφοί] as epexegetic".

236 Pattemore, *The People of God in the Apocalypse*, 89.

237 Aune, *Revelation 6-16*, 412-413; Osborne, *Revelation*, 289; Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 448. Contra Caird, *The Revelation of Saint John*, 87.

of martyrs, that the satanic forces which kill the saints have limited authority only and that God is ultimately in control, rather than on the idea that God might hold back from intervening until a preordained number of martyrs have died. This agrees with Giesen's very apt comments: "Nicht die gottfeindlichen Kräfte bestimmen die Geschichte, sondern Gott allein. Er lässt die Märtyrer schon jetzt an der Heilsvollendung teilhaben. Er – und nicht die Gegner der Christen – legt das Maß der Märtyrer fest."<sup>238</sup>

#### **6.2.4 Naked or in white robes?**

The issue of faithful witness in Revelation is closely associated with the theme of clothing or lack thereof (cf. 2.5, 4.2.3). This theme is important in both the seven messages and in the series of sevens. The message to Sardis makes extensive use of the image of white clothing which is contrasted with soiled or defiled clothes. As Beale points out, "the majority of the people in the church at Sardis had compromised by not bearing witness to their faith"<sup>239</sup>. These are thus said to have soiled their clothes (3:4). Beale further suggests that the term soiled (ἐμόλυναν) points to their "being 'stained' with the pollution of idolatry."<sup>240</sup> Alternatively, Smalley thinks that "the absence of staining implies ethical purity on the part of the minority in Sardis: members of the church who have not aligned themselves with the prevailing standards belonging to the pagan city."<sup>241</sup> While both may be the case<sup>242</sup>, I think that here stained or soiled clothes primarily are meant to indicate contrast to the white clothes which are promised to the rest (3:4). This promise is repeated to the Sardian overcomers (3:5). The implication of the remaining promise to the overcomers in Sardis is that only those in white will be acceptable to God in the last judgment (3:5; 20:12-15). This applies equally to the souls under the altar who are not only promised but actually given white robes (6:11). Note also how frequently (7:9.13.14) the reference to their white clothes is found in the description of the multitude before the throne which appears in 7:9-17 as the second half of the "interlude" between the sixth and seventh seal. Notably Beale sees in these links to 6:9-11 and 7:9.13.14 evidence "[t]hat v 4b ['They will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy.'] concerns a reward because of perseverance through suffering"<sup>243</sup>.

The message to Laodicea explicitly links the lack of white clothes as signs of faithful witness to the church's spiritual nakedness. While believing that they lack nothing, they are told by

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238 Giesen, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 186.

239 Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 276. Similarly Johnson, *Revelation*, 53.

240 Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 276. Similarly Osborne, *Revelation*, 179.

241 Smalley, *The Revelation to John*, 84. Similarly Harrington, *Revelation*, 69.

242 Hughes, *The Book of Revelation*, 55; Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 256-257.

243 Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 277.



“the Amen, the faithful and true witness” (3:14) that indeed they are naked in their complete lack of witness and that they need to “buy” white clothes from him in order to rectify this and not have their nakedness on display (3:17-18). This is reflected in a key saying towards the end of the sixth bowl (16:15)<sup>244</sup>: “Blessed is he who ... keeps his clothes with him, so that he may not go naked and be shamefully exposed.” While, as the direct context suggests, this refers to general preparedness for the imminent yet unpredictable parousia of Christ<sup>245</sup>, the links to the seven messages give prominence to faithful witness (even to the point of death) as a key component of the church's overall readiness for its Lord.

Note also one more way in which the white clothes are linked to the readiness to die which is implied in the witness motif (cf. 2.5). In 3:4 the faithful witnesses are promised fellowship with Christ and white clothes ὅτι ἄξιοί ἐσιν, “because they are worthy.”<sup>246</sup> By contrast, 16:5-7 declares as true and just God's judgment over those who “have shed the blood of your saints and prophets”, ἄξιοί ἐσιν, “for they are worthy” (AV)<sup>247</sup>. Not only is this a clear reference to Revelation's principle of assessment according to a person or group's deeds (lex talionis)<sup>248</sup>, which applies to deeds of faithfulness as well as opposition, it also emphasizes the parenetic call to faithful witness even to the point of death and once more underlines that the Laodicean's lack of witness effectively associates them with the enemies of the church (cf. 6.1.4.14).

### 6.2.5 Morning star and Wormwood

The contrasts between 3:4 and 16:6 with regard to worthiness are complemented by additional, similar contrasts. In 2:28 the overcomers in Thyatira are promised the morning star. Since in 22:16 Jesus calls himself “the bright morning star”, it appears as though the Laodicean overcomers are promised Christ himself<sup>249</sup>. Note also that in 22:17 Christ offers water of life to anyone who comes and receives it. In contrast, the third trumpet (8:10-11) brings another star which turns a third of the water bitter and thus kills many people. Fittingly this star is called Wormwood. As I have argued in 3.3.2, it is most likely an allusion to the fall

244 Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 306; Harrington, *Revelation*, 166; Johnson, *Revelation*, 62; Osborne, *Revelation*, 593-594; Prigent, *Commentary on the Apocalypse*, 472.

245 Osborne, *Revelation*, 593.

246 Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 276-277.

247 Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 819; Giesen, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 352; Harrington, *Revelation*, 164; Hughes, *The Book of Revelation*, 174; Osborne, *Revelation*, 584; Smalley, *The Revelation to John*, 404; Thomas, *Revelation 8-22*, 254.

248 Harrington, *Revelation*, 164; Thomas, *Revelation 8-22*, 254.

249 Giesen, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 123; Hughes, *The Book of Revelation*, 52; Prigent, *Commentary on the Apocalypse*, 189-190; Roloff, *The Revelation of John*, 56; Thompson, *Revelation*, 76. Contra Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 235.

of Satan. The contrast of “Wormwood” with the bright morning star links 8:10-11 to the promise of life which is offered to the overcomers as opposed to the deadly threat which falls over the inhabitants of the earth.

#### **6.2.6 Unclean spirits and the Spirit(s) of God<sup>250</sup>**

Another case to note is Jesus' self-description in the message to Sardis. There he refers to himself as the one “who has the seven(-fold) Spirit(s) of God” (3:1, see also 1:4; 4:5; 5:6), implying oneness with God and holy and pure authority. By contrast the sixth bowl presents us with images of three unclean spirits coming forth from the mouth of the dragon (16:13-16). That they are described as looking like frogs certainly is not meant to flatter them. In their hubris of staging a rebellion against God they reveal their true satanic nature as well as their own doom of going down with all the other forces of opposition against God. The call to be alert and ready for the (victorious) parousia is placed right in the middle of the report about their activities (16:15), underlining the parenetic exhortation to choose whom to serve.

#### **6.2.7 New and old names**

Names are universally important in Biblical thought, in Revelation as much as in the other books of the canon. The issue of names also is a linking factor between the series of sevens and the seven messages. In 2:17 the overcomers in Pergamum are promised a new name “known only to him who receives it.” One negative key figure in particular is given a new name: Jezebel of Thyatira (2:20). Neither is accidental. The new name marks the overcomers as children of God<sup>251</sup> whereas the Thyatiran leader is placed outside the people of God by her name alone. Old Testament Jezebel was, after all, a foreigner in Israel and she never sought to become a true Israelite, but rather endeavoured to divorce the people from its very existence, namely its relationship with YHWH.

There are two related issues in the series of sevens. One concerns the name of no one lower than God himself. His name, so holy to the Jews that they refrained from saying it, is being cursed (ἐβλασφήμησαν) by the unrepentant humanity. This provides a telling insight into the perversity of humanity's refusal to serve and honour him (cf. 6.2.10.2).

The other cases in the series of sevens where actors in Revelation's drama are explicitly given names are with those who execute the plagues. Their names, like that of Jezebel, are clearly negative names. In 6:8 the rider on the pale horse is called Death, in 8:11 the star

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250 Cf. 6.1.4.3.

251 Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 254-255; Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 202.

contaminating one third of all water is introduced as Wormwood and in 9:11 the leader over the locusts bears the name Abaddon in Hebrew and Apollyon in Greek, both meaning destruction or destroyer. As I have argued in 3.3.2, the star called Wormwood and Abaddon/Apollyon along with the fallen star of 9:1 and angel of 12:9 is most likely Satan himself. I suggest therefore that the rider on the pale horse (6:8: “Death”) is one more symbol for Satan. The assignment of negative names indicate the satanic nature of those who bear them. While the name Jezebel is not as harsh as “Death”, Wormwood or “destruction/destroyer,” the fact of this name alone indicates the side she is counted on.

Note also that according to 3:7, Christ holds the key of David, whereas in 9:1 the fallen star, which is symbolic for Satan, is given the key to the abyss (cf. 3.3.2). Satan's power is limited. Even as he unleashes his army of locusts over the world, he needs God's permission to do so (9:1-5). And even that permission is limited, not only in time, but in that he may not harm God's own at all (9:4). This both assures the suffering church that God is and will remain in control and sends a warning to those who are living in compromise that ultimately they will be counted among Satan's followers and thus go down with him.

#### **6.2.8 He comes like a thief**

The exhortation to be ready in the sixth bowl (16:15) has a counterpart in the seven messages, namely in the message to Sardis (3:2-3; cf. thief)<sup>252</sup>. In both instances the audience is called to wake up (3:3) or to remain awake (16:15) because Christ will come like a thief (3:3; 16:15). This means that his arrival, while to be expected at any time, will be entirely unpredictable (3:3): “you will not know at what time I will come over you.” Once again the implications are clear: faithfulness particularly in witness is a core ingredient to being ready and prepared, it is one of the most important responses Revelation's parenesis seeks to elicit in its audience.

#### **6.2.9 The Holy One**

The coming Lord as the central figure of the Book of Revelation appears in every part of the book. However, two of his self-designations at the beginning of two of the seven messages are linked to the series of sevens in a particular way. In both cases what Christ says about himself is later taken up in the praise of the church (or of an angel: 16:5). In 2:8 Christ says about himself that he is “the First and the Last, who died and came to life again.” As I have argued in 3.3.2, this is mirrored in 11:17 where the twenty-four elders praise God as “the One who is

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<sup>252</sup> Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 275.836; Giesen, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 359; Harrington, *Revelation*, 166; Hughes, *The Book of Revelation*, 55.177; Osborne, *Revelation*, 177.593; Thompson, *Revelation*, 156; Witherington, *Revelation*, 210.

and who was” and in 16:5 where the angel in charge of the waters addresses God with the words “you who are and who were, the Holy One”. This title of “Holy One” is also a designation used by Christ with regard to himself in 3:7, along with the phrase “he who is true”. Both occur again in 6:10 where the souls under the altar address God as holy and true. Twice more in the series of sevens God is called true (15:3; 16:7). The two churches, thus reassured that Christ's self-designations are adequate and reliable, are the churches in Smyrna and Philadelphia, the very two churches which suffer most from persecution. Not surprisingly then the affirmation of Christ's identity to them appears (within the series of sevens) always in the context of God's judgment of those who oppose him and his followers.

#### **6.2.10 The inhabitants of the earth**

As I have mentioned in 6.2.2 the series of sevens focus on the inhabitants of the earth in particular. Twice the reference is explicit (6:10; 8:13), but they are the prime objects of the series' plagues. This becomes obvious when in 6:4 the rider on the red horse is “given power to take peace from the earth and to make men slay each other.” It is the earth and those who live on it that are affected. Likewise in 9:3-4, the locusts come to earth and are “told not to harm the grass of the earth or any plant or tree, but only those people who did not have the seal of God on their foreheads.” Again, it is the human inhabitants of the earth that are in focus. The same applies not only to 16:2<sup>253</sup> (“The first angel went and poured out his bowl on the land, and ugly and painful sores broke out on the people who had the mark of the beast and worshipped his image”) but to other occurrences of γῆ in the series of sevens (6:8.15; 16:18) and even to a number of instances where the earth is not explicitly mentioned. For example, in 16:8 “the sun was given power to scorch people with fire.” Who else are these people if not the inhabitants of the earth? Witherington refers to them as “those who serve the anti-Christ”<sup>254</sup>, Smalley speaks of “unfaithful idolaters”<sup>255</sup> and Hughes calls them “the followers of the beast”<sup>256</sup>. All of these terms are exact descriptions of the inhabitants of the earth or “earth dwellers”<sup>257</sup>, as Johnson labels them. Thompson also points out that they “contrast those before the throne whom ‘the sun will not strike, ... nor any scorching heat,’ 7:16”<sup>258</sup>.

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253 Osborne, *Revelation*, 579.

254 Witherington, *Revelation*, 209.

255 Smalley, *The Revelation to John*, 405.

256 Hughes, *The Book of Revelation*, 175.

257 Johnson, *Revelation*, 154.

258 Thompson, *Revelation*, 154. Omission in Thompson.

The “earth dwellers” also make their appearance in the seven messages. Explicitly they are the ones to be tested in “the hour of trial that is going to come upon the whole world” (3:10). While the term τοὺς κατοικοῦντας ἐν τῇ γῇ excludes the faithful, the mentioning of a time of testing should lead to the hope of passing the test and should thus parenetically inspire Revelation's addressees, both faithful and unfaithful, to live as followers of the One who is holy and true (3:7). Even if the addressees were to be aware that the faithful are exempt from this testing, a similar response could nevertheless be expected. It is quite clear that Christ counts all those in the churches who do not live faithfully among the inhabitants of the earth who will be subjected to this “hour of trial”. Thus it should parenetically inspire Revelation's addressees to live as followers of Christ and to therefore escape being subjected to the trial, whether they currently live faithfully or not.

Three issues in particular identify the areas where members of the churches are in danger of being counted among the inhabitants of the earth: they are led by liars (see 6.2.10.1), they blaspheme (see 6.2.10.2) and they indulge in idolatry and fornication (see 6.2.10.3).

#### **6.2.10.1 *Led by liars***

In 16:13-16 the mock-trinity of dragon, beast and pseudo-prophet leads the world into battle against God. This demonic trinity of rebellion is the result of Satan's desire to be not only like God but to be God in God's place. While the inhabitants of the earth are not explicitly mentioned, they are represented by their kings (16:14: τοὺς βασιλεῖς τῆς οἰκουμένης ὅλης) and most likely form the bulk of their armies. That the pseudo-prophet is among those who lead them indicates that they are being led astray, deceived and made to follow lies<sup>259</sup>.

In the seven messages deception by lying leaders also plays a significant role. Jezebel of Thyatira is effectively given the same title as the third part of 16:13's mock-trinity. She is labelled a prophet who leads her followers astray (2:20-21), someone who claims to communicate the word of God to their followers but only tells them lies. Beale comments:

John later portrays those who engage in prophetic deception as a beast and “false prophet,” whose master is a devilish beast, in order to give the Thyatirans a true heavenly perspective of the real character of these false teachers (13:11; 16:13; 19:20; cf. πλανᾶω [‘lead astray’] in 2:20; 13:14; and 19:20 in descriptions of the false prophet and in 18:23 with reference to Babylon). Hopefully the connection would impress on them the gravity of the situation and shock them so that they would be impelled to take disciplinary action against the heretical teachers.<sup>260</sup>

259 Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 831; Osborne, *Revelation*, 591; Smalley, *The Revelation to John*, 409.

260 Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 261-262. Square brackets in original.

Those who follow her are thus directly associated with the demonic rebellion against God which the sixth bowl so clearly describes, even more so since in her self-idolizing their leader imitates the satanic desire to be God (cf. 6.1.4.15).

Unlike the church in Thyatira (and probably Pergamum), where Jezebel's lies have gained her a steady following, the church in Ephesus does not fall for the pseudo-apostles who try to deceive the local Christians<sup>261</sup>. This is to be commended and so the church is praised twice (2:2.6) for resisting the lies of false teachers. If they find themselves among the inhabitants of the earth, it was not because they were deceived by deliberately false teaching.

While probably not with a deliberate lie, the churches in Sardis (3:1: “you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead”) and Laodicea (3:17: “You say, ‘I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.’ But you do not realise that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked.”) nevertheless are deceiving themselves. Their positive self-image desperately needs to be corrected. Sardis' good reputation is not backed by reality and Laodicea's material wealth does not spare them from spiritual poverty. When put to the test in the series of seals, trumpets and bowls, their material possessions cannot help them, and so 6:15 finds the rich hiding in caves along with the theoretically powerful and – notably – the poor. When God judges the inhabitants of the earth their wealth becomes meaningless at best, but more likely problematic.

#### **6.2.10.2 Blasphemy**

The series of the bowls reports three instances where the people on earth “curse (the name of) God” (16:9.11.21). The word used in all three instances is ἐβλασφήμησαν. The English word blaspheme derives from this root. Within Revelation the word links the inhabitants of the earth not only directly and exclusively<sup>262</sup> to the beast on which Babylon rides (17:3) and thus to Babylon itself, it also links them to the (probably identical<sup>263</sup>) beast of Rev 13 which upon opening its mouth utters nothing but blasphemy against God, against God's “name and his dwelling-place and those who live in heaven” (13:6). “The persecutors are participating in the blasphemy of the Antichrist.”<sup>264</sup> Commenting on 16:9 Thomas observes about the earth people who curse the name of God that “[t]hese men have now taken on the character of the god

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261 Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 229; Hughes, *The Book of Revelation*, 34; Osborne, *Revelation*, 113.

262 Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 823.

263 Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 853; Giesen, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 370-371; Osborne, *Revelation*, 610-611; Thomas, *Revelation 8-22*, 285.

264 Osborne, *Revelation*, 586.

whom they serve”<sup>265</sup>, implying that instead of acknowledging the God of heaven (16:11) they worship Satan as their idol.

In the seven messages the word βλασφημία is used only once in 2:9 in the context of “those who claim to be Jews but are not but belong to the synagogue of Satan.” Commenting on 16:21 Osborne remarks: “Thus, not only is God blasphemed but his people as well (2:9; 13:6b).”<sup>266</sup> Thus nobody from within the churches is directly engaged in this behaviour. It is typical of satanic opposition to the church, it is the behaviour of the persecutors of the faithful who “in their opposition and slander of God's people have become one with ‘Satan.’”<sup>267</sup> It is attempted character assassination as well as actual murder. But that also means that anyone in the churches, who by their unfaithfulness is effectively associated with the inhabitants of the earth, is therefore also associated with both blasphemy against God and the murder of the faithful.

### **6.2.10.3 Idolatry and fornication**

Members of two churches are accused of both idolatry and fornication in no uncertain terms. Those in Pergamum who follow the teaching of Balaam (2:14) and Jezebel's followers in Thyatira (2:20.22) are guilty of participation in pagan cults, likely even to the point of engaging in sexual contacts with temple prostitutes (cf. 2.2.1.2 and 2.2.1.3).

That in 9:20.21 the inhabitants of the earth are accused, among other vices, of these two acts of disobedience towards Christ<sup>268</sup>, underlines that these perpetrators in the churches in Pergamum and Thyatira are to be counted among the inhabitants of the earth and are thus associated with the satanic rebellion against God. Among other things, this means that ultimately they share in the responsibility for the death of the faithful witnesses. Obviously the dividing line between the inhabitants of the earth who bear the mark of the beast (13:16.17; 14:9.11; 16:2; 19:20; 20:4) and those who have the seal of God on their foreheads (9:4) runs right through the churches.

It is interesting to note that in 9:21 fornication (πορνεία) is listed along with murder (φόνος), witchcraft (φάρμακον) and theft (κλέμμα). While murder could somehow be associated with the persecution of the faithful and thus linked to idolatry and while witchcraft could well be yet another word for idolatry, theft can hardly be symbolic but needs to be understood literally. It is thus only reasonable to assume the same for the use of witchcraft, murder and

265 Thomas, *Revelation* 8-22, 257.

266 Osborne, *Revelation*, 600.

267 Osborne, *Revelation*, 132.

268 Osborne, *Revelation*, 385.387.

fornication in 9:21, particularly so since idolatry is dealt with in a separate statement in 9:20. This in turn would support an argument that reads fornication in the seven messages as literal sexual misconduct and not as a symbolic expression for idolatry<sup>269</sup>.

### **6.2.11 Repentance and the hour of trial**

It is interesting to follow the development of the reactions of the inhabitants of the earth to the plagues which come over them. In the first series, in the sixth seal (6:16-17), they all, high and low, flee into caves and explicitly acknowledge God's lordship. They exclaim (6:17) that "the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?" While not exactly the typical wording of a prayer of repentance, there is as yet no explicit rebellion against God's judgment either. Rather, it seems as though the inhabitants of the earth acknowledged that they deserved the wrath of God<sup>270</sup>. They seek to evade judgment (Thompson: "Being buried under an earthquake and under falling rocks is preferable to facing divine wrath"<sup>271</sup>). The reference to Hosea 10 is obvious. Osborne writes:

There are not many times in history people have begged to be smothered in an avalanche. This is an allusion to Hos 10:8, which describes the destruction of Israel's idolatrous high places and altars and then predicts that Israel will "say to the mountains, 'Cover us!' and to the hills, 'Fall on us!'" Both in Hosea and here the enemies of God wish to perish in order to escape the divine wrath.<sup>272</sup>

However, Hosea 10:12 implies that as of yet it is not too late to seek the Lord ("for it is time to seek the LORD, until he comes"). Likewise in Rev 6:16 the possibility of the earth dweller's repentance and God's mercy is still implied, particularly in comparison to the reactions to the trumpet and bowl series.

In the sixth trumpet we find the relatively brief comment that "[t]he rest of mankind that were not killed by these plagues still did not repent of the work of their hands" which is followed by a list detailing what exactly they should have repented from (9:20-21). The expectation is now made explicit. The inhabitants of the earth should have been prompted to repentance by the plagues. The plagues are "a final offer of salvation to the nations"<sup>273</sup>. As had been obvious in the sixth seal, the inhabitants of the earth were aware that the disasters around them were not random acts of nature but acts of God in the truest sense of the word. But instead of doing as they are urged to do, the inhabitants of the earth continue in their life without and therefore

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269 Contra Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 250.519-520; Harrington, *Revelation*, 61.

270 Lohse, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 48; Roloff, *The Revelation of John*, 93; Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 457.

271 Thompson, *Revelation*, 106.

272 Osborne, *Revelation*, 295.

273 Osborne, *Revelation*, 385.



against God. Thomas aptly comments (on 16:9, where it also occurs): “‘They did not repent’ (Οὐ μετενόησαν [*Ou metenoēsan*]) is a refrain like a funeral dirge (9:20-21; 16:11).”<sup>274</sup>

In the bowl series, the reactions of the inhabitants of the earth are reported three times, but each time the reaction is essentially the same. Thomas speaks of “a continuation of defiance”<sup>275</sup>. In 16:9 John reports them as cursing God, refusing to repent and refusing to glorify God (in contrast to those who survive the earthquake in 11:13<sup>276</sup>). That in 16:11 no more mention is made of the refusal to glorify God may point to John's growing conviction that repentance and an end of the cursing is all that could possibly be expected of the inhabitants of the earth, that to expect them to glorify God would be asking for too much. This trend is then confirmed in 16:21 where John seems to have given up hope that the inhabitants of the earth might indeed repent. All he mentions there is that they still keep cursing God for what he inflicts upon them. Most likely John no longer expects them to stop that either. In their cursing in 16:21 is contained the refusal to both repent and glorify God. Witherington's comment is apt: “The chapter concludes with a hailstorm without parallel. Even this leads to no repentance, only a blasphemous scream complaining about the severe weather.”<sup>277</sup> That is how far they have come, from the chance of repentance, to neglecting this chance, to outright blasphemy where repentance is no longer even imaginable. Beale compares the plagues in the series of sevens to the plagues of Egypt (Ex 7-12). Commenting on 16:11 he then writes: “As in the case of Pharaoh, the ultimate effect of the plague is only further hardness: ‘they did not repent from their works.’”<sup>278</sup>

This scenario gives a new urgency to the exhortations to repent in the seven messages. Six times, at least once in every message, except in those to the churches in Smyrna and Philadelphia where Christ has nothing to criticize, Christ extends the invitation or challenge to repent. The development in the series of sevens adds to the seriousness of this exhortation in the messages<sup>279</sup>. The longer repentance is delayed, the more the as of yet unrepentant member of the church identifies with the inhabitants of the earth, the greater the hold which the satanic deception is allowed to gain in their life, the higher the likelihood that they will end up in unreserved hostility towards God. Jezebel of Thyatira is the classic example of such a development (2:21): “I have given her time to repent of her immorality, but she is unwilling.”

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274 Thomas, *Revelation 8-22*, 258. Square brackets in original.

275 Thomas, *Revelation 8-22*, 277.

276 Harrington, *Revelation*, 164; Thomas, *Revelation 8-22*, 258.

277 Witherington, *Revelation*, 211.

278 Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 825. Similarly Aune, *Revelation 6-16*, 889; Giesen, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 226; Johnson, *Revelation*, 157; Osborne, *Revelation*, 588; Smalley, *The Revelation to John*, 405.

279 Johnson, *Revelation*, 99.

For the series of sevens this interpretative link has important implications as well because it means that the purpose and rhetorical function of the seals, trumpets and bowls in the overall discourse of the book is to call the churches to repentance. Both 9:20-21 and 16:9.11 imply that God expects repentance as the appropriate reaction to the plagues of the series of sevens. While this does not necessarily make the desired repentance the single reason why God might send plagues over the earth, it definitely is the main reason why they are shown to John and why he then reports them in his book.

It is remarkable that of the 12 (sic!) occurrences of μετανοέω in Revelation (2:5.16.21.22; 3:3.19; 9:20.21; 16:9.11) all are in the seven messages or in the series of sevens<sup>280</sup> (the noun μετάνοια is not used in Revelation). This supports the notion that the theme of repentance is the one single most important issue connecting these two parts of the book. More than anything else, Revelation wants to provoke repentance in the unfaithful. This is plain to see in both the seven messages and in the series of sevens, not to mention all the other occasions where other words are used to symbolically refer to the same concept (cf. 6.1.4.1).

Therefore, since the series of sevens are part of Revelation in order to prompt the churches to repent, wherever necessary from whatever acts of unfaithfulness towards God they may be involved in, it would be quite beside the point to read them as though they were predicting specific future events. Humphrey's comment about Babylon<sup>281</sup> applies here as well: The seals, trumpets and bowls are “true symbols”, “not merely ciphers” for one or even three distinct series of events. They stand for a general reality, for God's active involvement in the affairs of the world through which he seeks to stimulate repentance.

The prophets of the Old Testament often argued along similar lines, announcing God's involvement in the course of history, his explicit acts of judgment in order to make himself known to his wayward people. Ez 6:10.13-14 offers a vivid example of this:

And they will know that I am the LORD; I did not threaten in vain to bring this calamity on them. ... And they will know that I am the LORD, when their people lie slain among their idols around their altars, on every high hill and on all the mountaintops, under every spreading tree and every leafy oak—places where they offered fragrant incense to all their idols. And I will stretch out my hand against them and make the land a desolate waste from the desert to Diblah— wherever they live. Then they will know that I am the LORD.

In this context, droughts and other natural disasters are seen as “acts of God” in the most direct sense of the word (ie in Elijah's conflict with Ahab, 1 Ki 17-18). But it is typical of

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280 Aune, *Revelation 6-16*, 541; Osborne, *Revelation*, 385; Smalley, *The Revelation to John*, 242.

281 Humphrey, *The ladies and the cities*, 115, n 97.

other acts of divine judgment that God uses pagan kings and their soldiers to achieve his purposes (ie Jer 25:9), that these pagans count their God-given victories over the people of God as signs of their own strength or of the strength of their idols and that therefore they can themselves expect God's judgment over their own hubris which refuses to acknowledge that they too are but tools in God's hands (ie Jer 50:25). In Isaiah's prophecy against Assyria (Is 10:5-16) God speaks of both the judgment of Israel through the Assyrians and his judgment for Assyria's hubris:

Woe to the Assyrian, the rod of my anger, in whose hand is the club of my wrath! I send him against a godless nation, I dispatch him against a people who anger me ... But this is not what he intends, this is not what he has in mind; his purpose is to destroy, to put an end to many nations. 'Are not my commanders all kings?' he says. ... 'shall I not deal with Jerusalem and her images as I dealt with Samaria and her idols?' ... I will punish the king of Assyria for the wilful pride of his heart and the haughty look in his eyes. For he says: 'By the strength of my hand I have done this, and by my wisdom, because I have understanding. I removed the boundaries of nations, I plundered their treasures; like a mighty one I subdued their kings.' ... Does the axe raise itself above him who swings it, or the saw boast against him who uses it? As if a rod were to wield him who lifts it up, or a club brandish him who is not wood! Therefore, the Lord, the LORD Almighty, will send a wasting disease upon his sturdy warriors; under his pomp a fire will be kindled like a blazing flame."

This is in obvious analogy to what happens in Revelation. While most of the "acts of God" in the series of sevens are acts of God, armies that kill and bring destruction are, like the rider on the pale horse, of satanic origin, even while effectively acting on God's command and within the limits he allows them. That they see this as the beginning of a rebellious uprising against God is but one of the factors which leads to God's judgment over them.

In the seven messages, the one "event" which is directly related to the inhabitants of the earth as those upon whom the plagues of the series of sevens are inflicted is the hour of trial which is announced in 3:10. The combination of "earth" (γῆ) and "whole world" (οἰκουμένη) in 3:10 suggests that while the two are used in different phrases they essentially refer to the same thing. "The phrase 'the whole earth' [τῆς οἰκουμένης] ... is synonymous with 'the inhabitants of the earth' in v 10c."<sup>282</sup> So while in 3:10 the hour of trial is said to come ἐπὶ τῆς οἰκουμένης and in the series of sevens the plagues are unleashed against τῆς γῆς (8:5.7; 9:1.3.4; 16:1.2; however note the use of τοὺς βασιλεῖς τῆς οἰκουμένης in 16:14) and its inhabitants, I suggest that indeed the seals, trumpets and bowls symbolize this very hour of trial, that "the hour of trial" is a reference to the series of sevens, that the two are essentially

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<sup>282</sup> Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 239.

one<sup>283</sup>. This means that insights in the nature of the one need to impact the interpretation of the other.

For example the designation of the hour of trial as an opportunity to “test” the inhabitants of the earth (3:10) underlines that John need not be surprised at their unrepentant attitude. While the plagues should have caused the inhabitants of the earth to repent, they are not in themselves a call to repentance for the unfaithful. Rather, the inhabitants of the earth fail the test exactly because they do not repent and because rather than repenting they react to the test by decidedly doing the opposite in their deliberate cursing of God and his name. In their unwillingness to repent lies the criterion of the test upon which they themselves decide whether or not they are on God's side. The series of sevens thus do not seek to change the minds of those who are subjected to them but rather they seek to enforce and reveal what these minds are set on<sup>284</sup>. At this point Beale needs to be quoted a some length. Commenting in 9:20 he writes:

The “plagues” were never intended to *cause* the vast majority of idolaters to “repent” of worshipping demons, but only have the effect that those “not having the seal of God” remain in their hardened condition (cf. 9:4). These plagues will have a redeeming effect only on a remnant of compromisers inside the church and idolaters outside the church, who it will turn out, will have been sealed beforehand ... The pattern of the exodus plagues is still apparent. Just as the plague of death against the firstborn of Egypt ultimately led to hardening instead of softening the remaining Egyptians, so the plagues here have the dual effect of death and continuing delusion for the remainder (cf. Exod. 14:4-8, 17). ... This reaction is implicitly part of the purpose of the plagues, especially in light of the overall intention of hardening inherent throughout the exodus plagues ... and the idea of deception and judgment inferred from 9:17-19. ... Therefore, the sixth trumpet includes spiritual-physical death for some and hardening, resulting in deception, for others as they refuse to heed the divine warnings and to turn in faith to the true God.<sup>285</sup>

Another example of the implications of reading the series of sevens as the hour of trial is found in the fact that the locusts are not allowed to harm those who have the seal of God (9:4) which corresponds with the promise in 3:10 that the faithful Philadelphians will be “held from the hour of trial”<sup>286</sup>. According to 9:4 the people of God live in the plagued world, they have not been isolated from it by being taken up into heaven or to some other safe place for example in the “rapture”. In the latter case the order to the locusts to not harm them would not have been necessary. Those who have the seal of God live among the inhabitants of the earth and are not spared from living in the plagued world. This then clarifies that the promise to be

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283 Wikenhauser, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 46-47.

284 Giesen, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 134-135.

285 Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 517-518. Italics by me.

286 Osborne, *Revelation*, 366.

held from the hour of trial does not mean that the Philadelphians also will be taken out of the world in the hour of trial, but rather that they will be spared from harm while still living through the plagues that afflict the world around them<sup>287</sup>. To a similar point Beale (referring to Gundry) points to the only other NT occurrence of of τηρέω with ἐκ in Jn 17:15 where Jesus prays for his disciples: “I ask not that you take them out of the world, but that you *keep them from* (τηρήσης αὐτοὺς ἐκ) the evil one.”<sup>288</sup> Beale concludes: “Thus Jesus denies a physical removal from tribulation and affirms spiritual protection from the devil”<sup>289</sup>. Mounce adds: “It is their preservation in trial that is taught. That the martyrs of 6:9-11 are told to wait for vindication until their full number would be killed indicates that the issue is not physical protection.”<sup>290</sup> This in turn is underlined by Osborne who, commenting on 3:10, concludes:

Therefore, the point is that the Philadelphia church (identified with all the faithful believers here) will be protected from the wrath of God against the unbelievers but not from the wrath of Satan, and that this protection is within and not a removal from (as in a pretribulation rapture)<sup>291</sup> that wrath.<sup>292</sup>

This corresponds with the understanding of the series of sevens and thus the hour of trial as being a reference to God's general involvement in the world rather than one single particular event, the latter being an interpretation which might be expected especially from the term “hour.” However unless its context specifically shows it to mean an hour-long time-period (“one hour” in 17:12 and 18:10.17.19 where it emphasizes the swiftness of Babylon's fall<sup>293</sup>; cf. 6.1.4.10), the word ὥρα in Revelation always refers to an otherwise unspecified but divinely predetermined point in time (3:3: “you will not know at what time I will come to you”; 9:15: “this very hour and day and month and year”; 11:13: “at that very hour there was a severe earthquake”). In some cases ὥρα may also imply that the events at this point in time last for a period of time of unspecified duration (14:7: “the hour of his judgment has come”; 14:15: “the time to reap has come”). The use of ὥρα in 3:10 resembles most closely the use in 14:7.15 and thus refers not to a particularly short duration of the time of trial but to its divine predetermination and possibly to its unspecified duration. In any case it does not render

287 Osborne, *Revelation*, 193-194. Contra Johnson, *Revelation*, 58; Thomas, *Revelation 1-7*, 284-288.

288 Italics and Greek in brackets in Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 291.

289 Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 291.

290 Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 103

291 Footnote 22 in Osborne, *Revelation*, 194: “This does not mean that the pretribulation position is necessarily wrong, only that Rev. 3:10 cannot be used in favour of this position.” However since, as I hope to show, the trial is not a specific end-time tribulation, there is no room for a pretribulation rapture.

292 Osborne, *Revelation*, 194.

293 Aune, *Revelation 17-22*, 998; Giesen, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 397.399.400; Osborne, *Revelation*, 622 (“virtually instantaneous”); Thomas, *Revelation 8-22*, 329.339.

impossible the understanding of the hour or time of trial as God's ongoing involvement in the affairs of the world.

Such an interpretation also explains the imminence of the arrival of this hour of trial as implied by τῆς μελλούσης in 3:10. Unlike the parousia, which is to be expected “soon”, the hour of trial is about to come, it has practically begun already, it is as good as there.

According to Revelation then, God already acts in the here and now, his intervention and even his judgment is not entirely delayed until the final judgment. Those who refuse to repent and chose to curse God have not only had their judgment in the seals, trumpets and bowls, they even spoke the verdict themselves.

This is one of the reasons why I am not convinced by the view which sees in the series of sevens one particular pre-parousia event of judgment in the sense in which many scholars read Jesus' announcements to come in judgment over some churches (cf. 3.3.1.2). The judgment of the series of sevens is not one of Christ coming to fight against the unfaithful in the churches, it is in fact not related to his coming at all. Rather, it is one aspect of God's continuous involvement in the events in this world. He is in control and uses even the destruction caused by the satanic forces (whom he allows freedom to act) to bring his people back to himself and to separate them from those who oppose him. The hour of trial is thus not one specific literal hour, it is the present reality of God's presence in this world as he calls his own to live faithfully and as he challenges the inhabitants of the earth to either repent from their opposition to him or else to confirm it by engaging in outright rebellion against God.

In conclusion then, reading the series of sevens in connection with the seven messages has helped to shed light on their role in the overall rhetoric of Revelation. They serve to illustrate the importance of responding in repentance to God's intervention in the world. The series of sevens aptly illustrate that refusing to do so is not merely an act of unfaithfulness but will ultimately lead to outright rebellion against God. Christ's evaluation of the churches' failings and his advice on how to rectify the problems need to be taken to heart and acted upon. Repentance is necessary, not only to escape being harmed by the plagues but primarily to escape being deceived into a pattern of unfaithfulness.

### **6.3 Concluding remarks**

I have in two examples (Babylon and the series of sevens) applied my reading strategy to the concrete text of the Book of Revelation. I have done so primarily by making systematic interpretative use of the links between the body of Revelation's vision and the seven messages.

I have allowed those links to influence to a high degree, if not determine, my reading of the texts in question. In both examples this approach has brought significant results. These were reached by open-ended and plausible interaction with the text. At times this interaction with the text was creatively associative, as was to be expected with a text of such highly imaginative potential and intention. However, true to the genre of an academic thesis, the results of such creative steps were substantiated by less imaginative argumentation. For example the development in the earth dweller's responses to the plagues which I detected by reading between the lines (cf. 6.2.11) resulted in the observation of increasing hardening of the earth dweller's hearts towards God. Several other scholars made similar observations through the parallel to the Pharaoh's hardening heart in the Exodus plagues which seem to have served as a model for substantial parts of the series of sevens. I thus have demonstrated the plausibility and practical applicability of my reading strategy.

Some of the links between the body of Revelation and the seven messages are more important than others. For example the link between Revelation's Babylon and Jezebel of Thyatira (6.1.4.15) is significantly more relevant than the contrast between the hidden manna of 2:17 and the food items in the merchants' portfolio (6.1.4.6) and the former certainly needs substantially higher attention, not least because its consequences are more far reaching. But this certainly does not devalue the overall strategy of systematically identifying and analysing all links between a section of Revelation's body and the seven messages. I hope that it has become clear that such an approach to the book yields substantial, useful and plausible results.

In the concrete examples the comment of one scholar sums up the general insight gained from my examples of the application of the proposed reading strategy. Commenting (in a footnote!) on Revelation's Babylon, Humphrey writes that "Babylon is a true symbol, and not merely a cipher."<sup>294</sup> Not only is this distinction very helpful in clarifying just how different views see the book's visions, I dare say that in this statement Humphrey sums up the results of my investigation regarding the content of the visions in Revelation's body. Revelation's body, I have found, is (at least up to ch 19) not about a limited set of events which can be deciphered. Its symbols are truly symbolic, they are archetypical descriptions of a transcendent reality and its impact on those who live in the physical realm. They describe the satanic rebellion against God and its consequences for the church as well as its unbelieving neighbours. And they do so not in order to foretell specific future events or patterns of events but in order to parenetically

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294 Humphrey, *The ladies and the cities*, 115, n 97.

urge the church to live faithfully in the midst of threats and temptations of all kind and not to give in to these, since all of them are essentially satanic attempts to deceive Christians into unfaithfulness. I therefore agree wholeheartedly with Hendriksen's analysis:

Do these symbols refer to specific events, single happenings, dates or persons in history? For if they do, then we may as well admit that we cannot interpret them. Because among the thousands of dates and events and persons of history that show certain traits of resemblance to the symbol in question, who is able to select the one and only date, event, or person that was forecast by this particular symbol? Confusion results.<sup>295</sup>

If we are faced with symbols this does not make the task of interpreting them easier. As the examples in 6.1.5 demonstrate, the question of whether or not a concrete situation is an expression of Revelation's archetypical symbol is rarely unambiguous. What one interpreter might view as an example of the Babylonian archetype may well look like the New Jerusalem to someone else. For the first readers the seven messages helped to clarify these matters. For subsequent readers the situation is incomparably more complex and thus difficult. Is homosexuality Babylon incarnate or is opposition to homosexuals in the church akin to the loveless legalism many commentators see in the church in Ephesus<sup>296</sup> if not even a form of persecution? The symbol in itself cannot answer this question. But it can remind the church of the primacy of faithfulness towards the Lamb (whatever that might mean in any given situation) as opposed to conforming to the standards of the unbelieving world around it.

A cipher, should it even be clearly identifiable, by definition would not face the same problem. In itself its scope is limited to identifying one single entity which may or may not resemble other entities. But even if it did resemble other entities it would interpret or explain them only by extension. While a symbol is inherently polyvalent, a cipher has only one meaning. Thus once Revelation's Babylon has been identified as a cipher for Rome, the papacy or some other authority, the image's horizon of meaning and thus influence is limited to that particular entity.

But the many different aspects of Revelation's Babylon alone demand that it cannot be limited to one single meaning. Babylon is as much Thyatira's Jezebel as it is Pergamum's throne of Satan, it is as much the imperial cult as it is Tyre's and Laodicea's worship of money.

This however means that the hermeneutical effort can hardly end with an explanation of the text. Revelation's polyvalent symbols demand to be applied to the life of the church in whatever environment it happens to find itself in at changing times and in varying places, they

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<sup>295</sup> Hendriksen, *More than conquerors*, 40-41.

<sup>296</sup> For example Giesen, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 99; Harrington, *Revelation*, 57; Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 69-70; Osborne, *Revelation*, 116.



demand that the church examine itself in the light of the bright morning star (22:16) in order to know whether it is faithful and ready to face persecution or whether it is threatened by (self-) idolatry in its various kinds. Most likely persecution will be easily recognized, but how can one distinguish between true prophecy and false teaching? Most likely Jezebel's follower's believed that they heard the true word of God from her, while John claims that that was not the case. Likewise, today views about right doctrine and life will necessarily differ, often necessitating the quest for a middle ground that would still allow all positions to remain faithful to their respective positions. The difficulties encountered in searching for this faithful middle ground give a certain weight to the question whether or not Revelation does allow for a faithful middle ground where the church neither unfaithfully compromises nor exposes itself to persecution. While the seven messages as the first concrete cases of applying the symbols and archetypes to real life certainly prove a valuable tool in the process, every new generation will have to ask and answer for themselves the question of what does and what does not constitute faithful Christian living.

## 7 Summary and outlook

### 7.1 Summary

I have endeavoured to find a more focused and refined way of reading the Book of Revelation while remaining true to my understanding of the book as part of the Christian canon. To this end I have examined the book's introductory and concluding chapters in search for clues about the nature of the book as well as about how it thus might be intended to be read (chapter 3 of this thesis). What emerged was a clearly distinguishable frame to the book which emphasizes the urgency, the reliability and the parenetic intention and authority of the book, including all its parts, while also focussing on Christ as the central character of the book. The inaugural vision (1:9-20) plays a special part in that it introduces the visions of Revelation's body while being inseparable from the seven messages (see below).

Part of the examination of the frame required close attention to some issues which also are important for other parts of the thesis. These issues along with some others were dealt with in a separate chapter before embarking on the systematic exploration of first the frame and then the seven messages, among them the identification of the book's addressees (2.1), an examination of the social world in which these addressees lived (2.2) and studies of three words or concepts (τηρέω: 2.4.1; ἔργα: 2.4.2; μάρτυς: 2.5).

The seven messages were examined in chapter 4, providing insights into the variety of parenetic issues addressed in Revelation. Christ's self-introductions are particularly relevant to the parenetic message for the respective church. His analysis of each of the churches' circumstances and their deeds (ἔργα) is followed by parenetic advice for overcoming the problems and living faithfully. Each message concludes with promises to the overcomers, that is to those who heed the advice which applies to their respective situation, and a general exhortation to heed the spirit's message to the churches. Links between all the parts examined up to this point as well as the book's body speak clearly of the unity and intra-connectedness of the book's discourse.

I then presented my reading strategy in two steps: In a first step I drew conclusions about the nature, purpose and genre of Revelation's body from my observations on the frame and the seven messages (5.1). In a second step I developed a proposal for reading the visions accordingly. While also pointing out that Revelation's visions need to be read as a work of art (5.2.1) this proposal has two primary points of focus in its emphases on parenesis (5.2.2) and intra-textuality (5.2.3). This means that in this reading strategy the primary mode of

interpretation is parenetical, that is identifying the parenetic intention and impact of a passage. One of the most vital tools in reading Revelation's visions parenetically is to interpret them intra-textually, that is to allow a text's links to the other part of the book to determine its meaning, to allow a corresponding passage in the seven messages to interpret an image in Revelation's body and vice versa.

I have then applied this reading strategy to two particular parts of the body in order to demonstrate how it could be implemented and that it yields plausible and substantial results. In the case of Revelation's Babylon (6.1) I argued that the majority view which reads Babylon as a cipher for Rome cannot be upheld, particularly when considering the broad range of issues represented in the image, its Old Testament sources and its application in the seven messages. I have then argued that the Babylon image is an archetype, a symbol for a reality which at various times and places may appear in a different guise. Similarly in the series of seven seals, trumpets and bowls (6.2) I have suggested that these series neither depict a chronology of events nor can be limited to one single set of events. It has emerged that the series of sevens speak in symbolical and figurative language of God's ongoing involvement in the world, of his judgment of the inhabitants of the earth and of his protection of the faithful.

I hope to have shown that my reading strategy is one plausible, workable and effective tool among a number of others (e.g. consideration for the Old Testament background, cf. 5.2) which are helpfully decisive for interpreting the visions of Revelation's body. It takes seriously the original communication event of which it was a part and confirms the book's relevance for its first audience by reading it in its historic context. It also allows for the parenesis offered to the original addressees to be reapplied to the wider church throughout time and space.

While not providing an unambiguous definition of every conceivable incarnation of its symbols, such an intra-textual reading eliminates many arbitrary applications of the Book of Revelation. It provides an alternative to some interpretations of the book along various end-time scenarios while still remaining true to the basic conviction that as part of the Christian canon the Book of Revelation is the faithful and reliable word of God to his church.

## **7.2 Outlook**

The end of this thesis can be but a colon, a starting point to further research. There remains a considerable amount of work to be done in a number of fields. Most obviously I have not commented at all on a number of significant passages in Revelation's body. The throne room scene in Rev 5-6, the vision of the 144000 and the great multitude in Rev 7, Rev 10-14 with

such significant images as the two witnesses (11:1-14), the woman clothed with the sun, the directly linked description of the beast (12:1-13:18) and the harvest scene of 14:14-20 as well as the final section of the book including the “millenium” (20:1-6) have not been touched upon at all. Since they were made only in passim my comments on the last judgment (3.4.5) or the New Jerusalem (ie. 4.2.5, 5.2.2, 5.2.3, 6.1.5) likewise barely touch the surface of these passages. Further substantial insights are to be expected from reading these images intra-textually as my reading strategy suggests.

Intra-textuality in the Book of Revelation cannot stop at linking the seven messages to isolated passages in the book's body. So far I have for practical purposes separated the Babylon vision and the series of sevens from their co-text in the body of Revelation. I believe that this is a necessary step, just as within these scenes single words and statements need particular attention before contributing to their context. The second step however is similarly important. The single isolated passages need to be put back together, they need to be synthesized as it were, in order to not only make their specific contribution within rather than separated from the overall picture but to also be interpreted adequately even by themselves. The Babylon vision requires an understanding of the nature of the beast, probably beyond what I could offer in my exposition. The beast on the other hand can hardly be understood without reciprocal understanding of the image of the woman clothed with the sun. Thus ultimately to do justice to the Book of Revelation requires a thorough examination of each of its parts, something unfortunately well beyond the scope of this thesis.

Another question which arises from a successful parenetic reading of the book, is whether such a reading strategy has value for accessing other literature sharing apocalyptic features. It would be helpful to test this thesis by examining the role of parenesis generally as a common intent of apocalyptic literature.

Finally and, I suspect, most challengingly, Revelation's parenesis demands to be applied in the life of the church. The Book of Revelation was not written to be confined to scholarly examination in the security of academic abstraction. Revelation was meant to be read and followed, to be applied and thus obeyed. While this goes beyond mere scholarly exploration of the text's original meaning, such a scholarly undertaking would itself remain meaningless if it did not seek to provide with its results tools for the church to adequately appropriate to its own situation the message of God's historic interaction with seven churches in late first century Asia Minor. Ultimately therefore the results of the application of my reading strategy

to the complete text of Revelation need to be made accessible for the church beyond the academic community.

I would be truly successful in my research if it indeed would help the church to live faithfully, to stand against threats and temptations, to live in the expectation of her coming Lord, to foreshadow the New Jerusalem and to reject Babylon's influence even in this present world. That, I am convinced, is what Christ wanted to achieve through the vision he gave to John, it likewise is what John hoped to achieve by writing down and publishing what he experienced. It therefore is what the church should use the book for, lest the warnings of 22:18-19 apply. What then could be more appropriate than to conclude with Christ's own words and John's response which the church needs to make its own (Rev 22:7.20<sup>1</sup>):

ἰδοὺ ἔρχομαι ταχύ.

μακάριος ὁ τηρῶν τοὺς λόγους τῆς προφητείας τοῦ βιβλίου τούτου.

... ναι ἔρχομαι ταχύ.

Ἀμήν, ἔρχου κύριε Ἰησοῦ.

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1 “Behold, I am coming soon! Blessed is he who keeps the words of the prophecy in this book. ... Yes, I am coming soon.” “Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.”

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