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A narrative commentary on Revelation approaches the book as an organic whole, a unity with a beginning, middle, and end. The way the narrator tells his story—the artful use of rhetorical devices, the development of characters, the arresting images, the narrator’s point of view, and the twists and turns of the plot—is of utmost importance in narrative analysis. An understanding of the narrator’s repertoire—his style, the cultural and historical assumptions, intertextual allusions, and his usage of Greek grammar and syntax—is also important for understanding his message. Another feature of a narrative commentary is that it reads like a novel with a beginning, middle, and an end. It flows from chapter to chapter, looking ahead and looking back, developing the symbolism, exploring the nuances of plot, and tracing the development of characters and elaborating their traits. John’s story has a specific point of view, and so a narrative commentary asks, What ideological or theological point of view does the writer want the reader/hearer to adopt? And why does he tell his story in this particular way?

The introduction to this commentary is a primer on narrative analysis. John’s usage of metaphors and similes, verbal threads, chiasms, inclusios, two-step progressions, and other rhetorical devices are explained. The prominence of symbolic numerals such as three, four, seven, and twelve is developed. Topographical, architectural, and temporal settings are not viewed merely as backdrops against which the story unfolds; they are saturated with meaning to orient the reader/hearer to a familiar yet strange...
world. John’s bizarre characters are not thin disguises for historical personages of the first century; they are characters in their own right with archetypical characteristics that reveal the nature of good and evil in our world. And even the cities of Revelation are not what they seem to be. Babylon is Rome. Or is it? Revelation’s plot of descent into disaster and its rescue by a messianic deliverer is a key component of John’s message, and so plot conflicts and complications are developed throughout the commentary. Other aspects of narrative analysis such as the writer’s unique style, the masterplot of the book, and the ideological point of view of the Apocalypse are examined.

This work follows a chapter-by-chapter analysis of John’s story but avoids the verse-by-verse annotations of traditional commentaries. The intention is to offer a readable commentary without the intrusions of intricate arguments or sidebars. Although the commentary is based on my translation of the Greek text, comments on the original language are kept to a minimum and placed in the footnotes. The audience for the commentary is upper-level undergraduate students, entry-level seminary and graduate students, and pastors and lay persons who want to read Revelation once again as a compelling story of intrigue.

I am happy to acknowledge many that have made this work possible. Grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities provided a solid grounding in literary theory and criticism. The University of Iceland allowed me to hone my skills as a literary critic as a Fulbright fellow in 1990. Students in my doctor of ministry courses on Revelation at Winebrenner Theological Seminary offered valuable insights and comments. And the editors at Baker Academic and Jeannine Grimm made many helpful suggestions to improve the quality of the work and eliminate the infelicities of expression. I am happy to dedicate this book to my two grandsons, Caleb and Ethan, who know how to brighten a day and delight their parents and grandparents.
A narrative commentary on Revelation enters John’s apocalyptic world to see what John sees and to hear what he hears. This approach pays close attention to the *how* of the narrative—the way the narrative constructs its meaning. Form and content are an indissoluble whole, and the way John tells his story—the imagery, settings, metaphors, and so forth—is as important as what he has to say. How do bizarre creatures with traits of this world and the world below help the reader to understand the nature of evil? What is the significance of the hybrids of humans and beasts? How do the numerous threes, fours, sevens, and twelves form the construction material for John’s story? What do the characters’ clothing and accessories reveal about their inner traits? How is the masterplot of a people longing for a homeland—exiled in Babylon, confined in Egypt, wandering in the wilderness, journeying to the promised land—worked out in the Apocalypse? Why are Babylon and Jerusalem portrayed as mirror opposites? These and other questions can be answered by paying close attention to the way John tells his story.

Two aspects of narrative criticism are emphasized in this commentary. First is a focus on the organic unity of John’s story. A basic premise of a literary approach is the understanding that the work is a unified whole. The parts cannot be understood without understanding the whole. For instance, a literary perspective places the problems within the churches in Rev. 2 and 3 within the cluster of problems developed and elaborated in Rev. 13 and 17. The problems of the churches are the same as the problems of the society as a whole. The second aspect of a literary and theological reading consists of close readings of the complexities and nuances of the text, taking note of...
the structure, rhetoric, setting, characters, point of view, plot, and the narrator’s style and his repertoire. The narrator’s repertoire includes intertextual allusions, the social and cultural location of the narrator, the political environment, and the evaluative or ideological point of view of the narrator. A close reading of Revelation brings out the ideological point of view of the narrator, his evaluative perspective and worldview. John’s ideological or theological point of view reveals his perspective on the nature of evil, the role of the church in the in-between times, the counterintuitive way God conquers in this world, the conflicted nature of humanity, the centrality of God and Christ, the critique of humanity’s self-deification, the new liberation of God’s people from a new Pharaoh, and the urgent need for a messianic repair of the fractured cosmos. The future, of course, plays an important role in the Apocalypse—as does the past and present.

Some of the more common literary terms and narrative devices related to rhetoric, setting, character, point of view, and plot are defined and illustrated in this introduction. A discussion of the narrator, his style, the implied reader, and the structure of Revelation conclude this introductory section.

Rhetoric

Rhetorical devices that John uses include metaphors and similes, two-step progressions, verbal threads, chiasm, inclusio, and numbers and numerical sequences.

Metaphors and Similes

Metaphors and similes are the scaffolding for John’s symbolic world. Without analogies from this world, the world above remains unseen; and without


2. See also Leonard L. Thompson, *The Book of Revelation: Apocalypse and Empire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 46–48, on similes and metaphor. See also the comments

James L. Resseguie,
*The Revelation of John: A Narrative Commentary*,
arresting comparisons, this world and the world below remain partially veiled. John’s above point of view develops and elaborates worlds unseen and worlds partially seen. The strange is made familiar by similes and metaphors—only to make the familiar seem strange again.3 John “will jar us out of our lethargy, get us to live on the alert, open our eyes to the burning bush and fiery chariots, open our ears to the hard-steel promises and commands of Christ, banish boredom from the gospel, lift up our heads, enlarge our hearts.”4

A simile compares two distinctly different things with the use of “like” or “as,” whereas a metaphor ascribes an action or quality of one thing to another by way of identity without the use of “like” or “as.”5 I. A. Richards uses the concept of tenor and vehicle to analyze metaphors.6 The tenor is the subject or referent to which the metaphor refers. The vehicle, as the term implies, bears the weight of the imagery. The reader is to discover the implied analogy or implicit comparison between the vehicle and the tenor.

Metaphors and similes of sight describe people, places, and things. John’s three-storied world is a visual feast of bizarre and fantastic sights. Figures of speech liken cities to brides and whores; humans to beasts; domination and oppression to illicit sexual acts; satanic power to dragons; faithfulness to virginity; and so forth. John’s initial vision of the one like a son of man alerts the reader to the world of similes and metaphors that lie ahead (1:12–20). His title is a simile—one like a son of man—and his features are embellished with similes. His head and hair are as white wool, white as snow; his eyes are like a flame of fire; his feet are like burnished bronze; his voice is like the sound of rushing water; and his countenance is like the sun shining at full strength (1:14–16). In addition to the similes are metaphors: seven stars are held in his right hand and a two-edged sword comes out of his mouth (1:16). Without similes and metaphors this transcendent being remains unseen, indescribable, and beyond human comprehension. Similarly the unseen God is known only by what he is like in the mineral world: jasper and carnelian with a rainbow like an emerald.

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James L. Resseguie,
The Revelation of John: A Narrative Commentary,
around the throne (4:3). And the attendants around the throne, the bizarre hybrid creatures of another world, are described by what they are like: a lion, an ox, a human face, and an eagle (4:7).

Similes and metaphors of the eyes distinguish good sight from poor sight. Jesus’ eyes are “like a flame of fire” (1:14; 19:12). His penetrating, fiery eyes see through the deceptive appearances of the world. The four living creatures around the throne have eyes everywhere: in front and behind and even on their wings. Their twenty-twenty vision allows them to see God for who he is and thus to see God’s attributes: his holiness, omnipotence, and eternality (4:6, 8). The Lamb’s seven eyes give him perfect eyesight (5:6). He can see all and thus he knows all; he is omniscient. The Laodiceans, however, have faulty eyesight. Their vision can be cured only by purchasing salve from Jesus (3:18).

The use of similes and metaphors heightens the qualitative difference between the new city and cities of this world. The new Jerusalem reflects the glory of God “like a very rare jewel . . . clear as crystal” (21:11). The city is made of “pure gold, clear as glass” (21:18); the boulevard of the city is “pure gold, transparent as glass” (21:21). Its dimensions are oversized, dwarfing any city of this world (21:16, 17).

In addition to similes and metaphors of sight are similes and metaphors of sound. Revelation is the “noisiest book” in the New Testament. The book is a spirited and seemingly endless performance of Tchaikovsky’s 1812 Overture, complete with blaring trumpets and rolling thunderclaps. Similes and metaphors liken the sounds of the Apocalypse to loud trumpets (1:10; 4:1), rushing waters (1:15; 14:2; 19:6), and the roar of thunder (6:1; 14:2; 19:6). Momentous events seem to require a loud, mighty, or great voice. The search for someone to open the scroll is announced by an angel “with a loud voice” (5:2); a loud voice from the temple announces the end (16:17); Babylon’s doom is shouted to the world by an angel “with a mighty voice” (18:2); a loud voice announces God’s dwelling among humans (21:3). The souls under the altar raise loud voices to ask how long they must wait (6:10).

Angels sound trumpets as warning blasts (8:7–9:21). The sound of locusts’ wings is likened to the deafening noise of chariots and horses rushing into battle (9:9). The throne rumbles and belches out thunder (4:5). Flying eagles screech “woe, woe, woe” (8:13). A mighty angel’s shout is like a roaring lion (10:3). Piercing angelic voices shout stage directions and commands (7:2; 11:12; 14:7, 15). Boisterous choirs sing earsplitting praises (5:12; 7:10; 19:1). Some choirs require several similes to capture their exuberance: “And I heard a voice from heaven like the sound of many waters and like the sound of loud

thunder” (14:2); “I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude, like the sound of many waters and like the sound of mighty thunderpeals” (19:6). Not all sounds are ear-piercing, nor are all voices boisterous. Some are laments of weeping and wailing (18:9–10, 11, 15, 19), while other sounds are conspicuous by their absence. At the opening of the seventh seal there is silence in heaven for half an hour (8:1). And at Babylon’s fall the familiar sounds of commerce and joy are silenced: the sounds of musical instruments, the grinding of flour, and the voices of the bridegroom and bride (18:22–23). The absence of sound in the raucous heavens is almost as eerie as the absence of gaiety in Babylon’s empty streets.

All the earsplitting sounds, blaring instruments, and endless hymns train the hearer to listen to the commotion in heaven or to what the Spirit is saying and to ignore the din of this world that shouts for undivided attention. A resounding theme of the Apocalypse is the need for attentive, careful hearing (13:9; cf. 14:12). “Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches” (2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22); “blessed are those who hear and who keep what is written in [the book]” (1:3). And nowhere is attentive hearing more apposite than when the end encroaches on the present. “Come out of [Babylon], my people, so that you do not take part in her sins” (18:4).

Metaphors and similes of sight and sound are complemented by metaphors and similes of taste and smell. After seeing great visions and hearing raucous noises, John gets a taste of what he has seen and heard. An oversized angel from heaven offers him a scroll to eat: “Take it, and eat; it will be bitter to your stomach, but as sweet as honey in your mouth” (10:9). And indeed, “it was sweet as honey in my mouth, but when I had eaten it, my stomach was made bitter” (10:10). The vehicle is the sweet and sour scroll; the tenor is the effect this scroll has on John and others as the contents are revealed. Figures of speech describe what comes out of the mouth more frequently than what goes in. What goes in is digested and becomes a part of the person, while what comes out reveals the inner traits or essence of a character. Out of Jesus’ mouth comes a sharp two-edged sword. His speech or testimony cuts through the lies of this world to slay falsehoods and those who proclaim the lie (1:16; 2:12; 19:15, 21). Out of the serpent’s mouth comes a river of water to drown the woman. His trait is the destruction of God’s people (12:15). Out of the sea beast’s mouth come “haughty and blasphemous words” to utter against God. Its self-deifying claims seek to diminish God, to make God small and invisible while making itself larger than life (13:5–6; cf. 17:3). And out of the mouths of the dragon, beast, and false prophet come three “foul spirits like frogs” (16:13). For the Laodiceans, Jesus warns that he will spit them out of his mouth, which dramatically portrays their complete, if unexpected, expulsion from Christ’s body (3:16).
Metaphors and similes of smell can be pleasant or unpleasant. The prayers of the saints are like incense (5:8; 8:3) but the creatures of the underworld belch forth foul odors. Out of the mouths of the demonic horses comes noxious suffocating sulfur (9:17). The dragon, beast, and land beast are thrown alive into the foul smelling “lake of fire that burns with sulfur,” a place of torment (19:20; 20:10; cf. 14:10). The unpleasant vehicle, the lake of fire and sulfur, captures the horror of the tenor, “the second death” (20:14; 21:8). Smoke can be pleasant or unpleasant. The smoke of incense is pleasant (8:4) but the billowing smoke of a “great furnace” is suffocating (9:2).

John also employs metaphors of sexuality. Metaphors of sexual infidelity and promiscuity describe economic exploitation, social tyranny, political compromise, and religious assimilation to the dominant culture.8 Porn—words such as fornication,9 fornicate,10 and whore,11 are verbal threads forming a tapestry of sexual images in the book. The sexual metaphors accentuate the crossing of boundaries that are established through covenant relationships, and are descriptive not only of illicit sexual relations but also of other areas that are marred by desire, transgression, confused boundaries, and compromise. John stands in a long tradition of prophets who rely on sexual congress and illicit relations as metaphors for religious, economic, social, and political intercourse with the dominant culture.12 In Hosea, for example, harlotry is a metaphor for Israel’s idolatrous practices, which abrogate the covenant between God and Israel just as adultery abrogates the marriage covenant. Isaiah employs sexual imagery to indict Tyre for unjust trade practices and economic exploitation ( Isa. 23:15–18). Nahum charges Nineveh with economic prostitution (Nah. 3:4). Ezekiel depicts Jerusalem as an unfaithful wife who accommodates herself to the prevailing culture (Ezek. 16). In Rev. 17 metaphors of sexual boundary crossing are images for accommodation to the dominant culture.

The church is not immune from the danger of boundary crossing. Compromise with the dominant culture—Babylon’s attractive blandishments—is represented by Jezebel and Balaam, who advocate assimilation to the norms, values, and beliefs of the prevailing culture (2:14; 2:20–22). Further, the trumpet

9. πορνεία (porneia).
10. πορνεύω (porneuō).
11. πόρνη (pornē).
plagues fail to persuade the rest of humankind to repent of their “fornication,” which is the worship of demons and idols (9:20–21), while fornicators and idolaters are banned from the new promised land (21:8).

If *porn*-words are metaphors for religious infidelity, then “virgin”\(^{13}\) and virginity represent the opposite. The 144,000 “virgins” remain unentangled with the norms, values, and beliefs of the dominant culture (14:4). They reject the ways of Babylon, Jezebel, and Balaam, remain spiritually chaste, and persevere in their covenant relationship with God. The metaphor of virginity is similar to the unsoiled garments worn by the faithful at Sardis (3:4) or to the pure linen garment worn by the bride (19:7–8).\(^{14}\)

**Two-step Progressions**

Two-step progressions are repetitions that, as the designation implies, occur in two parts.\(^{15}\) The second step appears redundant but often adds important information or qualifies the first step in some way. Progressions occur in phrases, clauses, double questions, commands, parallel statements, and even larger units of text. David Rhoads suggests that two-step progressions repeat a thing “in order to get the hearers to notice it. The first step gives a generality while the second step, the repetition, gives more specific detail and usually contains a crucial element.”\(^{16}\) An instance of this is found in John’s opening. He testifies to (1) “the word of God” and (2) “to the testimony of Jesus Christ” (1:2). The second step amplifies and thickens the meaning of “the word of God.”

Two-step progressions occur in double affirmations that accentuate what happens or is spoken. For example, “so it is to be,” the Greek for “yes,” and “Amen,” the Hebrew for “let it so be,” affirm the certainty of Jesus’ coming in the prologue (1:7). Similarly, the dual benediction of the twenty-four elders and four living creatures—“Amen” and “Hallelujah” (19:4)—emphasize the rightness of God’s judgment. A two-step progression reinforces Jesus’ authority over the realm of the dead: “I have the keys of Death” and “of Hades” (1:18). Death is the state of the dead while Hades

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\(^{13}\) παρθένος *(parthenos)*.  
is the place of the dead. A double repetition can reinforce the role of a character in a story. The rider on the white horse comes out “conquering” and “to conquer,” underlining his role as a conqueror (6:2). Or a double repetition may emphasize the severity of a happening. The fourth bowl is poured out on the sun: “It was allowed to scorch them with fire” and “they were scorched by the fierce heat” (16:8b, 9a).

The most frequent usage of two-step progressions is to clarify one part of the progression. The angel flying in midheaven, for example, proclaims the eternal gospel “to those who live on the earth” and “to every nation and tribe and language and people” (14:6). The gospel is proclaimed to one-and-the-same group as the NRSV clarifies with a dash (“to those who live on the earth—to every nation and tribe and language and people”). The fourfold listing of the second part of the progression emphasizes the universal and inclusive scope of the eternal gospel “to those who live on earth.” Similarly, the conquerors of the beast stand by (or on) a fiery sea and sing “the song of Moses, the servant of God” and “the song of the Lamb” (15:3). Although it may appear that two songs are sung, the first part elaborates the occasion and the second part the content of the song. The occasion is an exodus-type celebration of the liberation of God’s people from their captivity by the Pharaoh of Revelation. The content is a thanksgiving canticle for the redemptive work of the Lamb. At the end of the long list of Babylon’s cargo are “slaves” and “human lives” (18:13). These are not two separate commodities of Babylon’s commerce. Rather, it is a reminder that slaves (lit. “bodies”) are human lives or souls, not commodities like cattle and sheep and horses.

In antithetical two-step progressions the second part states negatively what the first part states positively. To the angel of the church of Pergamum Christ says, “You are holding fast to my name” and “you did not deny your faith” (2:13). Denial of faith is letting go of Christ’s name. And to the angel of the church at Philadelphia Jesus says, “You have kept my word” and “have not denied my name” (3:8). Progressions also occur as double questions that draw attention to an event or person. The search for a worthy person to open the scroll is heightened with a twofold question: “Who is worthy to open the scroll” and “break its seals” (5:2)? The redundancy appears unnecessary, for the seals have to be broken in order to open the scroll (an example of *hysteron-proteron*; see below in the section on narrator). The two parts emphasize the impossibility of finding a morally and spiritually fit person, except one. A two-step progression heightens the pathos of the search for this worthy person. John weeps bitterly because no one was found worthy “to open the scroll” or “to look into it” (5:4). The worthy person himself is unveiled in two steps: first, the announcement that the lion of the tribe of Judah is the worthy one (5:5), then his appearance as a seven-horned, seven-eyed, slaughtered yet
risen Lamb (5:6). The Lamb comes and takes the scroll from the one seated on the throne (5:7), and the twenty-four elders extol his worthiness “to take the scroll” and “to open its seals” (5:9). Their obeisance is emphasized in two steps: they fall down and worship (5:14; cf. 19:4). A two-step rhetorical question, voiced by the ones who worship the beast, draws attention to the seeming invincibility of the monster: “Who is like the beast?” and “who can fight against it?” (13:4).

When the symbolic city of 70,000 falls, the survivors “were terrified” and “gave glory to the God of heaven” (11:13). The second part explains their terror as a reverent fear that leads them to glorify God. Their response contrasts with the two-step commentary on the obdurate who “did not repent” and “give [God] glory” (16:9c). In Rev. 19 a voice from heaven commands “all you his servants” and “all who fear [God]” to praise God (19:5). The second part clarifies who are God’s slaves. The false prophet who is thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur is identified by two traits: “he deceived those who had received the mark of the beast” and “those who worshiped its image” (19:20). The second part elaborates what it means to receive the mark of the beast. God’s self-designation occurs in two steps: “I am the Alpha and the Omega” and “the beginning and the end” (21:6). “The beginning and the end” elaborates the meaning of Alpha and Omega and reinforces the notion that God is the beginning and the end, the source and goal of creation, and not just at the beginning and the end.

Two-step progressions occur in commands. A voice from heaven instructs John to seal up the seven thunders and not to write it down (10:4). This apparent redundancy (if the thunders are sealed they cannot be written down) assures the reader/hearer that whatever they had to say, their voice will never be heard. And John is commanded to “take” the little scroll from the angel and “eat” it (10:9), which is followed by two antithetical steps. The scroll will be bitter in the stomach but sweet as honey in the mouth.

Verbal Threads

Verbal threads are repeated words or phrases that tie together a section, even the entire book, and often elaborate a main theme or subthemes of a passage.17 The verbal thread “name”18 occurs thirty-eight times in the book and signifies a change in status or a new character (cf. Gen. 32:24–28). It is a prominent thread that pops up eleven times in the letters to the seven churches. The Ephesians patiently endure for the sake of Jesus’ name (2:3);

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18. ὄνοµα (onoma).
the congregation at Pergamum holds fast to Christ’s name (2:13) and will receive “a new name” if they conquer (2:17). The congregation at Sardis, however, has a “name” of being alive but is dead (3:1). Yet there are a few “names” (NRSV “persons”) among the Sardians that have not soiled their clothes (3:4). The victors at Sardis will not have their “name[s]” blotted out of the book of life and Jesus will confess their “name[s]” before God and the angels (3:5). The congregation at Philadelphia has not denied Jesus’ name (3:8), and the conquerors will surely receive a new identity, for “name” is reiterated three times: the “name of my God,” “the name of the city of my God,” and Jesus’ own “new name” (3:12). At the end of the book, God’s people will see him face-to-face and his “name” will be written on their foreheads (22:4). In Rev. 19, Jesus’ traits are characterized by names. He has a name that no one knows but himself (19:12); his name is “The Word of God” (19:13); and the name on his robe and on his thigh is “King of kings and Lord of lords” (19:16).

Similar to naming is the verbal thread of sealing or branding. The verbal threads of “seal” and “mark” accentuate the two choices of the Apocalypse. “Seal” in its nominal20 and verbal forms21 weaves throughout Rev. 7:1–8 six times (7:2, 3, 4 [twice], 5, 8) and emphasizes the sealing of the 144,000—that is, those who belong to God. The “mark”22 occurs seven times in Revelation and identifies those who follow the beast (13:16, 17; 14:9, 11; 16:2; 19:20; 20:4). The beast’s followers are branded on the forehead, which perhaps represents their inner commitment, or on the right hand, which symbolizes the practical outworking of their commitment.23 Their tattoo is a travesty of the seal that is imprinted on the saints’ foreheads. Thus some are sealed, others are branded, but none receive both a seal and a brand.

Chiasm

Chiasm is a figure of speech in which the order and pattern of words and phrases departs from customary or standard usage of word order or pattern.24 Chiasm derives from the Greek letter χι (written X), which

19. Thompson, Book of Revelation, 49, points out the pun involved with “name.” In 3:1 it is a superficial reality whereas in 3:5 “name” represents the “deepest reality.”
20. σφραγίς (sphragis).
21. σφραγίζω (sphragizō).
22. χάραγµα (charagma).
symbolizes the crossover pattern of words, phrases, clauses, or ideas that are repeated in reverse order. The simplest type of chiasm is A B B’ A’—a pattern that privileges key concepts by placing them in the first and last positions (A, A’).25 Jesus’ authority to open and shut the messianic door is stressed with a chiasm. As the bearer of the key of David,

A [Jesus] opens
   B and no one will shut,
   B’ shuts
A’ and no one opens. (3:7, author’s translation)

Similarly, the unpleasantness of the little scroll is given the first and last position in the following chiasm.

A It will be bitter to your stomach,
   B but in your mouth it will be sweet as honey.
   B’ And it was in my mouth sweet as honey,
A’ but when I ate it my stomach was made bitter. (10:9–10, author’s translation)

The sources of light for the eternal city are also prominently placed in the first and last position of the following chiasm.

A The glory of God
   B is its light,
   B’ and its lamp is
A’ the Lamb. (21:23)

Inclusio

An inclusio uses similar words and phrases to bracket the beginning and ending of a text.26 The prologue (1:1–8) and epilogue (22:6–21) form an inclusio with similar words, phrases, and concepts, bringing the book full circle and recapitulating the themes found at the beginning of the book. The repetition of the perfect passive participle “sealed” forms an inclusio around the first and last tribes in 7:5–8. Satan’s expulsion from heaven


26. Thompson, Book of Revelation, 45–46, uses the concept of “circularity” to refer to inclusios.
brackets the interpretative hymn of 12:10–12: “He was thrown down to the earth,” “so when the dragon saw that he had been thrown down to the earth” (12:9, 13).

**Numbers and Numerical Sequences**

John uses numbers and numerical sequences as the construction material for his apocalyptic world. Numbers place boundaries on activities and happenings; accent a character’s traits; or reinforce an ideological point of view. Numbers in Revelation are invariably symbolic, including the seven mountains on which the woman is seated in 17:9, the thousand-year reign of the saints in chapter 20, and 666 in 13:18. Three, three and a half, four, seven, ten, and twelve with their multiples are the prominent numbers in the book.

Three is associated with the divine or the counterfeit divine. The threefold divine title with its present, past, and future tenses expresses the eternality of God (“who is and who was and who is to come,” 1:4, 8; cf. 4:8). The beast mimics the divine with its threefold title (“was and is not and is to come,” 17:8c; cf. 17:8a, 11). When the four living creatures extol the attributes of God, they rely on threes: “Holy, holy, holy, the Lord God the Almighty, who was and is and is to come” (4:8). The twenty-four elders proclaim God is worthy to receive “glory and honor and power” (4:11). An anonymous voice in heaven announces the arrival of “the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God” (12:10), and the choirs of heaven sing “salvation and glory and power” to God (19:1). Grace and peace are from God, the seven spirits, and Jesus Christ (1:4–5), while the parodic triumvirate of the dragon, beast, and false prophet send from their mouths “three foul spirits like frogs” (16:13). Threes characterize the work of Christ: “the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth” (1:5). His self-designation consists of threes: “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end” (22:13).

Other forms of threes add superlative force to what is acclaimed or to what happens. The thrice holy of the four living creatures emphasizes God’s exceeding holiness. Three sets of characters—kings, merchants, and sailors who thrived on Babylon’s greatness—step forth to lament her.


Rhetoric

loss (18:10–19). The three woes of the eagle correspond to the intensification of eschatological judgments (8:13).

Four is associated with the earth and creation. The earth has four corners with four winds that blow from the corners (7:1; 20:8), and four compass points (21:13). Around the throne are four living creatures, representing all of creation (4:6, 8; 5:6, 8, 14). A fourfold division of humanity into “every tribe and language and people and nation” describes the total peoples of the earth (5:9; cf. also 7:9; 10:11; 11:9; 13:7; 14:6; 17:15). John makes use of fours when he wants to indicate creation's full participation: “I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea . . . singing” (5:13; cf. 14:7). And their acclamation to God and the Lamb is fourfold: “blessing and honor and glory and might” (5:13). Four angels restrain the four winds (7:1) and four angels are bound at the Euphrates, who are ready for “the hour, the day, the month, and the year” (9:15). The sights and sounds from the throne are threefold in the vision of the heavenly throne room (4:5), but when judgment comes to earth the formula is extended to fours: “peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning, and an earthquake” (8:5). Humanity is divided into four parts in parallel structure: “let the evildoer still do evil, and the filthy still be filthy, and the righteous still do right, and the holy still be holy” (22:11). The new Jerusalem has four sides because it is the new earth (21:16).

Multiples of four are also associated with the creation and the earth. Babylon’s cargo is an extensive list of twenty-eight items or four times seven. It represents all the products (seven) of the whole world (four).29 And when the wine press is trodden, the blood flows as high as a horse’s bridle, “for a distance of about one thousand six hundred stadia” (14:20; NRSV “about two hundred miles”). One thousand six hundred stadia are four squared multiplied by ten squared (4 × 4 × 10 × 10). Since four is the number of the earth or creation and ten represents totality, the bloodbath covers the earth completely.30

Seven, which occurs fifty-five times in Revelation out of eighty-eight occurrences in the New Testament, is a number associated with completeness, plenitude, or perfection.31 The seven-day week and seven days of creation mark a complete, full period of time. Seven is a combination of the number of the divine (three) and the number of the earth (four). There are seven letters to the churches (2:1–3:22), seven seals (6:1–8:1), seven trumpets (8:2–11:18), seven thunders (10:3–4), and seven bowls (15:5–16:21). Each

series of sevens is complete in itself. Seven angels blow seven trumpet blasts (8:2), and seven angels pour out the contents of the seven bowls (15:1, 6–8). There are seven spirits (1:4), which represent the plenitude of the Spirit, seven stars (1:20), seven lampstands (1:20), seven kings (17:9–10). The whore sits on seven mountains, which can be a reference to Rome’s seven hills, but also could be symbolic of the entire earth (seven) reaching to the heavens (mountains) in an act of self-deification—a symbolic tower of Babel (17:9). The Lamb has seven eyes and seven horns, representative of his complete sight and complete power (5:6). The divine is parodied by the counterfeit divine, which has seven heads (12:3; 13:1; 17:3). The dragon wears seven diadems on its head (12:3).

Sevens occur in rhetorical sequences that accent completeness, plenitude, or perfection. There are seven beatitudes (1:3; 14:13; 16:15; 19:9; 20:6; 22:7, 14). Myriads of myriads of angels voice a sevenfold acclamation: “worthy is the Lamb . . . to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing” (5:12). And after the sealing of the 144,000, angels acclaim God with sevens (7:12). When John wants to specify every class and division of society from the lofty to the lowly, he uses sevens: “Then the kings of the earth and the magnates and the generals and the rich and the powerful, and everyone, slave and free, hid in the caves and among the rocks” (6:15).

Three and a half is a broken seven. It designates a complete period of time (seven days, years, etc.) turned on its head and inside out. It is the disruption of a symbolic week, which “is arrested midway in its normal course.” Three and a half is derived from Dan. 7:25 and 12:7, where “a time, two times, and half a time” signifies a period of persecution. As half of seven, three and a half interrupts a complete, full period of time, and is a numerical cipher for the in-between times. Just as the exodus and wilderness trek is in-between space—wilderness space that lies in between captivity in Egypt and arrival in the promised land—three and a half represents in-between time. As wilderness space is neither here nor there, neither biblical Egypt nor the promised land, three and a half is neither here nor there but in-between time. It is the time between the church’s exile in Babylon and its arrival in the new promised land, the new Jerusalem. Other numbers also symbolize the in-between times. Forty-two months, a variant of three and a half (and the numerical equivalent of three and a half years), represents

32. Northrop Frye, Words with Power: Being a Second Study of ‘The Bible and Literature’ (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1990), 163, defines the tower of Babel as “the demonic tower [that] signifies the aspect of human history known as imperialism, the human effort to unite human resources by force that organizes larger and larger social units, and eventually exalts some king into a world ruler, a parody representative of God.”
the period of the beast’s autarchy and reign of terror in which the church is persecuted (11:2; 13:5). One thousand two hundred and sixty days (also three and a half years) is the period of the church’s witness and preservation of the church. The two witnesses prophesy for 1,260 days (11:3); the church receives divine succor on its wilderness sojourn to the promised land (12:6). The last variant is the Danielic designation for a broken period (Dan. 7:25; 12:7), “a time, and times, and half a time,” which designates the period of divine nourishment during the season of travail (Rev. 12:14).

The two witnesses, defeated and killed by the beast from the abyss, lie in the street of the “great city” for three and a half days (11:8–9). Edmondo Lupieri notes that the symbolism of times in the Apocalypse does not lie in the unit of measurement (days, weeks, months, years) but in the numerical value attached to the measurement (one-half, three and a half, seven, ten, twelve, one thousand, etc.). Three and a half days is equivalent to three and a half years, forty-two months, 1,260 days, and time, times, and half a time. The broken seven describes the essential character of the church in the in-between times: an authoritative, powerful voice within society that is also beaten down, trod upon, and killed.

Six is one step away from seven, the penultimate in a series of seven. The sixth seal, sixth trumpet, and sixth bowl are penultimate judgments. John and the church stand in the penultimate space in the narrative. John’s commission to prophesy again (10:1–11) and the church’s commission to witness (11:1–13) is sandwiched between the sixth and seventh trumpet. Since six is one step away from seven, it can represent incompleteness or imperfection: the sixth trumpet and sixth bowl appear to be the end, but the seventh—not the sixth—is the ultimate in a series. The heaping up of sixes, as in 666, may represent the penultimate striving to be ultimate, humanity (the beast) in the quest to be like God.

Ten represents totality. There are ten fingers, ten toes. The dragon and the beast have ten horns (12:3; 13:1; 17:3, 7). The beast has ten diadems on his heads (13:1). There are ten kings (17:12, 16). Ten days is a total period of affliction (2:10). Again the emphasis is on the numerical value (ten) and not the unit of measurement (days). Multiples of tens represent the intensification or heightening of a total period of time or number. The millennium or thousand-year reign is a total, unbroken period. Tens lengthen and amplify numbers to express sometimes incalculably large numbers: 144,000 (7:4; 14:1, 3), 12,000 stadia of the city (21:16), thousands.

35. See below on Rev. 13:18.
of thousands of angels (5:11), 1,600 stadia (14:20), 7,000 citizens of the symbolic city (11:13), 200 million troops (20,000 × 10,000; 9:16).

Twelve is a number of completeness. There are twelve months in the year, twelve signs of the zodiac, and twelve tribes of Israel. Like seven, twelve conveys completeness. But unlike seven, which describes both the divine and the counterfeit divine, twelve is associated with the people of God. Twelve occurs twenty-three times in Revelation out of seventy-five times in the New Testament. It is a multiple of three and four, the number of the divine multiplied by the number of the earth. Twelve is lengthened to 144,000, the complete number of God’s Israel (7:4; 14:1, 3). The woman’s crown has twelve stars (12:1) and the new Jerusalem is designed by twelves. The multiple of three times four occurs in the description of the twelve gates of the city (three on each of its four sides). There are twelve angels at the twelve gates and the names of the twelve tribes are inscribed on its gates (21:12). The twelve foundations of the city wall have the twelve names of the twelve apostles (21:14). The wall is twelve squared, 144 cubits (21:17), and the city measures 12,000 stadia (21:16). Twelve jewels adorn the foundations; the twelve gates are made of a single pearl (21:19–21). At city center is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit (22:2). The heaping up of twelves describes a perfect city, complete in every way, from top to bottom.

Setting

The settings of the Apocalypse are more than colorful backdrops for John’s three-storied world. They are symbolic, spiritual places that cannot be found on a physical map, although they may allude to well-known historical places. Mountains, wildernesses, rivers, abyss, sea, and lake of fire are part of John’s spiritual topography. Architectural space (such as cities, temple, and court) is spiritual space. Props, the *mise en scène* in French, are properties such as the furniture and furnishings of a setting. Although they may appear unimportant, they are frequently saturated with meaning. The throne, altar, censer, lampstands, scrolls, seals, and ark are props. Props may be human-made instruments such as swords, measuring rods, trumpets, harps, bowls, crowns, breastplates, iron rods, wine-cups, placards, and keys. Clothing and accessories are also symbolic props in John’s story.

Among John’s topographical settings, the sea represents threat. It is a place of chaos where terrifying monsters of the deep lurk, such as Leviathan and Rahab (Job 9:13; Ps. 74:13–14; 89:10; Isa. 27:1). The sea is a metonym...
“for everything that is recalcitrant to the will of God.”36 The first beast arises from the sea (13:1), also called the abyss (11:7). In the new heaven and new earth the sea is “no more” because evil and chaos are relics of a past age (21:1). If the sea is a threat, the wilderness is ambiguous, in-between space, neither here nor there, neither Egypt nor the promised land. It is a place of divine protection and succor but also a place of testing. The wilderness is where the Israelites received safe sanctuary from Pharaoh and were nourished by miraculous manna and quail. The wilderness is also where the Israelites were tested as to their loyalty.37 Will they follow a cloud and a pillar of fire on an uncertain path to an unknown land? Or will they follow the gods of their own making? This pregnant setting of Israel’s past spills over to the wilderness setting of Revelation. “Wilderness”38 occurs three times (12:6, 14; 17:3) while the cognate verb, “lay waste” or “desolate,”39 occurs an additional three times (17:16; 18:17, 19). The wilderness is a sanctuary and a place of divine succor for the woman attacked by the dragon in Rev. 12. As the dragon/Pharaoh pursues her, she is given safe sanctuary in the wilderness for the symbolic period of 1,260 days (12:6). And when a flood from the serpent’s mouth attempts to drown the woman, she is given two wings of an eagle to fly to the wilderness, where she receives asylum for “a time, and times, and half a time” (12:14). The wilderness is the woman’s home, the “place” where the church spiritually dwells in the in-between times (12:6, 14). Yet the wilderness is also the haunt of the demonic, a desolate, barren place forsaken by God. John is carried away in the spirit into the wilderness to see the whore who sits on the scarlet beast (17:3). And in 18:2 Babylon becomes the dwelling place for the demonic and all kinds of foul creatures. In one hour the city is made into a wilderness, a haunt for every unclean and evil thing (18:17, 19; cf. 17:16).

A mountain represents the earth reaching to the heavens, the place where heaven and earth meet.40 Like the wilderness, it may be a refuge for God’s people. On Mount Zion, the mountain of God, the 144,000 gather and stand triumphantly with the Lamb (14:1; cf. Joel 2:32). The new Jerusalem descends from heaven and sits on “a great, high mountain” (21:10). On this huge mountain the new heaven and new earth meet in pleasant harmony. As the place where heaven and earth meet, the mountain is where the final

38. ἔρημος (erēmos).
39. ἔρημοω (erēmoō).
eschatological battle occurs. Armageddon or Harmagedon is found only on John’s spiritual map and symbolizes the place where evil battles good (16:16). In Hebrew the word har means “mountain,” thus the spiritual battle occurs on the symbolic mountain, “the mountain of Megiddo.”41 The mountain is not only the place where heaven and earth meet; it also can represent the earth reaching heavenward to be like God.42 The artificial mountain, the tower of Babel, is the prototype. The counterpart in John’s world is the city perched on seven mountains, Babylon (17:9). Although the seven mountains may be an allusion to Rome’s seven hills, Babylon is more than Rome. In this verse seven has its usual meaning of completeness or fullness while the mountains represent the earth reaching to the heavens. The city on seven mountains is the new tower of Babel (Babylon), humanity’s defiant attempt to be like God.

The river is both a threat and a promise in John’s story world. The Edenic river, the river of the water of life, flows out of the throne of God and of the Lamb in the new Jerusalem. It is life-giving and life-sustaining (22:1). But a river can also be a threat. In 12:15–16 the serpent opens his mouth and a flood like a river pours out to sweep away the woman. But the earth, ge, comes to her rescue and swims the river, reminiscent of the Israelites’ salvation from the pursuing Pharaoh of the exodus (Exod. 14:16, 21–23).43 Both references to the river Euphrates represent an ominous threat for humankind. The Euphrates marks the boundary where “the earth loses its character as a holy land” (cf. Gen. 2:14; 15:18; Josh. 1:4).44 It is the boundary where four angels are released to bring destruction on the earth (9:14) and the boundary from which the kings of the east cross to wage war on the earth and its inhabitants (16:12). While God’s river offers the promise of life in the narrative world, Babylon’s river represents the threat of death and destruction.

Prominent among John’s architectural settings are the temple and the city. Slightly more than a third of the New Testament occurrences of temple45 are found in Revelation. The temple is spiritual space, not literal space. Most often it refers to the heavenly sanctuary where God dwells, with the exception of two references where it refers to a temple outside of heaven (11:1, 2). But even in 11:1, 2, naos is symbolic, not literal space. The heavenly temple is where those who come out of “the great ordeal” worship God day and night (7:14–15).

44. Prigent, Commentary on the Apocalypse, 319.
45. ναός (naos).
It is where the ark of the covenant is located (11:19) and angels come out to harvest the earth (14:15, 17). A voice from the temple shouts stage directions in 16:1 and a voice proclaims, “It is done!” in 16:17. The temple is unnecessary in the new heaven and new earth for “the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb” are the temple (21:22). As spiritual space, the measured temple with its unmeasured court outside represents the paradox of the church in the in-between times (11:1, 2). The church is at once protected (thus the measuring) yet vulnerable to persecution (thus the unmeasured court that is trampled). The character of the church is safe space though vulnerable space.

Some of John’s cities are located on a physical map. The seven cities in Rev. 2 and 3 are the historical cities of Asia Minor. Two cities, however, are symbolic: Babylon and the new Jerusalem. The new Jerusalem is the ideal city, the city of God, the new promised land (21:1–22:5). The other symbolic city, Babylon, is the satanic parody of Jerusalem. Babylon looks like Rome with its seven mountains (17:9); claims to divinity (“blasphemous names,” 17:3) are plastered over its throne, the scarlet beast. Yet Babylon is more than the imperial city. It is “Babylon,” the ancient city of Israel’s exile and alienation (see Ps. 137). It is “Sodom,” a symbol of wickedness (Rev. 11:8; cf. Gen. 19:1–25; Deut. 29:22–23; Isa. 1:9–15; 3:9; Jer. 23:14–15), and “Egypt,” the place of slavery and alienation (Rev. 11:8; cf. Exod. 5:1–21; Joel 3:19). It is the tower of Babel rising to the heavens staking a claim to be God. Babylon is the archetypal city of this world that seeks to deify itself and to rule supreme. Rome fits the bill—as does any and every place that makes claims that belong to God alone.

Babylon and Jerusalem represent the two choices of the Apocalypse. Babylon, the city of this world, the place of exile and alienation for Christians, is the spiritual capital for those who are earthbound, whose point of view is from below (that is, from this world). The earthbound includes not only those outside the church but also those within. Babylon is where the “inhabitants of the earth” dwell and the followers of the beast make their home. Yet Babylon is not only the home of the earth’s inhabitants; it is also where Christians live, although it cannot be called their home. In John’s world, Christians are exiled to “Babylon.” Thus John calls Christians to come out of Babylon in 18:4 and not take part in her sins. Although it is impossible to leave Babylon physically, Christians can leave Babylon figuratively by resisting its norms, values, and beliefs and by following the Lamb to the new promised land, the new Jerusalem. The temptation for


Christians, however, is to settle down in Babylon and make the “great city” their home. Like the Israelites who fell into idolatry on their trek to the promised land, Christians are tempted to put down roots in Babylon and abandon their trek to the new promised land. The Jezebels, Balaams, and Nicolaitans are the voices of Babylon within the Christian communities, urging compromise and assimilation.48

John employs a number of symbolic props, including clothing and accessories. Jewelry, headgear, footwear, and sashes can be outward markers of inner traits.49 The color of garments and their condition, whether clean or soiled, are especially important. Being clothed or unclothed is symbolic of watchfulness or spiritual somnolence (16:15). At Sardis there are a few names that have not soiled their white robes (3:4). Others will receive white robes if they conquer (3:5). The naked Laodiceans are counseled to purchase white robes from Christ “to keep the shame of [their] nakedness from being seen” (3:18). The martyred souls under the altar are given white robes and told to rest a while longer (6:11). The great multitude bleaches their robes white in the blood of the Lamb (7:9, 13–14). The bride’s garment is made of fine linen, bright and pure, emblematic of her spotless, untainted character. Her unblemished garment is symbolic of her moral and spiritual purity; she refuses to compromise with the beast. John defines her linen garment as “the righteous deeds of the saints” (19:8). She is adorned with precious jewels, twelve in all (21:19).50 The armies of heaven wear fine linen, white and pure (19:14). The two witnesses of Rev. 11 are dressed in sackcloth, clothing appropriate to their role as prophets (11:3). The sun also puts on, figuratively speaking, sackcloth to mourn the spiritual sclerosis of the people (“the sun became black as sackcloth,” 6:12) and to persuade them to repent (9:20–21).

The garments of the woman in Rev. 12 are the clothing of the cosmos. She is clothed with the sun and has the moon as footwear and a crown of twelve stars as headgear (12:1). The woman is from above in contrast to the whore of Rev. 17 who is earthbound, like the people she beguiles, the inhabitants of the earth. Unlike the cosmic garments of the celestial queen, she wears garments of purple and scarlet and is adorned with jewels and pearls (17:4). Her garish garments are a product of economic harlotry and the social exploitation of “slaves—and human lives” (18:13). Her scarlet51 clothing shows that she is cut


49. Thompson, Book of Revelation, 79.

50. The word for “adorn” (κοσμέω, kosmeō) in 21:19 is the same as in 21:2.

51. κόκκινος (kokkinos).
Setting

from the same cloth as her evil accomplices, the beast, who also wears scarlet (17:3), and the dragon, who wears fiery red (12:3). Although the woman’s adornment resembles that of the bride, who is dressed in gold and jewels and pearls (21:9–21), the whore’s wealth is a result of illicit affairs. The clothing of the demonic cavalry matches their satanic origins. They wear breastplates of fire and of sapphire and of sulfur, products of the underworld (9:17).

God’s garment is mysterious, opaque smoke or precious jewels. His clothing reflects his transcendence. Moses encountered God’s otherness when he attempted to enter the tent of meeting, but the cloud prevented him because the glory of God filled the tabernacle (Exod. 40:34–38). At Sinai a cloud of smoke enveloped the mountain in a mysterious divine presence (Exod. 24:15–16), while in the wilderness a cloud blazed a trail for the Israelites on their journey (Exod. 13:21; 14:19, 24). In 1 Kings 8:10–12 “thick darkness” filled the temple with God’s glory, and, in Isa. 6:1–6, smoke filled the temple. In Rev. 15:8 the smoke filled the temple with the glory of God and no one could enter the temple until the plagues were completed. God’s mysterious, unapproachable presence is symbolized by smoke. God’s otherness is also described in terms of precious jewels. “And the one seated there looks like jasper and carnelian” (4:3).

Headgear and footwear accent important characteristics of a person. God’s headgear is a rainbow that looks like an emerald (4:3); his unapproachable otherness is matched by his striking headgear. The beast and dragon wear matching headgear. The dragon wears diadems on his head (seven altogether in 12:3) while the beast wears diadems on his horns (ten altogether in 13:1). Other characters don victory wreaths or crowns for headgear. The twenty-four elders (4:4, 10), the first horseman (6:2), the demonic locusts (9:7), the mother (12:1), and the one like a son of man (14:14) wear wreaths or crowns. The Smyrnaeans are promised a victory wreath (2:10), and the Philadelphians are told to persevere so that they do not lose their crown (3:11). Both evil and good characters claim victory, but only one group is victorious in the end.

The mighty angel also has unusual headgear and footwear. He has a rainbow around his head and pillars of fire as feet (10:1). His garment is a cloud. The cloud and fire are reminiscent of the mysterious cloud and pillar of fire that guided the Israelites on their trek to the promised land (Exod. 13:21–22). This angel’s clothing suggests that he is the new angelic guide for a new exodus. Similarly the one like a son of man has unusual footwear, like burnished

52. πυρρός (pyrros).
54. Mazzalferri, Genre of the Book of Revelation, 265.
bronze refined in a fiery furnace (1:15). His feet will not crack or wear out, emblematic of his stable presence in a chaotic world.

Accessories heighten defining traits of characters. Christ, for instance, does not wear his sword on his thigh or wield it in his hand. Instead, the two-edged sword protrudes from his mouth (1:16; 2:12; cf. 19:15). Other accessories include keys to lock and unlock doors. Jesus has the keys of Death and of Hades (1:18); he has authority over death and the realm of the dead. Also on his keychain is the key of David, which grants him messianic authority (3:7). Other characters have keys as part of their wardrobe. A fallen star has the key to the bottomless pit (9:1). The angel of 20:1 has not only a key but also a great chain as part of his wardrobe. He is able to lock the dragon in the pit and bind him completely. Accessories such as brands and seals on the foreheads or on right hands identify peoples’ loyalties. A tattoo on the forehead is highly visible to all and announces who people are and to whom they belong. The 144,000 are stamped on their foreheads with the seal of the living God, identifying them as God’s people (7:3; 9:4). Others receive a mark, the name or number of the beast, on the forehead or the right hand identifying them as loyal followers (13:16–17; 14:9; 20:4). Some characters have names on their heads or foreheads. The beast from the sea has blasphemous names imprinted on its heads (13:1; cf. 17:3). The woman of Rev. 17 has an identifying name written on her forehead: “Babylon the great, mother of whores and of earth’s abominations” (17:5). The victors at Philadelphia will have three names stamped on them: the name of God, the name of the city of God, and Jesus’ new name (3:12).

All the accessories are figurative, just as the sword does not literally come out of Christ’s mouth. Some accessories point to a person’s status and rank. The one like a son of man wears a golden sash high across the chest, an emblem of his high status (1:13). The angels with golden bowls parade around in full temple regalia. These dignified representatives of the one on high wear “pure bright linen, with golden sashes across their chests” (15:6). Other accessories are marks of infamy. Along with her garment of purple and scarlet and her jewelry, the whore has a golden cup “full of abominations and the impurities of her fornication” (17:4).

Characters

Two generally recognized techniques for characterization are showing and telling. In showing, the narrator puts characters on display through their speech and actions. Characters are known by what they say and how they say it, what they do, what they wear, and how they present themselves—their
gestures and posture. They are also known by what other characters say about them or how others respond to them. Setting is an important part of the narrator’s showing. Often it is symbolic, providing an illuminating commentary on the characters’ speech and actions. In telling, the narrator intervenes into the story to comment directly on characters, singling out important traits or motives. The narrator’s inside views or commentary offer a glimpse into the characters’ thinking and motives. John generally prefers to show rather than tell. But as with the best of writers, everything he shows serves to tell.

A character does not need to speak or speak often to be noticed. God’s voice is identified only twice, at the beginning and at the end (1:8; 21:5–8), yet God is everywhere in the narrative. With its roundabout way of alluding to the divine, the passive of divine activity clarifies God’s direction and orchestration of the events of the story. His sovereign plan uses the good and the bad to bring about a new heaven and a new earth. Even God’s primary activity is passive: he sits. While lesser beings run to and fro, here and there, God sits. Angels shout commands, eagles screech woes, beasts rear their ugly heads, cavaliers bring devastation, living creatures sing praises, but God sits. “The one who is seated on the throne” or a similar expression is John’s favorite description of God (4:2, 3, 9; 5:1, 7, 13; 6:16; 7:10, 15; 19:4; 20:11; 21:5). What appears as a passive activity in fact identifies the one who rules in this story. John’s repeated reference to the one who sits on the throne emphasizes God’s sovereignty.

God is also known by what others say about him. John prefers lengthy, expansive titles and epithets to describe God. A simple “Lord God” as in 22:5 is seldom sufficient. Instead titles are heaped one upon another—the “Lord God,” the “Almighty” (1:8; 4:8; 11:17; 15:3; 16:7; 19:6, 21:22)—or they are expanded to correspond to the expansive, unlimited character of God, “who is and who was and who is to come” (1:4; cf. 1:8; 4:8). Even when God himself speaks he piles on the sobriquets: “I am the Alpha and the Omega . . . who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty” (1:8). God is Other, and the outsized, expansive titles announce God’s transcendence. Characters mirror God’s traits by what they say and do.56 The four living creatures’ incessant “holy, holy, holy” make certain that the reader does not miss God’s primary trait (4:8). The twenty-four elders add their commentary on God through both word and deed. They sing, fall

55. See Resseguie, Narrative Criticism, 121–30, for a more complete development of characterization.
down, and cast their crowns before the throne (4:10–11). The four living creatures fall down and worship God in 19:4. And the entire creation—in heaven, on earth, under the earth, in the sea (the significant fours)—weighs in with their assessment of God and the Lamb in 5:13.

God’s character is known not only by what he says and does or by what others say about him but also by the type of setting. The primary prop of Revelation is the throne, \( \text{θρόνος} \) (thronos), which occurs forty-seven times in the book and almost always refers to God’s throne, although Satan’s or the beast’s throne is also mentioned (2:13; 13:2; 16:10). This setting captures the major plot conflicts of the story: “Who sits on the throne?” “Who rules?” “Who is to be worshiped?” The throne’s location (in heaven) and the spatial arrangement of the heavenly attendants (symmetrical concentric circles around the throne) accentuate John’s ideological point of view. The ever-widening concentric circles include the four living creatures, the twenty-four elders, myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands of angels, and the entire creation. God is the center of creation and brings pristine order where he reigns. Unlike the disorder of this world and the world below, the world above is one of balanced harmony.

To bring out both the harmony and the conflicts in the cosmos, John uses hybrid characters that combine traits from this world and the world above or the world below. Hybrids may combine human traits with beastly characteristics. Just as the sphinx, with the face of a human and the body of a lion, and the Greek centaur, with the body of horse and a human face, combine the human and the animal, so also John’s hybrids are a mixture of the human and the monstrous, or of this world and other worlds. These hybrids capture the divided, conflicted nature of humanity: part human, part animal. They can also represent the creation in harmony with its creator, as in the case of the four living creatures. John’s hybrids include the four living creatures (4:6b–8), the locusts from the abyss (9:1–11), the beast from the sea (13:1–10, 18), and the beast from the land (13:11–17).

The four living creatures combine traits of this world and the world above. Their otherworldly traits are evident in their abundance of eyes (4:6b) and six wings with eyes around and within (4:8a), traits similar to the cherubim of Ezek. 1 and 10 and the seraphim of Isa. 6. The seraphim of Isa. 6 have six wings; the cherubim are four creatures that bear the throne. Yet the living creatures also have features of this world. One of the creatures is like a lion, another like an ox, a third has the face of a human, and the fourth is like a flying eagle (4:7). John’s grammar also supports the hybrid nature of the creatures, for he uses both the neuter and the masculine to describe them.

57. \( \text{θρόνος} \) (thronos).
When he says that the four living creatures had six wings, he uses the masculine participle,\(^{58}\) even though the word “living creatures”\(^ {59}\) is neuter. On the one hand, these hybrids are emblematic of the created world in complete harmony with its creator. On the other hand, the demonic locusts are hybrids that represent the created world in total rebellion with its creator. They are a different genus from the living creatures, combining characteristics of the world below and this world. They represent what the world would be like if God handed the world over to other powers.\(^{60}\) Their origin is the abyss, the underworld, but they have human features. Although they come from another world, they are like something in this world. They are like horses equipped for battle with something like gold crowns on their heads and faces like human faces (9:7). Their hair is like women’s hair, teeth like lions’ teeth, and scales like iron breastplates (9:8–9). Their wings make a sound like the sound of chariots charging into battle, and their tails are like scorpion tails (9:9–10). These hybrids represent the world turned upside down and inside out, reminiscent of Mikhail Bakhtin’s carnivalesque world (see below on “point of view”). In nature locusts eat grass and other kinds of vegetation, but these locusts torment the earth’s inhabitants and leave vegetation untouched (9:4–10). Locusts have no leader (Prov. 30:27), but Abaddon or Apollyon is the king of this satanic horde (9:11). In nature locusts use their voracious jaws to devour vegetation, but these malicious insects use scorpion-like tails to torment humans. Tails are generally found on demonic creatures in Revelation (cf. 12:4). The hybrid traits of the locusts symbolize the collusion of this world with the world below. As Caird notes, “in the last analysis [evil] has a human face, for it is caused by the rebellion of human wills against the will of God.”\(^ {61}\)

The beast from the sea and the beast from the land are hybrids that also combine monstrous traits with human characteristics. The origin of the sea beast is from the world below. It comes up from the abyss (11:7) or the sea (13:1), a chaotic netherworld inhabited by Leviathan and Rahab. Yet the beast has traits of this world, a hybrid of several ferocious animals such as the leopard, bear, and lion (13:2). The animals may refer to Dan. 7:4–6, but they are also “common names for monstrous, dangerous animals.”\(^ {62}\) Its human nature is clarified by an infelicity of grammar. John consistently uses the neuter gender to describe the beast except at 13:8, where he slips into the masculine gender: “all the inhabitants of the earth will worship him”

\(^{58}\) ἔχων (echōn).
\(^{59}\) ζῷα (zōa).
\(^{60}\) Craig R. Koester, Revelation and the End of All Things (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 100.
\(^{61}\) Caird, Commentary on Revelation, 120.
\(^{62}\) Thompson, Book of Revelation, 138.
(not it, as in NRSV). The beast is human, which is further underscored by its number. It is the number of a human or the number of humanity (13:18). Other human traits are the diadems on its horns and the “blasphemous names” on its heads (13:1). Similarly the beast from the earth has both monstrous and human traits. It has two horns like a lamb, speaks like a dragon, but is human. John’s solecism in 13:14b clarifies its human nature (see below on “narrator”). As this example shows, not all of John’s hybrids are monstrous. Unlike the sea beast whose appearance is a mixture of the ferocious and monstrous, the land beast appears harmless with its two lamblike horns. Only its dragonlike speech belies its true nature.

Point of View

Point of view is “the way a story gets told.”63 The actions of the characters, their speech, their rhetoric, and the setting are presented through the narrator’s perspective. The influence of point of view is seen in the events a narrator selects for the story, what the characters say or do, what settings are elaborated, what comments and evaluations the narrator makes, and so forth. Point of view is expressed in terms of space (the vantage point from which the narrator sees what is going on); in terms of time (the past, the present, the future); in terms of words and phrases (the way an ideological perspective is revealed by the narrator’s choice of words); in terms of inside views (the characters’ thoughts, motivations, and emotions); and in terms of ideology (the norms, values, and beliefs that the narrator wants the reader to adopt). This latter point of view—sometimes called the “evaluative” point of view64 or “standards of judgment”65—is the most important aspect of point of view, for it represents the ideological or theological position that the implied author wants the implied reader to adopt.66

John’s spatial point of view is from above. He views this world and the underworld from an above point of view. People, events, and things

65. Rhoads, Dewey, and Michie, Mark as Story, 44–45.
66. See p. 54 for a definition of implied author and implied reader.
are not what they seem to be, therefore a different perspective—one from above—is needed to see this world and the world below properly. John’s first word in Revelation reveals his point of view: a “revelation” of Jesus Christ (1:1). “Revelation” or “apocalypse” means “unveiling”: a look at a world that cannot be seen except through revelation, or a look at this world through an above perspective. And what John sees is an inverted world in which everything or nearly everything is turned inside out and upside down. Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of the carnivalesque describes the inside out, upside down, top to bottom apocalyptic world of John. The world below, and to a certain extent this world, is “the reverse side” of the world above. They are the above world turned inside out and upside down. This is what the cosmos would look like if God turned the world over to powers from below. The perversions and inversions of the world below spill over into this world, turning things upside down. Everything or nearly everything in John’s world has its opposite, its double, a perversion of that which is good. The beast from the sea parodies the Lamb, the dragon parodies God, Babylon parodies the new Jerusalem, the mark of the beast parodies the seal of God, and so on. In theological terms, evil parodies good, falsehood parodies truth, counterfeit Christ parodies real Christ, and false prophecy parodies genuine prophecy. The multiple inversions train the reader to see this world and the world below from an above point of view. When viewed from this perspective the counterfeit Christ appears downright beastly. He is an ugly blend of monstrous traits, a hybrid of frightful, terrifying animals (13:2). Yet when viewed from a this-worldly perspective, the beast is not so monstrous. He does the impossible, such as coming back from the dead (13:3), and gains a large following among peoples (13:4). His descriptive title—“was and is not and is to come”—almost appears divine (17:8; cf. 1:8). Viewed from a this-worldly perspective the beast seems neither monstrous nor even an imitation; rather, he appears good.

The Laodiceans are emblematic of the carnivalesque world of John. Everything is inside out, upside down, and needs to be turned upright. The Laodiceans are in urgent need of messianic repair. They are rich but actually poor; prosperous but wretched and pitiable; need nothing but are stark naked (3:17). This is Bakhtin’s carnivalesque world where nothing

67. ἀποκάλυψις (apokalypsis).
68. Mikhail Bakhtin, Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics, Theory and History of Literature 8, ed. and trans. by Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 122. See Resseguie, Narrative Criticism, 75–78, for a discussion of the carnivalesque.
69. The phrasing is Bakhtin’s, Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics, 122.
is what it appears to be and everything is turned upside down, inside out. The Laodiceans’ material prosperity cannot mask their spiritual poverty; their self-sufficiency cannot hide their religious nakedness. Their self-perception is upside down and needs to be turned upright by messianic intervention.

Plot

Plot is the designing principle that contributes to our understanding of the meaning of a narrative. Aristotle defined a plot as a continuous sequence of events or actions with a beginning, a middle, and an end (Poetics 7). This deceptively simple definition underscores the unity of action. As Paul Goodman elaborates, a beginning does not follow something else, a middle follows events and has consequences that follow, and the end does not have anything that necessarily follows but everything precedes it. Of course not all plots begin at the beginning. Some begin in the middle (in medias res) or even at the end and work backward to the beginning. E. M. Forster helpfully noted the difference between a story and a plot. A story is simply concerned with what happens next; a plot is concerned with why things happen. For example, Forster’s oft-cited example—“the king died and then the queen died”—is a story. One event follows another with no causal link between the two. But “the king died, and then the queen died of grief” is a plot that offers a causal link between the king’s death and the queen’s death.

Plots generally involve conflicts having to do with actions, characters, points of view, worldviews, values, norms, and so forth. The conflicts may be physical, mental, emotional, spiritual, or moral. Conflicts may be external or internal. The villains (antagonists) of Revelation battle with good characters (protagonists). The supernatural battles the supernatural: Michael and his angels fight the dragon and his angels (12:7–9). The world below is in conflict with the world above. This world and the world below are in rebellion against God. Evil battles good, but destructive characters also battle destructive characters (17:16). The values, norms, and beliefs of Babylon are in conflict with the values, norms, and beliefs of the Lamb. Conflicts may also be internal. Characters face a crisis of decision. Will the

inhabitants of the earth repent or will they remain recalcitrant (9:20–21)? Will Christian congregations turn away from disaster (2:5, 16, 22; 3:3, 19)? Will they wake up from spiritual somnolence (3:2)? Will they follow the Lamb on an uncertain journey to an unseen place, or will they settle down in Babylon? Will they heed the call to flee Babylon’s norms, values, and beliefs or will they assimilate to the dominant culture (18:4)? By the end of the book all loose threads are tied up and all plot conflicts are resolved.

The plot of Revelation is U-shaped. A U-shaped structure is the shape of a comedy, while an inverted U is the shape of a tragedy. Northrop Frye in *The Great Code* argues that the Bible is a series of U-shaped and inverted U-shaped plots, a series of disasters and restorations, ups and downs that begins in Genesis with the loss of the tree of life and ends in Revelation with the tree of life restored. A U-shaped plot starts with a stable condition that descends to disaster (the downward slope of the U). A reversal, or what Aristotle called the *peripety* (Greek *peripeteia*, “reversal”; *Poetics* 11), turns around the descent to disaster (the bottom of the U) and propels the plot upward. This reversal generally relies on a recognition or discovery, which Aristotle called an *anagnōrisis*. Although a recognition scene may never happen or may happen too late to avert disaster, a successful recognition reverses the tragic descent. The change in direction marks the beginning of the dénouement (French for “unraveling”) or resolution of the plot and the upward turn of the U to a new state of equilibrium.

In Revelation the top of the U, the stable condition, is represented by the protagonists—God (4:1–11) and the one like a son of man (1:12–20). The opening vision of the one like a son of man establishes Christ’s sovereignty and his control over the churches. Similarly the vision of God in Rev. 4 emphasizes stability, order, and symmetry in the world. Yet the seeds of instability are present within the narrative, sending the U-shaped trajectory downward to disaster. The world is in rebellion and requires a messianic repair. Evil in the guise of the dragon, the beast, and the land beast runs rampant. The city of this world, Babylon, is intent on absolute rule without impunity. The world at large and Christians too are called on to reverse direction, to repent. The U-shaped trajectory can continue downward to tragedy or a peripety can reverse that trajectory. The bottom of the U that reverses the descent to certain disaster is the cross. The seven-eyed, seven-horned slaughtered-yet-risen Lamb takes the scroll and


begins the work of messianic repairs to the cosmos. Christians are enlisted in this work through active resistance to the norms, values, and beliefs of the beast and Babylon. They may even lose their life in the process (12:11). The upward movement of the U is marked by active resistance to Babylon, patient endurance, and holding fast to the testimony of Jesus (13:10; 14:12). The world at large is called to change directions also, to repent and to give “glory to the God of heaven” (11:13). The top of the U, the new stable condition, is the safe arrival of God’s pilgrim people to the new promised land, the new heaven and the new earth, the new Jerusalem.

The church at Laodicea models the U-shaped plot of the entire book. The stable condition is established by the sovereign, immanent Christ: “the words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the origin of God’s creation” (3:14). Yet problems within the congregation send the U structure downward. They believe they are rich, but are spiritually poor; they need nothing, yet they are stark naked. Their polluted gold needs refinement by fire so that they become spiritually wealthy. They lack white robes to cover the shame of their spiritual poverty (3:18). The church is self-deceived and in need of revelation—not of the future but of the present. They believe Christ dwells within their congregation but, ironically, he stands like a stranger at the door of the church knocking. He is an outsider to his own church, waiting for the Laodiceans to invite him in for fellowship (3:20). They are blind to their spiritual health and, therefore, need to purchase salve from Christ to anoint their eyes (3:18). The descent of the U, however, can be reversed: “Be earnest, therefore, and repent” (3:19). The peripety requires a change of heart that begins the upward movement to the top of the U. If they conquer, they are given a place with Christ on his throne in the new Jerusalem, the new stable condition at the top of the U (3:21; cf. 22:1, 3).

Underlying the U-shaped structure is a masterplot. H. Porter Abbott defines a masterplot as “recurrent skeletal stories, belonging to cultures and individuals that play a powerful role in questions of identity, values, and understanding of life.” Masterplots deal with universal stories such as the quest for meaning in life (Where are we going?), questions of origins (Where did we come from?), the quest for identity (Who are we?), and the quest for reconciliation (How can we find our way home?). The masterplot of Revelation is a quest of the people of God to find their way home, to the new promised land. After exile from the garden of Eden, how can humankind...
find its way back to paradise? John develops and elaborates this masterplot through allusions to the exodus and exile.\footnote{On the exodus typology in Revelation see Ulfgard, \textit{Feast and Future}, 35–41; Beale, \textit{Book of Revelation}, 643–45.} He envisions a new exodus in which the new Israel journeys to a new promised land, the new Jerusalem. As with the Israelites, the wilderness is the “place” where the church dwells during the in-between times. The woman of Rev. 12, an image of the church, is pursued by the Pharaoh of Revelation, the dragon. But she is given “the two wings of the great eagle” to escape to the wilderness, where she is nourished during the in-between times (“time, and times, and half a time,” 12:14). The exodus setting is in the background of John’s vision of a mighty angel in Rev. 10. Like Yahweh or an angel who guided the Israelites by night with a pillar of fire (Exod. 13:21–22), John’s Brobdingnagian angel has blazing legs like a pillar of fire to guide the new Israel on its wilderness pilgrimage out of Egypt (“the great city,” i.e., Babylon, 11:8) to the new promised land, the new Jerusalem.\footnote{Caird, \textit{Commentary on the Revelation}, 126. See below, p. 164, for a discussion of Babylon as “the great city.”} Revelation 15:2–4 reenacts the deliverance of the people of Israel from Pharaoh at the Red Sea (Exod. 14–15). After the people’s safe deliverance from the pursuing representative of Pharaoh, the beast from the sea, the new Israel sings the song of Moses and the song of the Lamb by “a sea of glass mixed with fire” (a Red Sea?). The plagues of 15:5–16:21 reenact the Egyptian plagues. The two witnesses, another image of the church, are martyred in the great city, which is a type of Egypt (11:8). Finally, the people of God are urged to depart spiritually from the city of exile and alienation, Babylon: “Come out of her, my people, so that you do not take part in her sins” (18:4). The dénouement of this longing for a homeland is realized at the end when God’s people arrive safely at the new promised land.

**Narrator**

The narrator is the voice that tells the story.\footnote{See Greg Carey, \textit{Elusive Apocalypse: Reading Authority in the Revelation to John}, SABH 15 (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1999), for a different approach to John as narrator and his voice. At times he uses Mikhail Bakhtin and his concept of dialogic discourse in which multiple narrative voices are mediated and tamed by one voice (i.e., John’s) to explain the narrative dynamics.} The narrator of this story is John who calls himself God’s or Christ’s “slave” (1:1; NRSV “servant”) and a “brother” (1:9). He writes a prophetic work (22:9; 1:3) and is exiled on the island of Patmos.\footnote{For discussion of John’s identity as the apostle (son of Zebedee) or another John, see traditional commentaries such as Beale, \textit{Book of Revelation}, 34–36. Similarly, on the dating of...} In John’s narrative world, a “prophet” is one.
who is privileged to see this world from an above perspective and to see what cannot be seen by ordinary eyes—that is, to reveal the world above to readers and hearers of his story. First-person narration invites readers and hearers to join John on his apocalyptic journey to see what he sees and hear what he hears. Whereas a third-person report places distance between the narrator and the reader/hearer (“he saw”; “he said”), the first person enhances the vividness and immediacy of what happens (“I saw”; “I heard”). Those who venture to take the journey with John experience his pathos as no one is found worthy to open the scroll (“and I began to weep bitterly,” 5:4) and his astonishment at Babylon’s greatness (“I was greatly amazed,” 17:6). Readers and hearers are incredulous as he reveals his foibles: “Then I fell down at [the angel’s] feet to worship him” (19:10; cf. 22:8). This is no superhuman John but a very ordinary John who makes the same mistakes as even the inhabitants of the earth when they worship the creation. Unlike third-person narrators who know everything and see everything, John knows and sees only what is revealed to him. His lack of omniscience makes him like the reader/hearer—someone who is privileged to see things differently.

As with any writer, John’s narrative style is distinctive. Style is the manner of linguistic expression, or how the narrator says what he says. John uses solecisms or ungrammatical constructions, relies on the passive voice to emphasize divine activity, and favors the repetitive usage of “and” in lists to lengthen and thicken the rhetorical impact. He reverses the logical sequence of events, placing the results before the processes leading up to the results, and often refers to an object or person in the narrative as if already known to the reader/hearer. He frequently alternates between what he hears and what he sees, allowing the hearing and seeing to interpret each other, and he uses embedded narratives to slow down the narrative pacing.

John’s ungrammatical style is well documented by R. H. Charles and is also the subject of more recent studies. Harry O. Maier surveys the field and concludes that John’s grammar is difficult because John wants it to be difficult. John’s infelicities are not unintentional slips of the tongue but part of his overall strategy to force the reader and listener to pay attention. With his solecisms and grammatical irregularities John creates an “anti-

the Apocalypse see Beale, Book of Revelation, 4–27, and the bibliography listed in Pattemore, People of God, 57 n. 15.

81. Abrams, Glossary of Literary Terms, s.v. “Style.”


83. Maier, Apocalypse Recalled, 111.
Narrator

language”84 that challenges the “imperial order surrounding [his] listeners.”85 John’s language is subversive rhetoric that offers an alternative to the political structures of his day. This new world created with his anti-language offers the possibility of a new heaven and new earth in place of imperial domination and suppression.

Whatever social agenda John had in mind with his grammatical and stylistic blunders, his theological agenda is strengthened by grammatical slips. What better way, for instance, to clarify the hybrid nature of the beast from the land—its beastly yet human traits—than to use a grammatical solecism, an ungrammatical construction that draws attention to itself? Although John generally refers to the beast (a neuter word)86 in the neuter, he sometimes employs the masculine gender. In this way John’s grammar reinforces the divided nature of humanity, which is both human and beastly. The NRSV cleans up John’s solecism and glides over the infelicity by using “it”: “It had two horns,” “it spoke like a dragon” (13:11), “it exercises all the authority of the first beast,” “it performs great signs” (13:12, 13), “it is allowed to perform [signs],” “it was allowed to give breath to the image of the beast” (13:14–15). Instead of writing “legōn,” the neuter participle for “telling,” he slips in the masculine participle, “legōn.” The NRSV hides the grammatical clumsiness: “it deceives the inhabitants of earth, telling them to make an image for the beast” (13:14b). A more wooden translation would stumble over the grammatical lapse: “it deceives the inhabitants of earth; he told them to make an image for the beast” (13:14b, author’s translation). John’s solecism accentuates humanity’s conflicted nature, both human and monstrous.87 Further, John switches from a neuter pronoun to a masculine pronoun to describe the beast from the sea. He begins with the neuter: “It opened its mouth to utter blasphemies . . . it was allowed to make war . . . it was given authority” (13:6–7). But at 13:8 John slips in the masculine pronoun: “and all the inhabitants of the earth will worship him” (author’s translation; the NRSV reads “worship it,” once again gliding over the slip). This grammatical blip accentuates the human and beastly nature of the monster.

A theologically pregnant stylistic device is the use of the passive of divine activity (passivum divinum). The passive voice is a circumlocution for God

85. Maier, Apocalypse Recalled, 116.
86. ἰδρίον (thērion).
87. John also uses a solecism at 17:3: the neuter noun “beast” (ὁθρίον, thērion) is followed by a masculine participle, “having (ἔχων, echōn) seven heads,” not the neuter participle (NRSV “it had”).
that avoids direct mention of God’s activity in an event. With the passive voice, God remains ever present yet a “hidden actor” in the drama. No event or happening is outside the purview of God in the Apocalypse; the demonic creatures and beasts do not operate independently of God’s overall plan. The first horseman “was given” a crown (6:2); the second “was given a great sword” and “was permitted to take peace from the earth” (6:4). Death and Hades “were given authority over a fourth of the earth” (6:8). The satanic locusts “were given authority like the authority of scorpions” and “were told not to damage” the green growth of the earth (9:3–4). The beast “was given a mouth uttering haughty and blasphemous words” and “it was allowed to exercise authority for forty-two months” (13:5). The singular use of the divine passive (“was given”) occurs twenty-two times in the Apocalypse, and the plural form (“were given”) twice (8:2; 12:14).

Another characteristic of John’s style is the thickening of sentences and the lengthening of lists with the repetition of “and.” This paratactic style has the advantage of isolating each member of a list, allowing it to stand out and to be noticed. By doing away with the repetitious conjunction the NRSV creates a brusque, more impatient style than John intended. The long list of Babylon’s cargo in 18:12–13, for example, is strung together with a string of “ands”: “cargo of gold and silver and jewels and pearls . . .” (author’s translation; the NRSV usually omits “and” in this passage). Babylon’s luxurious lifestyle is a rococo piling of one commodity on another, creating a cadence of overwrought and outrageous commercialism. Similarly the canticles sung by heavenly choirs seem weightier because of repetition of the word “and.” The Lamb is worthy “to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing” (5:12). When the repeated “and” is omitted the sevenfold listing appears thinner. The theophanic sights and sounds are more noticeable with the repetition of “and” to lengthen the performance. “There were thunder and rumbling and lightning and an earthquake” (8:5, author’s translation). The NRSV omits the “ands,” attenuating the sights and sounds: “There were peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning, and an earthquake.”

89. The phrasing is from Eugene M. Boring, Revelation, IBC (Louisville: John Knox, 1988), 154.
90. ἐδόθη (edothē).
91. ἐδόθησαν (edothēsan).
93. καί (kai).
A stylistic device noted by Isbon Beckwith and developed by David Aune is John’s tendency to place the results before the processes that produced them, a technique called *hysteron-proteron* (“last-first”). This pattern occurs in 3:3, 17; 5:2, 5; 6:4; 10:4, 9; 19:13; 20:4–5, 12–13; 22:14,94 and may aid in the interpretation of a difficult or problematic passage. It may also be John’s way to develop readers’ expectations by foregrounding the most important item by placing it first in the sequence.95 The quest for a worthy one to open the scroll and break its seals is an inversion of the normal order (5:2, 5). Seals must be broken before a scroll can be opened. The inversion heightens the event of first importance—namely, to find someone fit to open the scroll.96 The Laodiceans are “rich” and “have prospered,” the reverse of the normal sequence of prospering and then becoming rich (3:17). The seven thunders are sealed up before the command not to write them down (10:4), an inversion of the logical order. John places the most important action first, namely the removal of the thunders as a threat to the earth or a delay for the saints. In 10:9 John describes the results of eating the little scroll (bitter to the stomach) before tasting the scroll (sweet as honey). In 19:13 Jesus’ robe is dipped in blood before the reference to a battle.97 By placing the blood-stained garment first in the sequence, John emphasizes the counterintuitive way Jesus conquers by his death on the cross. In 20:4 John describes the throne occupants’ martyrdom before the reasons for their deaths.

In another stylistic pattern, John introduces objects or persons into the narrative as if already familiar to the reader or hearer.98 According to Beckwith “the most striking instance” of this usage is the appearance of “*the* beast” in 11:7.99 This is the first time the beast from the sea is mentioned in the book. John does not say “a beast . . . comes up from the bottomless pit” to make war on the two witnesses, but “*the* beast,” as if


95. Beckwith, *Apocalypse of John*, 244, suggests that hysteron-proteron creates “the habit of anticipation” in the reader.


the audience were already familiar with this antagonist. The pattern of mentioning an object as if well known to the audience occurs also in 1:4; 2:11; 11:3; 11:8; 16:19; 17:1.100 In 1:4 “the seven churches” are mentioned, but it is not until 1:11 that the churches in Asia are identified. “The second death” is mentioned in 2:11, but the reader/hearer must wait until 20:14 for clarification. “The great city” is mentioned for the first time in 11:8 and again in 16:19, but one does not learn until 16:19b—far removed from the reference in 11:8—that “the great city” is Babylon. “The great whore” is mentioned in 17:1, although it is not clear who she is until 17:5.

John alternates between what he hears and what he sees.101 What he hears may be the “inner reality, the spirit” while what he sees is the outward reality.102 Or the hearing and seeing may mutually interpret each other, forging a new symbol.103 There is no simple formula, although there is a clear relationship between seeing and hearing. In 13:11, John sees a beast rise from the earth with two horns like a lamb but what he hears is the voice of a dragon. In this instance, appearances are deceptive and only attentive listening reveals the true nature of this hybrid. In Rev. 7 John hears 144,000 but sees a countless multitude. The significant number twelve (12 × 12 × 1,000) is the inner reality: the complete Israel of God. The inclusive multitude, however, is the outer reality: God’s Israel is composed of “every nation and tribe and people and language” (7:9, author’s translation). John sees the demonic cavalry (9:17–19) but hears their number (9:16). The inner reality is that evil has an “immense reserve army”104 that can be defeated only by a messianic deliverer. The war in heaven between Michael and his angels and the dragon and his angels is interpreted by a heavenly voice (12:10–12). In 17:1–6 John sees a woman sitting on a scarlet beast but hears the mystery concerning the woman in 17:7. In 21:1–2 he sees a new heaven and a new earth but hears the meaning of what he sees in 21:3–8.

In Rev. 5:5–6 the relationship between the hearing and seeing is complex. Although John hears a voice that announces a lion, he sees a lamb. It is not a simple matter of the term “lamb” substituting for the term “lion” in Revelation.105 Nor is the lion merely the inner reality while the lamb represents the outer reality. Rather, the lamb reinterprets Old Testament

100. See ibid., 248, for several of these examples.
102. Sweet, Revelation, 125.
104. Caird, Commentary on the Revelation, 123.
allusions to the lion of the tribe of Judah; at the same time, the lion reinterprets the counterintuitive way the lamb conquers, forging a new symbol of conquest in this world.

The canticles of the Apocalypse (what John hears) interpret the visions (what he sees). After the seven-horned, seven-eyed Lamb takes the scroll in 5:7 (what John sees), the creatures and elders join in a “new song” in 5:9–10 (what John hears). The angels and the entire creation add their commentary on the Lamb’s reception of the scroll also (5:12–13). The whole universe is unified in the worship of God and Christ. After John sees the great multitude standing before the throne and the Lamb, he hears the multitude’s commentary and the heavenly attendants’ praise (7:11–12). John sees those who had conquered the beast standing on a fiery sea and hears the song of Moses and of the Lamb (15:2–4). In 16:5–7 a doxology provides a commentary on the first three plagues. The “angel of the waters” is the spokesperson for the environment, interpreting the meaning of the environmental distress. The significance of Babylon’s fall is interpreted by a lengthy funeral dirge in Rev. 18 and by heavenly choirs in 19:1–8.

Finally, John uses embedded narratives to slow down the narrative pace and to focus the reader’s/hearer’s attention on what is important. An embedded narrative, also called an interlude or intercalation, retards the frantic, rapid-fire pace, interrupts the seemingly relentless progression to the end, and draws attention to what is significant. As the six seals are opened, the narrative momentum lurches forward like a runaway train. But suddenly the frantic pace is halted in Rev. 7 and John focuses on the sealing of the 144,000. The fits and starts of the narrative pace create anticipation of the end followed by delay. The end appears to be right around the corner but, unexpectedly, the steady progression to the end is interrupted. A similar pattern of rapid-fire events followed by an unexpected respite occurs in the sequence of the trumpets. A lengthy embedded narrative at 10:1–11:14 halts the breathless pace of the six trumpets just before the seventh trumpet blares. In these two examples the pace is halted between the penultimate and the ultimate of a series—between the sixth and seventh seal and the sixth and seventh trumpet. The cessation in the rapid pace creates a space in the narrative—an in-between space—that the narrator and reader occupy. The 144,000 or all God’s people are sealed, John is commissioned to prophesy again (10:11), and the two witnesses or the church testify (11:1–13). Just as the church’s spiritual home in the in-between times is the wilderness, its temporal home is the in-between period between the penultimate and the ultimate.

106. Sweet, Revelation, 126.
Reader

The reader of the Apocalypse is the implied reader—a competent reader who is similar to an ideal reader who is able to interpret the text in the way the implied author intends. The author of a work creates a persona or image of herself or himself called the “implied author.” The implied reader is a hypothetical construct of the implied author and is thoroughly familiar with the literary, historical, social, linguistic, and cultural repertoire of the implied author. The implied reader can assemble the clues from the text and interpret them as the implied author intended. The implied reader, however, is not a real flesh-and-blood reader, although real readers are to adopt the stance of the implied reader and to respond to the text in the same way the implied reader is to respond. The “authorial audience,” a term used by Peter Rabinowitz to describe the ideal audience that the author imagines, is sometimes used interchangeably with “implied reader.”

Structure

Two common views of the structure of the Apocalypse are a nonlinear, spiraling view in which events are repeated (called “recapitulation”) and a linear view that sees each event progressing one after the other to the end. Recapitulation, which in its various forms goes back to the third century to Victorinus of Pettau (about AD 300), understands the seals, trumpets, and bowls to be similar events but with important variations that up the ante. The structure of the book is nonlinear, consisting of...


108. Would the implied reader be familiar with “apocalyptic” literature? The definition of apocalyptic relies heavily upon John’s Apocalypse, which begs the question whether the implied reader would have recognized it as part of a specific genre. See the critical essay on the genre “apocalyptic” by Gregory L. Linton, “Reading the Apocalypse as Apocalypse: The Limits of Genre,” in Reality of Apocalypse, ed. Barr, 9–41.


110. On the structure of Revelation, see the excellent discussion by Mazzaferri, Genre of the Book of Revelation, 331–78.

of a series of spiraling events that move toward the eschaton. Disasters are intensified in each spiral with a larger proportion of the earth and its population affected. The seven seals (Rev. 6:1–8:1), seven trumpets (Rev. 8–11), and seven bowls (Rev. 16) reach the end with the seventh in their respective series. Thus the trumpets recapitulate the seals, while the bowls recapitulate the trumpets and the seals. As the spiral repeats itself a greater portion of the earth and its population is affected by the disasters: one-fourth in the seals; one-third in the trumpets; and “every living thing” in the bowls (16:3).

Recapitulation is a way to hit readers/hearers over the head with redundant information so that they do not miss the importance of what is said. Charles Talbert likens it to modern information theory: “In literary works, redundancy aims to make it harder for the reader to make a mistake. The repetition aims to make sure the message gets through all the ‘noise’ of extraneous signals that may mislead.”112 Craig Koester sees recapitulation as a way to shatter the readers’ sense of security “by confronting them with horsemen that represent conquest, violence, hardship, and death; by portents in heaven, earth, and sea; and by seemingly insuperable adversaries who oppose those who worship God and Christ.”113 What Koester fails to say, however, is that a linear progression would also threaten the readers’ sense of security. The accompanying table summarizes some of the parallels in the three septets.

### Seals, Trumpets, and Bowls

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Seals</th>
<th>Trumpets</th>
<th>Bowls</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2. Strife</td>
<td>2. Sea became blood</td>
<td>2. Sea to blood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Persecutions</td>
<td>5. Demonic locusts</td>
<td>5. Darkness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Silence</td>
<td>7. End announced</td>
<td>7. “It is done”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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The first four in the series are messianic woes leading up to the end and are separated from the last three in the series by identifiable markers: the four horsemen set off the first four seals from the last three; the eagle’s woes in 8:13 separate the last three trumpets from the initial four; and the first four trumpets parallel the first four bowls. The sixth in the series represents the penultimate events leading up to the end, and the seventh in the series is the end.

The most convincing part of the theory lies in the last two visions of each septet. The sixth seal, trumpet, and bowl judgments are shattering catastrophes that appear to signal the arrival of the end of the age. At the opening of the sixth seal, cosmic devastation occurs (6:12–14). At the blowing of the sixth trumpet, 200 million troops kill a third of humankind. And at the pouring out of the sixth bowl, the great eschatological battle of Armageddon (Harmagedon) occurs. The seventh in the series signals the arrival of the end. This is more noticeable in the seventh trumpet and seventh bowl than in the seventh seal. With the blowing of the seventh trumpet loud voices in heaven proclaim that “the kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah” (11:15). And at the pouring out of the seventh bowl, a loud voice from the temple says, “It is done!” (16:17).

The recapitulation theory is a promising one with a long history, but it is not entirely convincing. For instance, the silence after the opening of the seventh seal cannot represent the end, for it leads naturally into the trumpet series. The narrative continues for several more chapters and does not reach its dénouement until the pouring out of the seventh bowl. Furthermore, the progressive pattern of destruction suggests some sort of linear development in the plot. Although it appears that the end has arrived in the first two septets, each time it is postponed. The one exception is the seventh bowl. At the opening of the fifth seal those who were slaughtered for the word of God and for their testimony ask how long before God avenges their death (6:10). The answer is that they must wait. The end is not yet. After the opening of the sixth seal the recalcitrance of humankind becomes more evident but the end does not occur. The narrative moves onward. The first two series affect only a portion of humanity: one-fourth in the seals and one-third in the trumpets. Not until the bowl sequence is all humanity affected. Further, the bowls are called the last of the plagues:

115. Boxall, Revelation of Saint John, 217, is unconvincing when he claims that the plagues are not “last” sequentially but “last” in terms of the nature of the plagues: “they are eschatological plagues . . . about to be presented in the book for the final time.”
“Then I saw another portent in heaven, great and amazing: seven angels with seven plagues, which are the last, for with them the wrath of God is ended” (15:1, emphasis added).

The audience of each septet is different, suggesting some sort of linear progression. In the seal and trumpet plagues the audience is general—the earth and ordinary people. In the bowl series, however, the plagues are directed specifically against “those who had the mark of the beast and who worshiped its image” (16:2). This in itself is not an insurmountable difficulty for the recapitulation theory since John could be singling out a different audience for each series. Yet not only is the audience different but also the number of those affected by the disasters: one-fourth in the seals, one-third in the trumpets, and “every living thing” in the bowls (16:3). In each series the remnant spared decreases as the time for repentance diminishes. Three-quarters withstand the seals, two-thirds the trumpets, but none withstand the bowls. The point is this: each series allows an opportunity for repentance (cf. 9:20) but the prospect of salvation is made more urgent as the end approaches. A linear progression communicates the urgency and necessity of repentance in the strongest possible terms. It heightens the tension and angst of the reader/hearer until the climax is reached and the moment of decision can no longer be postponed.

One of the strongest arguments for the recapitulation theory is the view that the end occurs in 11:15 with the blowing of the seventh trumpet. David L. Barr considers this verse to be an “enormous obstacle” for those who support a linear sequence.116 Yet a close reading reveals otherwise. What appears as the end is actually an announcement that the days of the end have come (cf. 10:7), which should not be confused with the final wrap-up of history. Although the anticipation of the end is celebrated (thus the proliferation of the aorist tenses in 11:15–17 as a marker of a fait accompli), the realization remains somewhere in the (distant?) future. Prior to the blowing of the seventh trumpet, two woes have occurred but the third woe has not yet happened. The end cannot occur until the third and final woe happens when Satan is thrown down to earth and wreaks havoc on the church: “But woe to the earth and the sea, for the devil has come down to you with great wrath because he knows that his time is short” (12:12, emphasis added).117 The third woe

117. Sweet, Revelation, 202, argues that the third woe is the devil’s expulsion from heaven and the persecution of the church. Sweet anticipates objections: “It has been objected that this cannot be the third woe, because it affects the church (v. 17) not the ‘earth-dwellers’ (8:13); the

is the persecution of the church and overthrow of the beast’s kingdom. While the seventh trumpet announces the certainty of God’s reign, several other events occur before the end is ushered in. Beckwith suggests the following plotline:

The seventh trumpet introduces, not a single vision merely, but a long series reaching to and including the End. The song of praise which bursts forth from heaven upon the sounding of the trumpet hails this signal as announcing the consummation of the kingdom, but the third woe and all the other events which enter into the last act of the drama must intervene before that consummation is reached.118

Perhaps the strongest evidence against the recapitulation theory and in favor of a linear plot development is a literary device that reflects, as Frederick D. Mazzaferri notes, “Johannine genius at its very best.”119 It is well known that theophanic manifestations accompany the climax of each septet (8:5; 11:19; 16:18–21). What is sometimes missed, however, is the intensification of the stereotypical formula as the dénouement approaches. Mazzaferri and Bauckham pay close attention to the lengthening and thickening of the disaster formula as the story progresses.120 A display of light and sound first occurs in Rev. 4:5, which not only recalls the theophany at Sinai when God descends on the mountain in fire, smoke, thunder, and lightning (Exod. 19:16–19) but also serves as a “divine overture” to warn of judgment in Revelation.121

Coming from the throne are flashes of lightning, and rumblings and peals of thunder. (4:5)

The light and sound show occurs the second time at the conclusion of the seal septet. This time the threefold demonstration is lengthened to four. An earthquake is added to the symphonic arrangement, indicating that judgment has now reached the earth.122

third woe, like the first and second, should be ‘a terrible supernatural agency working in the visible world and inflicting agony and horror on the enemies of God.’ . . . But the whole point is that though the ‘earth-dwellers’ take it for bliss (11:10, 13:3ff.), it is in fact their deadliest plague (14:9–11, cf. II Thess. 2:8–12).”

118. Beckwith, Apocalypse of John, 606.
121. Mazzaferri, Genre of the Book of Revelation, 341.
122. Ibid.
There were peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning, and an earthquake. (8:5)

When the third formula occurs at the conclusion of the seven trumpets more is added to the divine arsenal.

There were flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, an earthquake, and heavy hail. (11:19)

The pelting of the earth with heavy hail heightens the tension of the symphonic fugue but the grand finale still lies in the future.

The final symphonic arrangement occurs in 16:18–21 and reaches unrestrained proportions. Not only is an earthquake part of the grand finale, but it is a quake so violent that nothing like it has ever happened on earth (16:18). The great city, Babylon, is split into thirds and enormous hailstones the size of boulders pound the earth.

And huge hailstones, each weighing about a hundred pounds, dropped from heaven on people, until they cursed God for the plague of hail, so fearful was that plague. (16:21)

The expanding literary expression is placed at key junctures in the story—at the initial throne vision and at the conclusion of the seals, trumpets, and bowls—to warn of a final dénouement in which all restraint vanishes. Mazzaferrri is certainly correct to note that the expanding commentary on the divine arsenal transcends a chronological arrangement. Yet there is some sort of linear progression with the seals and trumpets representing “prior, partial, and cautionary judgments” before the narrative sweeps into the bowls and climaxes with the seventh bowl. A linear view does not mean that the events of the Apocalypse follow in a neat chronological arrangement, as advocated in some popular approaches. Rather, the progression is a literary progression with one event folding into another until the end is reached and everything and everyone is in their proper place and the messianic repairs of the cosmos are complete.

123. Ibid.
124. Ibid.