

The Imagery of the Book of Revelation: The Identification and Importance of its Dominant Theme

Summary

After an introduction to the imagery and symbolism of the book of Revelation, and a brief review of the treatment of this subject by modern scholars, a search for the dominant symbolical theme of the text is proposed. This is defined as an imaginal or symbolical framework that gives order and unity to the various visions composing the book and, at the same time, explains its widely-acknowledged visionary and linguistic unity. The dominant symbolical theme is then identified by outlining and evaluating the five main symbolical themes in the text: the messianic war, the eschatological exodus, the justice and judgment of God, the cosmic transformation and the new creation, and the heavenly temple and its liturgy. The study concludes by recommending ‘the heavenly temple and its liturgy’ as the dominant symbolical theme, briefly mentioning some implications of this finding for the interpretation of the book.

Introduction

The book of Revelation starts by stating how its content was made known: it is written that Jesus Christ “*signified by sending his angel to his servant John, who witnesses the Word of God and the Witness of Jesus, all that he saw*” (Rev 1,1). There are two verbs in this sentence that imply that this Revelation was communicated primarily by means of visual images, or visions, which the author then transcribed into words. This is confirmed in the text, when the author is twice commanded to “*write in a book what you see*” (1,11; cf. 1,19) and also later, in the narrative, with the endless repetition of the phrase “*And then I saw*”, or “*And then was seen*”, followed by another vision.¹

The imagery, then, is not a secondary feature of this book, but instead represents the origin and foundation of most of the text. Except for the small amount of oracular (e.g., 1,8; 2,1–3,22; 13,9-10; 14,13; 16,15) and narrative prophecy (e.g., 11,3-13) in the text, every word is either directly related to, or dependent upon, the visionary material revealed to the author.² From the very first reading of the text, it is the imagery that makes the greatest impact on the reader. It has been variously described by scholars as bizarre,³ surreal,⁴ vivid and often grotesque,⁵ strange and sometimes weird or even monstrous.⁶

The images that compose John’s visions are described in various combinations of literal and figurative (non-literal) language, which includes forms such as simile, metaphor, allegory (extended metaphor), metonymy and personification.⁷ The type of language

¹ Cf. G.K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, NIGTC, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1999; 50-52.

² Cf. Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, Cambridge: CUP 1993, 3; Ian Boxall, *The Revelation of St. John*, Black’s New Testament Commentary, London: Continuum 2006, 3-5.

³ John Sweet, ‘Revelation’ in *Early Christian Thought in its Jewish Context*, Eds. John Barclay and John Sweet, Cambridge: CUP 1996, 161.

⁴ G. Biguzzi, ‘A Figurative and Narrative Language Grammar of Revelation’, *Novum Testamentum*, XLV, 4, (2003), 399.

⁵ Ian Paul, ‘The Book of Revelation: Image, Symbol and Metaphor’, *Studies in the Book of Revelation*, Ed. Steve Moyse, Edinburgh/New York: T & T Clarke 2001, 131.

⁶ H.B. Swete, *Apocalypse of John*, 3rd ed., London: Macmillan 1917, cxxxi.

⁷ For a useful review of the author’s use of simile and metaphor, see James L. Resseguie, *The Revelation of John: A Narrative Commentary*, Grand Rapids: Baker Academic 2009, 18-23.

employed in a particular text is identified by examining its literary character and context, and this helps in deciding its meaning (i.e., to what it refers, its 'referent'). This in turn contributes towards the clarification of the primary meaning of the text, its 'literal sense', upon which all other senses depend.⁸

However, in the text of Revelation, identifying the type of language employed by the author can be problematic. Although the transitions between literal and figurative description are sometimes indicated in the text (e.g., 'in the Spirit', 'and I saw [in vision]'), they are often not evident, in which case it may be difficult to distinguish whether the text is to be understood literally or figuratively.⁹ This is compounded by the fact that the same words may have a literal sense in some contexts and a figurative sense in others.¹⁰ In this area of uncertainty, interpretive decisions must be made about the literal or figurative nature of the imagery. Although scholars have proposed a number of useful guidelines to identify figurative language,¹¹ there remains disagreement. Lack of agreement in these decisions helps to explain the great variety of interpretations proposed for the text.¹² However, it is important to stress that there is no connection between the reality or truth of a thing and the type of language used to describe it: literal language does not imply real existence, just as non-literal, i.e., figurative, language does not imply unreality or non-existence. Both literal and figurative language can represent events or objects (referents) that are real and true.¹³

Unrelated to whether the language is literal or figurative, many of the images described in the text also have a symbolical character, especially those associated with vision reports. "A symbol is an image that evokes an objective, concrete reality and prompts that reality to suggest another level of meaning".¹⁴ So the symbolism of a text enables it to evoke levels of meaning that augment or transcend its literal sense. By means

⁸ *Catechism of Catholic Church*, London: Geoffrey Chapman 1994, para. 116, citing St. Thomas, *Summa Theologiae* I, 10, ad 1.

⁹ "Our difficulties begin when we try to decide how far to take the picture language literally and how far to take it figuratively", G.B. Caird, *A Commentary on the Revelation of St. John the Divine*, BNTC, London: A. & C. Black 1966, 6-7. A classic case in point is Rev 11,3-13: is this a straightforward piece of narrative prophecy, expressed in literal language and therefore asking to be interpreted literally for the most part, or is this a figurative (allegorical) description of persons, places and actions that is to be interpreted non-literally, because they represent referents other than those described?

¹⁰ E.g., sky/heaven, star/angel or demon, thunders/divine voices, sea or waters/abyss; Cf. Ugo Vanni, *L'Apocalisse: Ermeneutica, Egesesi, Teologia* (Supplementi alla Revista Biblica, 17) Bologna: Centro Editoriale Dehoniana 1988, 34-5.

¹¹ Cf. Beale, *Revelation*, 57; G.B. Caird, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible*, Pennsylvania: Westminster Press 1980, 186-197.

¹² I.e., there is a spectrum of interpretation from non-literal (often termed 'symbolical', but see next paragraph) at one end, to literal at the other.

¹³ Cf. Caird puts it like this "Any statement, literal or metaphorical, may be true or false, and its referent may be real or unreal... In short, literal and metaphorical are terms which describe types of language, and the type of language we use has very little to do with the truth or falsity of what we say and with the existence or non-existence of the things we refer to", G.B. Caird, *Language and Imagery*, 131.

¹⁴ Harmon and Holman define a literary symbol as follows: "If we consider an image to have a concrete referent in the objective world and to function as image when it powerfully evokes that referent, then a symbol is like an image in doing the same thing but different from it in going beyond the evoking of the objective referent by making the referent suggest a meaning beyond itself: in other words, a symbol is an image that evokes an objective, concrete reality and prompts that reality to suggest another level of meaning." William Harmon and C. Hugh Holman, *A Handbook to Literature*, quoted at <http://www.cod.edu/people/faculty/fitchf/readlit/symbol1.htm> (accessed 06/10/10).

of its symbols, a text can resonate with multiple levels of meaning (polyvalency). In the case of Revelation, most of the symbols are derived from the OT, either through the adoption of its symbols (e.g., Scroll of Life, Tree of Life, Water of Life) or symbolical systems (e.g., Ezekiel's plan of restoration, the gems on the high priest's breastplate), or through the symbolical use of OT metaphors (e.g., the Lamb and Lion of the Tribe of Judah, the Root of David, the Beasts, the Prostitute), or just through the symbolical use of places, persons and objects mentioned in the Hebrew Scriptures (e.g., Jezebel, Balaam, Babylon, Egypt, Sodom, the sacred objects and places).¹⁵ In the book of Revelation, in fact, almost every image that evokes an image in the OT can be called a symbol, because its corresponding context in the OT suggests a level of meaning over and above the meaning evoked by its immediate context. And if the image in Revelation evokes several OT images, then several levels of meaning may be perceived over and above the literal sense (e.g., the sounding of the trumpet can evoke, at the same time, divine worship, a call for repentance, the New Year convocation, assembly for war and the 'end of the world'; the celestial woman in Rev 12 evokes Eve, Wisdom, Zion, the Church, Mary and the chaste soul). The additional level, or levels, of meaning can then, in turn, exert influence over the literal sense, giving it more precision or depth, and demonstrating the important role of symbolism in the interpretation of the text.¹⁶ This aspect of symbolism will be taken up later in our study of the larger symbolical themes, or 'macro-symbolism' of the text.

Scholars of the book of Revelation often speak loosely of its 'symbolism' and 'symbolic language', thereby implying that all the images found there are symbols, or that they all have the same symbolical value. However, some caution is needed here. Despite the extensive symbolism of the vision reports, it has rightly been observed that "much of the imagery of the Apocalypse is doubtless not symbolism"¹⁷ and "it should be obvious from a reading of Revelation that the author's imagery and symbolism are not all of a single kind".¹⁸ All symbols are images, but not all images are symbols. Since not all the images of Revelation are symbols, it is preferable, when speaking generally about the image-evoking language of Revelation, to refer to its 'imagery', rather than to its 'symbolism'.

On the basis of Revelation's extensive symbolism and narrative structure, some scholars have deemed it, or parts of it, as belonging to the genre of 'myth', going so far as describing it as an 'eschatological myth'.¹⁹ This is a highly contentious assertion, because

¹⁵ Cf. Swete, *Apocalypse*, cxxxii-cxxxiii.

¹⁶ Of course, it also shows how previous OT patterns of behaviour or expectation have become 'fulfilled' in, or through, the present text. Clearly we are touching on an aspect of literary study that has been called 'intertextuality'.

¹⁷ Swete, *Apocalypse*, cxxxiii, who gives as an example Babylon's trade list in Rev 18,12-13.

¹⁸ John M. Court, *Revelation*, New Testament Guides, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press 1999, 91.

¹⁹ The most extreme protagonist of this view was S.H. Hooke, a British scholar of the 'Myth and Ritual' School, whose 'functional' definition of myth is capable of including almost any "product of the human imagination arising out of a definite situation and intended to do something" (*Middle Eastern Mythology*, Harmondsworth: Penguin 1963, 11). So it is not surprising that when speaking of the book of Revelation (op. cit. 15-16), he does not distinguish between the use of mythical allusions as a form of symbolism and myth *per se*, with all that this term implies about the worldview, religious customs and social structures of those whom it embraces (cf. also 'The Myth and Ritual Pattern in Jewish and Christian Apocalyptic' in *The Siege Perilous: Essays in Biblical Anthropology*, S.H. Hooke, London: SCM Press, 1956, 124-43). Among the scholars of Revelation none have gone so far as to call the book a myth, but many have come very close: e.g., M.E. Boring ('Revelation's pictorial language uses myth as the vehicle of truth'), A.Y. Collins ('the combat myth is the conceptual framework that underlies the book as a whole'), G.B. Caird ('he pictured the crisis of his own time in the archetypal symbols of myth and infused into the old myths the vitality of his own creative

of the derogatory significance given to term ‘myth’ in the NT (2Pet 1,16; 1Tim 1,4; 2Tim 4,4; Titus 1,14) and persisting among the public up to this day. All attempts to redefine the term and rehabilitate the status of ‘myth’ have had no effect in removing its negative connotations.²⁰ In the popular mind a myth is, at best, a fictional story invented by men for a particular purpose, or, at worst, an outright lie. Furthermore, the mid-twentieth century initiative to de-mythologize the NT writings, led by the German theologian Rudolf Bultmann, only endorsed negative attitudes towards ‘myth’ by strongly rejecting the mythological elements that survive in these writings.²¹

Returning to the claim that the book of Revelation is a kind of myth, there is good reason to believe that this is based on a misunderstanding of the way in which the total mythical worldview of Near-Eastern societies was gradually overthrown by the faith of the ancient Israelites. As far as we know, Israelite worship never tried to recall and recreate the conditions of a primordial time (*‘in illo tempore’*), through ritual re-enactments of elaborate myths, because the focus of Israel’s faith was upon a God who acts in history on their behalf. Israelite prophets looked forward to an ideal consummation in the eschatological future, though sometimes using mythological motifs as metaphors to describe its realization.²² The mythical and eschatological worldviews are so fundamentally opposed to each other that the mythical worldview first had to perish before the eschatological worldview could arise.²³ Myth, in its fullest and most authentic sense, is based on an entirely different set of theological beliefs than those of eschatological prophecy. The book of Revelation clearly falls into the latter category (1,3; 22,7.10).

Instead, it is worth recalling that the particular language and imagery of the book of Revelation have led to its identification as an example, arguably the most brilliant, of the genre of ‘apocalyptic’—a distinct group of writings with a similar generic framework, produced between the years 200 BC and 200 AD.²⁴ In writings of this genre the importance of biblical and mythological allusions is generally admitted, but “it should be clear that a mythological allusion does not carry the same meaning and reference in an apocalyptic context as it did in the original myth... Mythological allusions, like biblical allusions, are not simple copies of the original source. Rather they transfer motifs from one context to

imagination’), Steven J. Friesen (‘Revelation...created and deployed myths to show that ultimate authority was not located in this world’), and Gregory C. Jenks (‘*The Antichrist Myth*’), to mention a few.

²⁰ One thinks especially of the work of Prof. Mircea Eliade, cf. *‘Myth and Reality’*, New York: Harper and Row 1963, esp. 1-20 (ch.1).

²¹ Cf. ‘New Testament and Mythology’ by Rudolf Bultmann in *Kerygma and Myth: A Theological Debate*, ed. H.W. Bartsch, New York: Harper and Row 1961, 1-44. The point should be made, though, that Bultmann’s working definition of myth, or ‘mythical worldview’, is quite ‘unbiblical’: it basically included everything that could not be explained by modern science, and which he therefore considered obsolete.

²² Cf. James Barr, ‘The Meaning of ‘Mythology’ in Relation to the Old Testament’, *Vetus Testamentum* 1959, vol. 9, 1-10. This process has been termed ‘historicization’ of myths, i.e., abolishing their reference to a primordial time and applying them to historical time: historical persons, institutions and events in the past, present or future.

²³ Cf. S.B. Frost, ‘Eschatology and Myth’, *Vetus Testamentum*, Jan 1952, 70-80. On the finer differences between ancient myths of cosmic cataclysm and Judeo-Christian Eschatology, see also Mircea Eliade’s *Myth and Reality*, 54-67 (ch 4).

²⁴ The definition published, in 1979, by the SBL working group on this subject has been generally accepted: “a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial insofar as it involves another supernatural world”, J.J. Collins, ‘Introduction: Towards the Morphology of a Genre’, *Semeia*, 14, 9.

another. By so doing they build associations and analogies and so enrich the communicative power of language”.²⁵ Clearly, the use of mythological allusion in the book of Revelation does not mean that these writings are myths, or that they are derived directly from myths, or that they participate in any kind of mythical worldview. In fact, the mythological allusions in Revelation are far more likely to have been taken from the OT, as noted by Pierre Prigent: “It therefore hardly reasonable to have recourse to the hypothesis of a borrowing from mythology in order to account for an image that comes straight out of the OT and Judaism. I am surprised that the majority of commentators still feel obliged today to refer as if to a dogma to the shaky parallels pointed out by the school of comparative mythologies and their father, E. Dupuis.”²⁶

Modern scholarship

Most commentators, ancient and modern, agree that the imagery of Revelation is of central importance in the interpretation of the text, although it is barely given the attention it deserves.²⁷ It has undoubtedly “proved problematic for academic study... Scholarship is not always consistent in the importance it gives to the images in Revelation”.²⁸ Indeed, in a rapid survey of some of the most available works on the subject, we find that R.H. Charles devoted only two paragraphs to imagery in his two volume commentary on Revelation. Incredibly, he used these two paragraphs to apologize for the text’s symbolical language, explaining it as a consequence of the author’s inability to understand and clearly express what he had seen in his visions.²⁹ David Aune writes nothing whatsoever on Revelation’s imagery or symbolism in the introduction to his three volume commentary.³⁰

On the other hand, H.B. Swete included a simple, brief and useful summary of Revelation’s symbolism in his commentary.³¹ Ugo Vanni has provided perhaps the only comprehensive analysis of the symbolism in the text, giving us valuable insight into its structure, development and theological potential; of especial interest is his observation on the author’s dual use of the same terms in both literal and in symbolical contexts.³²

Confronting ‘fundamentalist’ exegesis, M.E. Boring proposes a new hermeneutic principle according to which factual inferences should not be made from the ‘pictorial’ image-evoking language of Revelation, because it totally differs from the ‘propositional’

²⁵ J.J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination*, 2nd Ed., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998, 19.

²⁶ Pierre Prigent, *Commentary on the Apocalypse of St. John*, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2001, 381, in reference to the dragon image of Rev 12,5; Cf. *ibid.* 16.

²⁷ Ugo Vanni, *L’Apocalisse*, 31.

²⁸ Ian Paul, ‘Image, Symbol and Metaphor’, *Studies in the Book of Revelation*, 131.

²⁹ “Thus the seer laboured under a twofold disability. His psychical powers were generally unequal to the task of apprehending the full meaning of the heavenly vision, and his powers of expression were frequently unable to set forth the things he had apprehended” R.H. Charles, *The Revelation of St. John*, Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1920, Vol. I, cvi-cvii. There is indeed some evidence of this in the text itself (Rev 7,13-14; 17,6; 19,10), though one should not underestimate the amount of information given from inner commentary and explanation: some indispensable interpretations are given by heavenly figures in the text itself (e.g., 1,20; 5,5; 7,14; 11,4; 12,9; 13,18; 17,1-2.7-18; 19,8; 21,9), or by the commentary of the heavenly choruses (e.g., 5,9; 11,16-18; 12,10-12; 15,3-4; 18,4-8; 19,1-8; 21,3-4) or simply slipped into text by the author (e.g., 4,5; 5,6; 11,8; 12,9; 19,8).

³⁰ David E. Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, WBC 52A, Dallas: Word Books 1997, xlvii-ccxi (Introduction).

³¹ Swete, *Apocalypse*, cxxxi-cxxxix.

³² Ugo Vanni, ‘Il simbolismo dell’Apocalisse’ (ch. 2), in *L’Apocalisse*, 31-61 (only in Italian).

language of normal ‘logical’ communication and conveys truths of a different kind.³³ G.K. Beale critiques Boring’s now-widely accepted ‘new hermeneutic’, because of the limitations it imposes on the cognitive value of Revelation’s images. Instead, he sees the interpretive errors of the ‘fundamentalist’ school as a lack of attention to the symbolical character of Revelation. He goes on to present a method for ensuring that the significance of its metaphors is taken into account, and concludes with a section on its numerical symbolism.³⁴

Richard Bauckham offers a staunchly Preterist explanation of the purpose of the ‘symbolical world’ of Revelation, before outlining a guide to the interpretation of its enduring theological significance.³⁵ David Barr is struck by “the pedestrian nature of the prosaic reality” to which some of the images of Revelation refer and by the ‘remarkable symbolical transformations’ that other images perform, reversing “the value of certain symbols of power and conquest by transforming them into images of suffering or weakness”.³⁶ Ian Paul proposes a new methodology for the interpretation of Revelation’s images, based on Paul Ricoeur’s ‘hermeneutic of metaphor’. His explanation and application of the method turn out to be somewhat more complex and confusing than the imagery he is attempting to analyze.³⁷ Finally, G. Biguzzi provides a ‘grammar’—a kind of compendium—of the inconsistencies he has identified in the figurative language of Revelation, offering this as evidence of compositional unity and a single source.³⁸

After reading this representative selection of scholarly works on the imagery of Revelation, one is left with the impression that there has been little progress since St. Jerome wrote “*The apocalypse of John has as many mysteries as words. In saying this I have said less than the book deserves. All praise of it is inadequate; manifold meanings lie*

³³ M. Eugene Boring, *Revelation: Interpretation, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, Louisville, Ky: John Knox Press, 1989, 51-9. The proposal appears to be based on the common, but false, identity between the literal and the real and, conversely, between the non-literal and the non-real (cf. Caird, *Language and Imagery*, 131). The type of the language we use, whether literal or symbolical, has very little to do with the reality or non-reality, existence or non-existence, of the things we describe or refer to. As noted by Grant R. Osborne “Revelation is a symbolic book, but that does not mean that symbols do not depict literal events...” *Revelation*, Grand Rapids: Baker Academic 2002, 16.

³⁴ Beale, *Revelation*, 50-69. The method is that of Vern Sheridan Poythress, outlined in his ‘Genre and Hermeneutics in Rev 20:1-6’, in *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 36/1 (March 1993), 41-54.

³⁵ Bauckham, ‘Understanding the Imagery’ in *Theology*, 17-22. His preterist view is inherent: “We have already noticed the unusual profusion of visual imagery in Revelation and its capacity to create a symbolic world which its readers can enter and thereby have their perception of the world in which they lived transformed. To appreciate the importance of this we should remember that Revelation’s readers in the great cities of the province of Asia were constantly confronted with powerful images of the Roman vision of the world... In this context, Revelation provides a set of Christian prophetic counter-images which impress on its readers a different vision of world: how it looks from the heaven to which John is caught up in chapter 4. The visual power of the book effects a kind of purging of the Christian imagination, refurbishing it with alternative visions of how the world is and will be” (op. cit. 17).

³⁶ David L. Barr, ‘The Apocalypse as a Symbolic Transformation of the World: A Literary Analysis’, *Interpretation*, 38 (1984), 39-50.

³⁷ Ian Paul, ‘Image, Symbol and Metaphor’, *Studies in the Book of Revelation*, 131-47. As an example of the complexity into which he leads us: “But within the metaphorization of apocalyptic symbolization, the discourse is folded back within itself and retains a narrative temporality which is accessed by means of the diachronic analysis of the semantic impertinence of the metaphor” (op. cit. 144).

³⁸ G. Biguzzi, ‘A Figurative and Narrative Language Grammar of Revelation’, *Novum Testamentum*, XLV, 4, (2003), 382-402.

hidden in its every word'.³⁹ Many valuable observations have been made, especially in the chapters by Swete and Vanni, that illustrate and confirm these comments of St. Jerome. Some interesting, though rather limited, interpretive approaches have been proposed, especially by Beale and Bauckham. Nevertheless, as demonstrated by Biguzzi's recent contribution, scholarship can still do little more than list and classify what it perceives to be the oddities and apparent inconsistencies of Revelation's figurative language.

The Importance of the Dominant Symbolical Theme

In most of the works reviewed above, and indeed in most of the commentaries, the study of the imagery of Revelation rarely ventures beyond an analysis of individual images and figures. However, in the original visions described by the author, these images and figures are always parts of a vision narrative. They are embedded in a larger visionary context. Interpreting the images without considering them in their larger context can be expected to lead to spurious results, especially since the larger context is often the only guide to the literal or figurative character of a particular image or text.

The visions revealed to the author, as the basis of the book of Revelation, can be described as a re-visioning of mainly Old Testament (OT) imagery⁴⁰ in a completely new setting—that of the messianic age established by the risen Christ. It is this new setting, then, that forms the larger visionary context for the individual images and figures under examination'.⁴¹ The larger context informs and guides the interpretation of its individual component parts. In fact, we suggest that it is only through an understanding of this larger context that the full significance of particular images and scenes can be grasped. Furthermore, since this larger context is the way by which the author integrates the various parts of his book, it is the only real check we have on the full meaning of the text and that of its different parts. The clarification of this larger context has, therefore, a specific hermeneutic importance. Before studying the particularities of the imagery and symbolism of the text, efforts must be directed towards a clarification of its major imaginal or symbolical theme, or themes.

There is now a scholarly consensus in favour of the linguistic, literary and narrative unity of this book, as it has come down to us.⁴² Bauckham surely speaks for most when he

³⁹ In his letter to Paulinus, Bishop of Nola (*Ad Paulinum*, LIII, 8, dated to A.D. 394) Jerome wrote "*Apocalypsis Joannis tot habet sacramenta, quot verba. Parum dixi pro merito voluminis. Laus omnis inferior est: in verbis singulis multiples latent intelligentiae*".

⁴⁰ Austin Farrer referred to this process as "a rebirth of images". The great majority of images in Revelation are derived from the OT, drawing also from its symbols and metaphors (Swete, *Apocalypse*, cxxxii). "The Apocalyptist, however, does not limit himself to O.T. imagery, but has much that is his own, or that belongs to the common stock of the later apocalyptists" (ibid. cxxxiii). A large part of the interpretation of these images therefore lies in comparing the text of Revelation with the corresponding part of the OT or apocalyptic literature. There remains, however, a considerable amount of imagery whose significance cannot be determined from other sources, precisely because it is original to Revelation.

⁴¹ The larger context, or overall imaginal structure, is basically the 'big picture'. It is not quite the same as the literary structure, although the similarity of the figurative and literary structures should help the one to interpret the other.

⁴² Cf. Swete, *Apocalypse*, xlii-1; L.L. Thompson, *The Book of Revelation*, Oxford: OUP 1990, 37-73; Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, cvii-cx. For other authors, see Antoninus King Wai Siew, *The War Between the Two Beasts and the Two Witnesses: A Chiastic Reading of Revelation 11.1-14.5*, LNTS 283; London: T & T Clark 2005, 8-10 and note 15.

says the book of Revelation is “one of the most unified works in the New Testament.”⁴³ For Resseguie this is not only axiomatic, but also essential for the work of interpretation: “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”.⁴⁴ Since its literary characteristics are closely linked to the foundational visionary material, as noted above, it is a short step to argue from literary unity to figurative unity and agree with Bauckham when he writes: “Revelation, by contrast, is really (from 1:10 to 22:6) a single vision. The imagery is common to the whole. From time to time the scene shifts and fresh images may be introduced, but, once introduced, they may recur throughout the book, Thus John’s vision creates a single symbolic universe in which its readers may live for the time it takes them to read (or hear) the book. Both the profusion of the visual imagery and the unity and continuity of the visionary sequence make Revelation distinctive among the apocalypses.”⁴⁵

If indeed the greater part of Revelation constitutes a single vision, it is reasonable to suppose that there is a uniform set of imagery responsible for creating, maintaining and characterizing this unity. For the reasons given above, it not only makes good sense, but it also becomes imperative, to look for and identify this dominant symbolic framework, for this is the ‘big picture’ that embraces all the other images and determines their fullest meaning. When this symbolic framework has been identified, the work of interpreting particular images within the vision can be brought to completion. Indeed, as argued above, it is only by integrating the interpretation of particular images with the overall visionary structure that their original and fullest sense can be known.

An important step in the interpretation of Revelation’s imagery is, therefore, the identification of the dominant symbolic framework. There are several possibilities that need to be considered for this role. Richard Bauckham lays the foundation for this work in his identification of three major symbolic themes in the text of Revelation: ‘the messianic war’, ‘the eschatological exodus’ and ‘witness’.⁴⁶ Anticipating the argument outlined above, Bauckham presents these grand symbolical themes as an aid to the interpretation of the author’s vision of Christ’s messianic mission, that is, the ‘new setting’ mentioned previously: “In order to find our way through the rather complex imagery in which John expresses his understanding of Christ’s work, it will be helpful initially to recognize the three major symbolic themes—or complexes of symbols—which are all used of all three stages of the work of Christ.”⁴⁷

In the study that follows, we propose and describe five major symbolical themes that can be considered for the role of a dominant symbolical framework governing the entire text of Revelation: ‘the messianic war’, ‘the eschatological exodus’, ‘The justice and judgment of God’, ‘the cosmic transformation and the new creation’ and ‘the new temple and its liturgy’. The first two are developed from the first two themes proposed by Bauckham (‘the messianic war’, ‘the eschatological exodus’); in the third, Bauckham’s third theme has been modified and expanded considerably (‘witness’ has become an aspect

⁴³ Richard Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy: Studies on the Book of Revelation*, Edinburgh: T&T Clark 1993, 1, note 1.

⁴⁴ James L. Resseguie, *The Revelation of John: A Narrative Commentary*, Grand Rapids, Mi: Baker Academic 2009, 17.

⁴⁵ Bauckham, *Theology*, 10.

⁴⁶ Bauckham, *Theology*, 67-73.

⁴⁷ Bauckham, *Theology*, 67.

of ‘the justice and judgment of God’), and the final two are new proposals (‘the cosmic transformation and the new creation’ and ‘the new temple and its liturgy’).

The Messianic War⁴⁸

In early Jewish eschatological expectation, the awaited messiah was to bring final victory in a battle against the enemies of God and his people. For the most part, this expectation was based on the Old Testament holy war traditions, in which victory is won by God, alone or accompanied by his heavenly armies. In its most ideal form, victory was attained without any human combat (e.g., Ex 14,13-14; 2Kgs 19,32-35; 2Chron 20). Descriptions of the eschatological war in later OT writings (Is 59,16; 63,3; Joel 3,11, Zech 14,5) remain true to this ideal. Early apocalyptic literature (Daniel, *Testament of Moses*) follows the same ideal of supernatural victory, with Israel’s angelic patron, Michael, as the divine warrior. Identifying the divine warrior with the long-awaited messiah, later apocalyptic and early post-biblical literature continued to speak about victory gained in a miraculous and supernatural way, without the need for active human combat (cf. 2Bar 40,1; 1En 62,2-3; 4Ezra 12,31-33; 13,9-11; 37–38; Ps Sol 22-25; 1QSb 5,24-25).⁴⁹ It is in this literary and historical context that the theme of messianic war is encountered in the book of Revelation.

The messianic war theme is introduced in the opening vision, where the divine warrior is identified by the sharp two-edged sword coming out of his mouth (Rev 1,16; 2,12, cf. Is 11,4). This is the risen Christ, who will use the sword to fight the unrepentant followers of the Nicolaitans (Rev 2,15-16), before employing it later in the final battle to strike the nations (19,15) and slaughter the armies of his opponents (19,21). From the supernatural nature of the warrior and his weapon, it is clear that Revelation closely follows the holy war tradition of previous and contemporary writings.

Further evidence of the war theme can be found at the end of the messages to the seven churches (2,7.11.17.28; 3,5.12.21), in the promise of great rewards for the hearer who ‘conquers’, or ‘overcomes’ (νικῶ). These exhortations resonate with the author’s vision of a messianic figure in heaven whose ‘victory’ makes him worthy to take the scroll from the heavenly throne and then open it: “*Behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered so to open the scroll and its seven seals*” (Rev 5,5; cf. Gen 49,9; 4Ezra 12,31-2; Is 11,10). However, the contrast between these war-like titles and the one to whom they refer—‘a Lamb standing as one that had been slain’ (Rev 5,6)—indicates a change in the way victory is understood. Since the Lamb that was slain represents Jesus Christ, the ‘victory’ of the Lamb refers to his martyrdom on the cross, followed by Resurrection and Ascension. In this context, it can be inferred that, in a similar way, the ‘victory’ of his followers also refers to their lives of self-donation, even up to death by martyrdom. This is confirmed in a later vision, in a way that reveals the precise identity of

⁴⁸ Several modern authors have written books or articles on the theme of war in Revelation, and some have gone so far as to propose this as a structuring principle, e.g., C.H. Giblin, *The Book of Revelation: The Open Book of Prophecy*, Collegeville, Minnesota, Liturgical Press 1991; A. Yarbro Collins, *The Combat Myth in the Book of Revelation*, Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2001; R. Bauckham, ‘The Apocalypse as a Christian War Scroll’ in *The Climax of Prophecy: Studies on the Book of Revelation*, Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993, 210-37.

⁴⁹ This paragraph is summarized from Bauckham, *Climax*, 210-11. He goes on to show how the pattern of supernatural combat and victory is broken by the ‘War Rule’ from Qumran (1QM, 4QM), because of the description of man to man combat that is described there.

the enemy in this war. The vision depicts a spiritual battle in heaven leading to the defeat of the devil and his fall to the earth (Rev 12). At this point, the heavenly chorus attributes the devil's defeat to those who "conquered him because of the blood of the Lamb and because of the word of their witness, and they loved not their lives up to death" (12,11).

The theme of Christ's victory is continued in a vision of the opening of the first of the scroll's seals (Rev 6,1-2): "And I looked and behold, a white horse, and one sitting on it had a bow and a crown was given to him, and he came out conquering and so to overcome." Assimilating two messianic passages in the Old Testament (Is 49,2; Ps 45,4-5), and evoking the imagery of the horses in Zechariah's visions (Zech 1,7-17; 6,1-8), this figure represents the invincible force that leads to the establishment of the Kingdom of God amongst men and is evident in the Church's mission to evangelize the world before the end of history (Mt 24,14).⁵⁰ Although the riders of the second and fourth horses (Rev 6,4,8) bring war to the earth, this effect cannot be identified specifically with the messianic war, but rather as a judgment of God (cf. Lev 26,14-46; Dt 28,15-69; Jer 29,17-19; Ezek 5,1-17).

By following verbal and thematic links in the text, it becomes evident that, from this point onwards in the text, the references to war relate more specifically to the final battle in the war between the forces of good and evil. The first of these references is to be found in the vision of the sealing of the 144,000 servants of God with the seal of the living God, 12,000 from each of the twelve tribes of Israel (Rev 7,1-8). Although the act of sealing with a seal, or branding, refers to divine protection (9,4; cf. Ezek 9,2-4) and is also a mark of possession,⁵¹ there is little doubt that the list of those who are sealed from the 12 tribes (Rev 7,4-8) alludes to the census that God commanded Moses to perform in the desert of Sinai (Num 1), of all the fighting men in each tribe except Levi, as a preparation for the military organization of their camp (Num 2).⁵² In brief, the sealing of the 144,000 appears to signify their selection as members of an army with a very special mission, for they are the only ones to be spared from the plague that follows the blowing of the 5th trumpet (Rev 9,4). In general, the blowing of the trumpets (8,6-12; 9,1-21), without the battle-cry, is a signal for the assembly of the combatants (Num 10,7).

The next mention of the 144,000 comes in a later vision where they are seen with Christ the Lamb on Mt. Zion (Rev 14,1-5).⁵³ They are men of the highest moral quality,

⁵⁰ For a fuller exposition of the four horsemen, see <http://www.newtorah.org/the-four-horsemen.html> .

⁵¹ As in the practice of branding servants and slaves (δοκλος).

⁵² A closer comparison can be made between this passage in Revelation (7,4-8) and the law for the king in Qumran's 'Temple Scroll' (11QT; col. LVII; 2nd cent. BC): "This is the law [that they shall write for him]... [They shall count,] on the day they appoint hi[m] king, the sons of Israel from the age of twenty to sixty years according to their standard (units). He shall install at their head captains of thousands, captains of fifties and captains of tens in all their cities. He shall select from among them one thousand by tribe to be with him: twelve thousand warriors who shall not leave him alone to be captured by the nations. All the selected men whom he has selected shall be men of truth, God-fearers, haters of unjust gain and mighty warriors. They shall guard him always day and night. They shall guard him from anything sinful, and from any foreign nation in order not to be captured by them" (*The Dead Sea Scrolls in English*, G. Vermes, 3rd Ed., London: Penguin, 1987, 151). The parallels between the 144,000 (12 x 12,000) and the 12,000 strong army of the King of Israel will become even more striking when considering subsequent visions of this group in Revelation (i.e., Rev 14,1-5; 17,14; 20,7-10).

⁵³ After the statement indicating that the spiritual name of the city where Jesus was crucified (Jerusalem) is no longer Zion, but rather Egypt and Sodom (11,8), it is no longer probable that Mt. Zion in this vision is identified with that city. As a consequence of the eschatological exodus (see next section, 6th paragraph), the location of this mount has changed.

who are loyal to Christ and, though on earth,⁵⁴ are in close communion with the celestial choruses in heaven. The assembly of the 144,000 in the presence of the Lamb confirms that they form a messianic army⁵⁵ and the reference to Mt. Zion in this context alludes to Psalm 2, which speaks about the imminent victory of the Lord's messiah over all the rebellious nations of the earth. The impression is that this is an army preparing for an eschatological holy war.

In the meantime, the devil's human embodiment, the 'beast from the sea' (Rev 13) wages war against the two witnesses and kills them (11,7-13), before being given "*authority over every tribe and race and tongue and nation*" (13,5.7) for a short period (42 months). During this period, the beast "*was allowed to make war against the saints and to overcome them*" (13,5.7), in a terrible persecution of all those who would not show him their loyalty and devotion (13,11-17). However, those who were overcome by the beast and martyred in the 'great tribulation' (7,14) are seen worshipping God in heaven (7,9-17), where they are identified as 'those who overcame the beast' (15,2-4), in a joyful reversal that recalls the original victory of Christ and his followers over the devil (12,11). Though celebrated in advance, theirs is nevertheless a genuine victory, because at the end of history their persecutor, the beast, and his allies "*will make war against the Lamb and the Lamb will overcome them, because he is Lord of lords and King of kings, and those with him are called and chosen and faithful*" (17,14).

This final battle, which is called the 'battle of the great day of Almighty God', is convoked in a place called 'Harmagedon',⁵⁶ as a consequence of the outpouring of the sixth and penultimate bowl plague (16,12-16). The combatants and outcome of the battle are described in a later vision (19,11-21), where the risen Christ and his heavenly armies defeat the assembled forces and their leaders, the beast and his false prophet, are captured and punished. This represents Christ's 'second Coming'. The sword from his mouth strikes the nations and slaughters the armies of his opponents (19.5,21). But that is not yet the end of the final battle, because a second phase follows immediately upon the release of the devil.⁵⁷

Then the devil "*will go out to deceive the nations in the four corners of the earth, the Gog and Magog, whose number is as the sand of the sea, to assemble them to the battle. And they went up over the breadth of the land and surrounded the camp of the saints and the Beloved City, and fire came down from heaven and consumed them*" (Rev 20,8-9; cf. Ezek 38-39). In this phase of the final battle, it is clear that the attackers are people from all over the world, under the deceitful leadership of the devil, but it is not so clear who are the

⁵⁴ Only men of flesh and blood have the capacity to learn (14,3) and the need to resist temptation with women (14,4). They are therefore alive on earth and must be considered as a group distinct from the countless multitude in heaven (7,1-8 vs 7,9-17 and 14,1-5 vs 15,2-4).

⁵⁵ Bauckham (*Climax*, 219-20) gives abundant evidence from ancient literary sources showing why "the notion of a messianic army composed of all twelve tribes is not at all surprising. Not only was the return of the ten tribes and the reunion of all Israel a traditional element in the eschatological hope (Isa 11:11-12, 15-16; 27:12-13; Jer 31:7-9; Ezek 37: 15-23; Sir 36:11; Tob 13:13; 2 Bar 78:5-7; TJos 19:4; cf. Matt 19:28; m. Sanh. 10:3; j. Sanh. 10:6), but there is also evidence for the expectation that the ten tribes would return specifically in order to take part in the messianic war" (ibid. 219).

⁵⁶ Harmagedon is a Hebrew word meaning Mt. Megiddo. Since this is the place where the Beast and his armies attempt to demonstrate their force, in opposition to Christ and his armies (17,14), it can be seen as evil's counterpart to Mt. Zion – the mount of the assembly of the Messiah (14,1-5; cf. Ps 2).

⁵⁷ From the 'amillennialist' point of view, which sees the so-called millennial reign of Christ with his saints as a retrospective vision of the present age; for arguments in favour of this view see <http://www.newtorah.org/The%20Millennium%20and%20the%20Mystery%20of%20Iniquity.html> .

defenders in the camp of the saints, the beloved city. There are two clues to their identity: the first is that the Greek term for ‘camp’ (παρεμβολή) is frequently used in a military sense (e.g., Dt 23,10-15 in the LXX), and the second is that the ‘beloved city’ is another name for Mt. Zion (cf. Ps 78,68; 87,1-3). Both of these details take us back to the vision of the saintly messianic army on Mt. Zion (Rev 14,1-5) and their very special role in the eschatological holy war. Without raising a weapon, fire comes down from heaven and destroys their enemies (20,9).

This army of saints is encountered once more in the final vision (20,10), when the author is carried away onto a great and high mountain and from there sees the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God. Since ‘the great and high mountain’ is another allusion to Mt. Zion (Ezek 40,2; cf. Is 2,2-3; Mic 4,1-2), the author seems to be indicating that the new Jerusalem will be realized within view of the camp of the 144,000 saints on Mt. Zion. The final act of holy war, as described in the OT, involved the consecration of the enemy’s possessions to God (Heb: חרם),⁵⁸ thus explaining the origin of the precious stones and metals that will be taken into the holy city and used in its construction (Rev 21,18-21.24-26).

This quick survey has shown how much of Revelation is taken up with the theme of war, and especially with holy war in its most authentically biblical sense—a war in which God fights in favour of his people (cf. Dt 1,30-31). The implication of this is that God’s faithful do not actually need to fight with physical force in order to win: they are either martyred and go to heaven to await victory at the end of history, or when that time comes they are selected for a special group, who are rescued supernaturally from the enemies of God, by ‘fire from heaven’. It is clearly not correct to say that ‘warfare’ in Revelation has been transformed or spiritualized, for real wars and persecutions are described. Instead, this is a war with a historical and an eschatological component. Throughout history, victory has been defined spiritually as keeping the Faith and attaining heaven. But this ‘spiritual’ victory is only part of the story; it is merely a preparation for the final and complete victory at the end of history, which will be realized physically at Christ’s second Coming.

The Eschatological Exodus⁵⁹

This exodus theme in the book of Revelation regards allusions to the liberation of the Israelites from Egypt narrated in the book of Exodus. It includes the preparations leading up to the Israel’s Exodus and their subsequent wanderings in the desert, up to their entrance into the Promised Land. From the time of Deutero-Isaiah the Exodus account had become the model for expressing the eschatological liberation expected in the future, so the occurrence of this theme in the book of Revelation follows a very ancient tradition.

The first mention of the exodus theme in Revelation is in praise of Jesus Christ: “*who loves us and freed us from his sins with his blood, and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be the glory and the might for ever and ever, amen*” (Rev 1,5-6). Just as God freed the Israelites from Egypt and invited them to become “*a kingdom of priests and a holy nation*” (Ex 19,6), so Christ, through the shedding of his blood, has freed

⁵⁸ Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel and its Customs*, London: Darton, Longman and Todd 1961, 260.

⁵⁹ Useful studies on the exodus theme in the book of Revelation include: Håkan Ulfsgård, *Feast and Future: Revelation 7:9-17 and the Feast of Tabernacles*, Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell, 1989; 35-41; Bauckham, *Theology*, 70-72; Pierre Prigent, *Commentary on the Apocalypse of St. John*, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001; 371-2, 377; and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Redemption as Liberation* (Revelation 1:5-6 and 5:9-10), ch. 2 in *The Book of Revelation: Justice and Judgment*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 68-81.

us from sin and made us a kingdom and priests to God. This is the text's first affirmation of the representation of the Christian life as a new exodus, not from Egypt, but from sin, in a way that combines the exodus theme of redemption with divine reconciliation and expiation of sin. Later in the text, Christ is portrayed as a Lamb (Rev 5,6), whose blood "*bought people for God, from every tribe and tongue and people and nation, and made them a kingdom and priests for our God, and they shall reign on the earth*" (5,9-10). There seems to be a parallel, here, between Christ the Lamb and the Passover lambs, whose blood preserved the Israelites from death on the first Passover night and helped bring about their departure from Egypt, so they could go on to become God's Covenant people (cf. 1Cor 5:7). On reflection, however, the role of the first Passover lambs cannot be compared with the redemptive role of Christ.⁶⁰ Nevertheless, the broader exodus theme of redeeming slaves or prisoners, in order to bring them close to God, is certainly present in this passage.

After a considerable pause, the next time we meet the exodus theme is in the descriptions of the judgment 'plagues' that follow the seven trumpets blasts (Rev 8–9) and bowl outpourings (Rev 16). Here there are several allusions to the plagues of Egypt that Moses announced. The 1st trumpet plague (8,7) recalls the plague of the hail (Ex 9,23-25; Wis 16,16-19); the 2nd plague (Rev 8,8-9) recalls the plague of blood (Ex 7,20-21); the 4th plague (Rev 8,12) recalls the plague of darkness (Ex 10,21-23); the 5th plague (Rev 9,1-11) recalls the plague of the locusts (Ex 10,12-15) and the intervention of the destroying angel (Ex 12,23); the death of a third of mankind (Rev 9,18) in the 6th plague (9,13-19) may allude to the death of the first-born (Ex 11,29-30) and the refusal of people to repent (Rev 9,20-21) recalls various passages of reflection and commentary on the plagues of Egypt (Wis 11–12).

The 7th trumpet leads into the outpouring of the 7 bowls (the 3rd woe; Rev 11,14-15), whose plagues are even more severe than those of the trumpet series. In the same way, however, some of the bowl plagues are described with partial allusions to the plagues of Egypt: the 1st and 5th bowl plagues (Rev 16,2.10-11) resemble the plague of boils (Ex 9,8-12); the 2nd and 3rd bowl plagues (Rev 16,3-4) evoke the turning of the River Nile into blood and the death of its fish (Ex 14-24); the 5th bowl plague speaks of darkness falling on the kingdom of the beast (16,10) and resembles the plague of darkness (Ex 10,21-29). Finally, after the 7th bowl there is a terrible plague of hail (Rev 16,21) that evokes the plague of hail and fire (Ex 9,13-35).

In these passages of Revelation, however, it is evident that the allusions to the 'plagues of Egypt', which made way for the exodus of the Israelites, are not taken in any order, neither in their entirety. Similarly, not all aspects of the trumpet and bowl plagues allude to the plagues of Egypt (e.g., Rev 9,13-19; 16,8-9; 16,12-16). The allusions are neither comprehensive nor systematic. In fact, the plagues of the trumpets and bowls appear to differ from the plagues of Egypt in almost every way. The use of exodus language to describe the trumpet and bowl plagues is most probably related to the fact that the greatest concentration of allusions to the exodus theme is found enclosed by these plagues (i.e., Rev 10–15). The use of exodus language to describe the judgment plagues signals the way these

⁶⁰ In brief, the sacrifice of the Passover lambs had no power to expiate sin, something very clearly associated with the blood of the Lamb in the book of Revelation (Rev 1,5): "but the Israelite Passover never had any expiatory purpose" (de Vaux, *Ancient Israel*, 488); "The sacrifice of the Passover lamb was not a means of expiation from sins in early Judaism..." (Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 372); "the Lamb of Ex 12 is translated πρόβατον by the LXX, and although it is sacrificed (...) there is never any question in Exodus of the expiatory value of this sacrifice" (Prigent, *The Apocalypse*, 43).

chapters should be understood: as an eschatological exodus recalling the ancient exodus pattern of biblical judgment and salvation—judgment on the worldly Egyptians and salvation for the faithful Israelites.

So moving on to these intervening chapters (Rev 10–15), we first encounter the exodus theme in the cloud, the column of smoke and in the ‘voices’ of the seven thunders described by the author in his meeting with the mighty angel (10,1-4). These phenomena all recall the ‘signs and portents’ that accompanied the theophany on Mt. Sinai (Ex 19,16-21). The corollary to this is that the little open scroll in the hand of the angel is analogous to the ‘Word of God’ given to Moses in the form of the Torah (cf. Acts 7,38), thus identifying John, the author, as a ‘new Moses’ and the scroll he received and recorded as a new Torah. Furthermore, just as the revelation on Mt. Sinai involved Moses in the construction and consecration of a dwelling for God (Ex 25,8), so also John is given a cane ‘similar to a rod’ and is entrusted with an analogous task, that of measuring “the Sanctuary of God, the altar and those who are worshipping there” (Rev 11,1-2). With the prophetic ministry of Moses in the background, there is an obvious parallel between the ‘cane similar to a rod’ given to John and ‘the rod of God’ with which Moses performed his miracles (Ex 4,17.20). In this context, it is significant that many of the miracles performed by the two witnesses vividly recall those made by Moses (Rev 11,6).⁶¹ Significant, also, is the fact that these two witnesses are put to death “*on the street of the great city which is spiritually called Sodom and Egypt, where indeed their Lord was crucified.*” (11,8). At this point, the city where their Lord was crucified, once spiritually called Zion, becomes spiritually identified with Sodom and Egypt, two cities which the people of God had to leave in a hurry. Implied is an eschatological exodus of God’s people from Jerusalem (cf. Mt 24,15-21; Mk 13,14-19).

The eschatological exodus of God’s people from Jerusalem and elsewhere appears to be one of the main subjects of the next section, though it is described in a somewhat mystical way, by means of three signs that, at a certain time, are seen in heaven. The first sign is of a glorious woman who is about to give birth to the messiah (Rev 12,1-2) and the second sign is of a dragon, who is waiting to devour her child (12,3-4). On giving birth, the woman flees to a place prepared for her in the desert, where she will be nourished for a certain period and protected from the dragon (12,6.14). The entire account of the flight of this woman to the desert is described in terms taken from the exodus of the ancient Israelites: the dragon, which evokes Pharaoh or Egypt (cf. Isa 51,9; Ezek 29.3; 32,2), pursues the woman who was ‘given the two wings of the great eagle’ to fly to the desert, as were the ancient Israelites (Ex 19,4; Dt 32,11). She will also be nourished miraculously, as were the Israelites (manna, quails). The dragon’s pursuit of the woman evokes the pursuit of the Egyptian army (Ex 14), and her rescue ‘by the earth opening her mouth’ evokes their defeat (Ex 15,12). At this point, there is a link with the 144,000 men with the Lamb on Mt Zion, considered in the previous section as a messianic army, for “while their number leads us to consider them alongside the people of Rev 7, their preservation in a geographical location evokes the flight of the woman whom God welcomes and protects in the wilderness (Rev 12:6,14)”.⁶²

⁶¹ The fact that the two witnesses can perform the miracles Moses performed would suggest that they too have an analogous rod for working miracles: the ‘cane similar to a rod’ given to John and interpreted as the prophecy he was given to prophesy again (10,11). This helps to confirm that they are the announcers of this prophecy.

⁶² Prigent, *The Apocalypse*, 430.

The third sign represents the divine judgments that bring an end to history (15,1.5-8; cf. 11,19). At the same time, the author sees the victorious martyrs in heaven singing ‘the song of Moses, the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb’ (15,3-4)—a title that not only recalls the celebration of the Israelites after the defeat of Pharaoh’s army (cf. Ex 15), but it also suggests a correspondence between ‘the glassy sea mixed with fire’, on which they stand, with the Red Sea through which the Israelites passed on their way to redemption. The words of the original ‘song of Moses’ (Ex 15,1-2) are also reflected in the praise of salvation proclaimed by the martyrs in an earlier vision (Rev 7,9-17; esp. 7,10), after they pass through the great tribulation, washing and bleaching their robes in the blood of the Lamb.

After the bowl plagues, the exodus theme disappears from the text, in order to give way to other themes (messianic war; justice and judgment), but it reappears at the end of Revelation, in the attainment of the holy city (Rev 21-22), with the author eyeing this promised reward from a great and high mountain, as Moses glimpsed the Promised Land from the peak of Mt. Nebo (Dt 34,1-3).

From the short review presented above, it can be seen that the exodus theme is employed extensively in Revelation to describe the events leading up to the eschatological salvation of the people of God. Its greatest use is to be found in chapters 8–16.

The Justice and Judgment of God

The theme of God’s justice and judgment is intimately linked with the theme of witness and appears to have been inspired by the prophecies of divine salvation and judgment in Deutero-Isaiah (Is 40-55). Parts of this prophecy represent a judicial contest between Israel’s God and the gods of the nations (cf. Is 41,1.21-24; 43,9-13.21; 44,6-8). In this contest, the people of Israel are called God’s servants and ‘witnesses’ (Isa 43,10.12; 44,8) and they are invited to bear witness to all the nations that their God is the true God. One of them, ‘the Servant’, is especially chosen by God to bring divine justice to the nations (Is 42,1-9; 49,1-7; 50,4-11) and to deliver his people from their sins (Is 52,13-53,12). God’s judgment will fall on Babylon, on those who continue to worship idols and on those who do not turn to God for salvation. The same basic elements can be found in the book of Revelation, in a way summarized by Bauckham as follows: “the world is a kind of court-room in which the issue of who is the true God is being decided. In this judicial context, Jesus and his followers bear witness to the truth. At the conclusion of the contest, their witness is seen to be true and becomes evidence on which judgment is passed against those who have refused to accept its truth: the beast and his worshippers”.⁶³

So the theme of God’s justice and judgment really begins with the theme of witness and witnessing. The book of Revelation itself is “*the Word of God and the Witness of Jesus*” (Rev 1,1-2) witnessed by God’s servant John. In order to receive this ‘Word of God and Witness of Jesus’, John was taken to the Isle of Patmos (1,9). The ‘Witness of Jesus’ is the spirit of prophecy (19,10). Holding the ‘Witness of Jesus’ brings one into fellowship with the angels (19,10), but also into persecution and martyrdom (6,9; 12,11.17; 20,4). The ‘Witness of Jesus’ is therefore the Revelation, or spiritual insight, given first to Jesus, then to John and the churches (1,1), concerning present and the future realities (1,11.19) and

⁶³ Bauckham, *Theology*, 73.

God's central role in them (Rev 4-5). The most identifiable form of the 'Witness of Jesus' is the book of Revelation itself.⁶⁴

Being the source and origin of the 'Witness of Jesus', it is logical that Jesus Christ is then called 'the faithful (and true) witness' (1,5; 3,14), a title shared with the martyr Antipas, "my faithful witness" (2,13). The term for witness (μάρτυς) is not yet synonymous with 'martyr', but it is certainly moving in that direction, since those who are called 'witnesses' (1,5; 3,14; 2,13; 11,3-13; 17,16), or hold the 'Witness of Jesus' (6,9; 12,11.17; 20,4), are all killed (i.e., martyred) for giving their testimony. Acceptance of martyrdom is strongly encouraged (2,10; 13,10; 14,12-13). After their death, the souls of these 'witnesses' join the assembly of angels and elders before the throne in heaven (6,9-11; 7,9-17; 15,2-4), forming an innumerable host awaiting the final battle against the forces of evil (17,14; 19,14). The souls of the martyred 'witnesses' show a keen interest in the delivery of divine judgment: "*How much longer, Holy and True Master, until you judge and avenge our blood on the inhabitants of the earth?*" (Rev 6,10).

Indeed, divine judgment is a theme of great importance from the very start of Revelation, beginning with the divine edicts and warnings conveyed in the messages to five of the seven churches (Rev 2-3, all except 2,8-11; 3,7-13).

There follows a vision of central importance for the theme of God's judgment: "*And I saw on the right of the One seated on the throne a scroll with writing on the inside and on the back, sealed with seven seals*" (5,1). We have argued elsewhere⁶⁵ that this is the scroll of Life, from the foundation of the world, that will be read out at the final judgment (20,12.15), after its seals have been opened (6,1-17, 8,1) by the one who is worthy to receive it—the Lamb that was slain (5,5-6.9). Only those whose names remain inscribed in the scroll of Life will participate in the promised salvation (21,27), while those whose names have been erased will be eternally condemned (cf. 13,8; 17,8; 20,15). There is good reason to believe that the Lamb erases those names from the scroll of Life (3,5) in the interval between the opening of all its seals (8,1) and its recitation at the final judgment (20,12). The one who is worthy to receive the scroll and open its seals (5,9) is therefore the one who is worthy to make the final and eternal judgment recorded in the scroll of Life.

Before the judgment process can begin, the Lamb must first break all seven seals of the scroll of Life. The breaking of the first four seals results in the emergence of four horsemen from heaven (6,1-8) whose missions are emblematic of God's justice and judgment: the first horse represents the invincible force that leads to the establishment of God's justice amongst men (6,1-2), recalling the mission of the chosen and exalted servant in Deutero-Isaiah (esp. Is 49,2, with Ps 45,4-5). However, the second, third and fourth horsemen (6,3-8) are responsible for a series of divine judgments involving murder, oppression, war, famine and disease, in a way that recalls the fearsome judgments that would befall the Israelites if they broke God's law (cf. Lev 26,14-46; Dt 28,15-69; Jer 29,17-19; Ezek 5,1-17).⁶⁶ They culminate with a vision of the whole world groaning in expectation of the great day of divine anger and judgment (Rev 6,12).

⁶⁴ 'The Witness of Jesus' is therefore to be understood grammatically as a subjective genitive (i.e. as a genitive of the noun Jesus considered as the subject, and not as the object). For the arguments in favour of the subjective genitive, see Allison A. Trites, *The New Testament Concept of Witness*, N.T.S. Monograph Series (31), Cambridge: CUP 1977, 156-8.

⁶⁵ Mainly on the basis of Rev 13,8; 17,8 and 21,27; see <http://www.newtorah.org/The%20Final%20Judgment.html>

⁶⁶ For a fuller exposition of the four horsemen, see <http://www.newtorah.org/the-four-horsemen.html> .

What follows, however, is a plan that will allow for the salvation of countless numbers of God's people (7,1-17) during a gradual intensification of God's judgments represented by the seven trumpet and bowl plagues (8,2-11,14; 15,1-16,17). The judgments announced by the first four trumpet blasts result in damage to a third of the world's natural environment (land, sea, rivers, and sky), while those following the fifth and sixth trumpets harm people for a while, and then kill a third in an unsuccessful attempt to lead them to repentance (9,20). The seventh and last trumpet signals the final series of divine judgments "*the last, because with them the passion of God was finished*" (15,1). These take the form of plagues poured over the earth from a series of seven bowls, further afflicting mankind and elements of the natural world (the followers of the beast, sea, rivers, sun's intensity, throne of the beast, River Euphrates and air). This progressive intensification of divine judgment, from the trumpet plagues to that of the bowls, is supplemented by the dire warnings of the two witnesses (11,3-13) and of the three angels (14,6-11), and is punctuated with praise emanating from the heavenly assembly for the manifest justice of God's judgments (15,3-4; 16,5-7; 19,2). God avenges the blood of his servants (19,2; cf. 6,10) with the judgment and destruction of Babylon (14,8; 17,1-19,5) and the entire series of judgments culminates with divine intervention and victory in a final battle against the forces of evil at Harmagedon (16,12-16; 19,11-21).

What happens next, depends upon the interpretation of the one thousand-year reign of the Messiah with his saints and martyrs, with the simultaneous binding and imprisonment of Satan (20,1-6). We have argued elsewhere⁶⁷ that this interregnum is, in fact, a retrospective vision of Christ's universal Church, in which the saints and martyrs are given the power to rule and judge (20,4-6) in a way that expresses the extension of God's justice in the world in the present age of salvation. Viewed in this way, the subsequent battle of Gog and Magog (20,7-10) is merely the last phase of the final battle that started at Harmagedon (19,11-21). Divine fire falls on the enemies of God's people and the devil is sent to eternal perdition. The resurrection of the dead and the final judgment follow (11,15-19; 20,11-15), when all those whose names have been erased from the scroll of Life will be eternally condemned (3,5; 20,15), along with the depraved and unrepentant (21,8; 22,15). Eternal condemnation will also be the destiny of Babylon (19,2-3), 'death and Hades' (20,14; 21,4), the devil (20,10), the beast, the false prophet (19,20) and all their followers (14,9-11).

The final expression of God's justice is seen in the realization of the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God and described as the dwelling of God among mankind (20,3-4) and the reward for his servants (11,18; 22,12; 22,3-4). There is almost no chapter of the book of Revelation that does not refer, in one form or another, to the theme of God's justice and judgment, and in many chapters it is the dominant theme. It is such a pervasive theme, that many readers come away with the impression that God's judgment is indeed the main subject of the book.

The Cosmic Transformation and the New Creation

Cosmic imagery is an important characteristic of all apocalyptic writings, both canonical such as Daniel and non-canonical such as *1 Enoch*. It appears to have its origin in the post-exilic Hebrew prophets (e.g., Is 24-27; Hag 2,7; Is 56-66), who, in turn, had taken

⁶⁷ On the basis of Ps 90,4, see

<http://www.newtorah.org/The%20Millennium%20and%20the%20Mystery%20of%20Iniquity.html> .

it from earlier oracles of destruction and judgment (Amos 5,18-20; Is 13,9-13). It is another of the symbolical themes that recurs throughout the book of Revelation. At first, it seems the strangest and least credible aspect of the text. On closer inspection, however, the cosmic imagery can readily be understood as a way of symbolizing the profound transformation of 'the first heaven and the first earth' into 'the new heaven and the new earth', which is a biblical expression referring to the dwelling of God among men and the consummation of all God's promises (Is 51,6; 65,17-25; 66,22; Mk 13,31; 2Pet 3,13; Rev 21,1).

The cosmic landscape of John's visions is, in fact, not so different from our own. Above there is the sky, below the earth with four corners. It has rivers, springs of water, a desert, a holy city, a great city and a great and high mountain. The earth has inhabitants, belonging to many tribes and tongues and races and nations, and from these inhabitants a people are being redeemed by Christ and made into a kingdom and priests for God. Also there is the sea and under the surface of the sea there is an abyss.

What may be confusing for the modern mind is that every component of this natural world has a supernatural counterpart: the word for sky also means 'heaven' and in this heaven is the throne of God to which all creation directs its praise. Around the throne is God's sanctuary, which is populated with heavenly beings, angels and the souls of saints and martyrs. The stars in heaven are also angels, which have important roles in the unfolding of events in the Revelation. They are also in charge of various physical elements on earth such as the winds, fire and waters. The sea is synonymous with the many waters and also with the abyss: the waters represent the unredeemed peoples of the world and the abyss is the place where Satan is bound up for a thousand years. This, then, is a sketch of 'the first heaven and the first earth', whose transformation can be followed in the text.

Following the introductory vision of the risen Christ in the midst of seven lampstands (1,10-20), the author describes his ascent 'in Spirit' to the throne of God, in order to be shown what will happen in the future (Rev 4-5). There he sees Christ, represented as a Lamb, taking a sealed scroll from God and proceeding to break its seals. After the breaking of each seal, the author sees and describes a vision of the consequences in heaven and on earth. After the Lamb broke the sixth seal of the scroll in heaven, the author describes the dissolution of 'the first heaven and the first earth' using the traditional apocalyptic images of the 'Day of the Lord': "*And I saw when he opened the sixth seal, and a great earthquake occurred and the sun became black as sackcloth made of hair, and the whole moon became like blood, and the stars of heaven fell to the earth as a fig-tree drops its unripe figs when shaken by a great wind, and the heaven departed like a scroll being rolled up, and every mountain and island was moved from its place*" (Rev 6,12-14). However, the dramatic events are delayed when the angels at the four corners of the earth are ordered to restrain the winds (7,1), in order to prepare those who will be saved from the great Day of divine anger (6,17; 7,2-17).

The breaking of the seventh seal leads into a series of seven trumpet blasts, which announce a further set of judgments caused by falling heavenly bodies (Rev 8-9), a fact that suggests that this series represents, at least in part, the collapse of the 'first heaven'.

The sound of the last trumpet heralds the final series of judgments represented by the outpouring of a series of seven libation bowls. With the last bowl there is a tremendous earthquake (Rev 6,12; 11,19; 16,18), which initiates the disappearance of the 'first earth': "*And there were lightning flashes and noises and thunders and a great earthquake occurred, such as never had happened since man had been on earth, such an earthquake—so great....And every island fled and mountains were not found*" (Rev 16,18.20). The

destructive hail in the next verse would seem to indicate the final precipitation of the ‘first heaven’: “*And a great hail, as a talent in weight, comes down from heaven on the people and the people blasphemed God from the plague of hail, because this plague is exceedingly great*” (Rev 16,21).

So when the time for the final Judgment arrives, ‘the first heaven and the first earth’ are ready to disappear completely: “*And I saw a great white Throne and the one seated on it, from whose face the earth and heaven fled, and no place was found for them*” (Rev 20,11). Finally, when “*the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea is no more*” (Rev 21,1), John saw and described a vision of ‘the new heaven and the new earth’ with the new Jerusalem at its centre.

Of all the visions in Revelation, the vision of ‘the new heaven and the new earth’ is perhaps the most difficult to comprehend. The greatest unknown is whether this new creation is *ex nihilo*, following the total destruction of this planet ‘earth’, or whether it refers instead to a radical transformation and renewal of life on this very same planet.⁶⁸ The dramatic imagery of cosmic collapse, which represents the divine judgments and leads to the dissolution of ‘the first heaven and the first earth’, may seem to favour the former of the two possibilities. But on a closer look, there are several indications that the text is speaking about the same planet, and about a total transformation of life within the original creation.

Firstly, in order to be shown the realization of the new Jerusalem, John was not taken away ‘in the Spirit’ to another part of the universe, to the site of the new creation. In this vision, he was taken to a great and high mountain on this planet, and from there he sees the new Jerusalem descending from above, on to the same planet where he is standing (21,10). Secondly, there is no indication in the Bible, neither in the book of Revelation, that the planet ‘earth’ will be less pleasing to God in the future, than it was when he created it (cf. Gen 1,9-10). Neither is there any explicit warning that God would want to destroy the planet, or even allow it to be destroyed.⁶⁹ On the contrary, it is written that, at the time of judgment, those who are destroying the earth will, themselves, be destroyed (Rev 11,18).

Moreover, the eternal Covenant that God established with Noah and all the creatures, when he swore he would never again destroy every living creature as he had done (Gen 8,21; 9,11-17), is not ignored in the prophecy of Revelation; it is, in fact, recalled with the appearance of the rainbow in the vision of the angel that announces the imminent fulfilment of the mystery of God: “*And I saw another mighty angel coming down from heaven, clothed with a cloud and with the rainbow over his head*” (Rev 10,1).

Finally, many features of the present way of life are recognizable in the author’s

⁶⁸ Cf. Gale Z. Heide, ‘What is New About the New Heaven and the New Earth? A Theology of Creation from Revelation 21 and 2 Peter 3’, *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 40/1 (March 1997) 37-56.

⁶⁹ The passage which probably comes closest to describing a total destruction of the planet is to be found in the 2Peter: “then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and the works that are upon it will be *burned up*” (2Pet 3,10 according to the RSV). Several details in this description, however, suggest that the transformation of the present world by means of fire does not involve the total destruction of the planet. In the first place, the word for ‘*burned up*’ is not found in the most reliable Greek manuscripts (Ⲙ, B, K, P, et al.); instead, these simply state that “the earth and everything that is done on it will be *disclosed*” (NRSV), a prediction that is entirely consistent with the fact that the final Judgment is taking place at the same time (2Pet 3,7). In the second place, the transformation of the present world is compared to the destruction of the preceding world by the Flood (2Pet 3,6-7). The Flood, however, did not destroy the planet, but transformed it into the present heaven and earth. It is implied, then, that the transforming fire is not destructive, but purificatory, and can therefore be identified with the fire of the Spirit (1Cor 3,10–17; 1Pet 4,12; Mt 3,11; Lk 12,49; Rev 8,5).

description of ‘the new heaven and the new earth’, confirming that the disappearance of ‘the first heaven and the first earth’ will not involve the destruction of this planet. John recounts how, after the final Judgment, there will be ‘nations’ that will need to receive healing from the leaves of the trees of Life (Rev 22,2), so that they may then be able to walk by the light of the holy city (21,24). There will also be ‘rulers of the earth’, who bring the glory and the honour of the nations into this city (21,24–26).

Conversely, as a result of the divine judgments, the following negative realities of the present age will no longer be around: Babylon (19,2–3); death and Hades (20,14; 21,4); the devil (20,10); the beast, the false prophet (19,20) and their followers (14,9–11); the unrepentant reprobates (21,8.27; 22,15); the sea (21,1); sorrow, mourning, pain (21,4) and every curse (22,3).

The author’s description of ‘the new heaven and the new earth’ does not indicate the destruction of this planet. Instead, it foresees the elimination of the former reality (‘the first heaven and the first earth’) from the life on this planet, especially its evil aspects. The vivid ‘apocalyptic’ imagery of falling heavenly bodies, giant hail, tremendous earthquakes, fleeing islands, disappearing mountains, and the absence of any place to hide from the judge’s throne, is a way of linking the cosmic upheaval to the intensifying series of eschatological judgments and emphasizing the totality of the resulting transformation.

The Heavenly Temple and its Liturgy

The area around the throne in heaven is described with another kind of symbolism, one which extends throughout the text and relates to the ancient Jerusalem temple and its liturgy. As noted by Fr. Yves Congar: “If John thus sees the heavenly temple in the shape of the Temple of Jerusalem, it is not so much because he imagines the sanctuary on the model of the sanctuary he had seen on earth at Jerusalem, it is principally because the latter, as the successor of the Mosaic tabernacle, had been constructed according to the heavenly prototype shown to Moses on the mountain”.⁷⁰ Although it is unlikely that the Exodus passages (Ex 25,8-9.40; 26,30; 27,8) originally meant that the plan shown to Moses involved a vision of the heavenly sanctuary, this is certainly how they were re-interpreted later in the post-exilic period. Through a process of re-interpretation, these and certain other passages (Ezek 43,10-11; 1Chron 28,11-20) lie at the origin of the numerous apocalyptic temple visions.⁷¹ However, although the heavenly temple is a feature of many other apocalyptic writings,⁷² nowhere did it reach the development it achieved in the book of Revelation.

In this book, temple and liturgical symbolism is plentiful and pervasive. Starting

⁷⁰ Yves M-J. Congar, *The Mystery of the Temple*, London: Burns and Oates 1962, 209.

⁷¹ Cf. R.H. Charles, *Studies in the Apocalypse*, 2nd ed, Edinburgh: T.&T. Clark 1915, 166-67; George Buchanan Gray, *Sacrifice in the Old Testament: Its Theory and Practice*, Oxford: OUP 1925, 154-57.

⁷² The subject of the heavenly Temple became a prominent feature in the apocalyptic tradition. In all of the following non-canonical writings the author ascends to heaven and proceeds to give a description of the Temple there: the book of Watchers (1*Enoch* chs. 1–36), the Testament of Levi, 2*Enoch*, the Similitudes of Enoch (1*Enoch* chs. 37–71), the Apocalypse of Zephaniah, the Apocalypse of Abraham, the Ascension of Isaiah and 3*Baruch*. On this subject, however, the conclusions of the recent study by Robert Briggs should be mentioned: “In short, the belief that John was appreciably influenced by non-scriptural Jewish literature, however true or untrue it may be regarding other themes in Revelation, is to be rejected regarding the temple. The sanctuary strains of the OT testimony alone were apparently more than adequate for John to have built his temple scenes and symbolisms upon” (Robert A. Briggs, *Jewish Temple Imagery in the Book of Revelation*, New York: Peter Lang 1999, 217-18).

with the ‘Lamb that was slain’ as a sacrificial victim whose blood redeems a people from sin and from the world (Rev 1,5-6; 5,9-10; 7,14; 12,11; 14,4; 22,14), the temple symbolism extends throughout and beyond the heavenly setting surrounding the throne where the Lamb appears (5,6). In numerous parts of the text, this heavenly environment is explicitly referred to as God’s sanctuary (ναός; Rev 3,12; 7,15; 11,1.2.19; 14,15.17; 15,5.6.8; 16,1.17) or dwelling (σκηνή; 13,6). It includes many of the liturgical objects and furnishings that characterized the ancient temple cult: the seven-branched lampstand, or *menorah* (1,12.13.20; 2,1.5; 11,4), the divine throne guarded by the living creatures or *cherubim* (4,6-8), the altar of incense (6,9; 8,3.5; 9,13; 14,18; 16,7), the sea (4,6; 15,2), the altar (11,1; 16,7), the ark of the Covenant (11,19), the harps (5,8; 14,2; 15,2), trumpets (8,2) and libation bowls (15,7; 16,1).

Similarly, words and actions described in these passages clearly represent liturgical activities corresponding to those performed in the former temple at Jerusalem: opening and reading of scrolls (6,1-17; 8,1; 20,12), the holding of palms (7,9), the offering of incense at the time of prayer (8,3-4), the blowing of trumpets (Rev 8–11), the offering of the first fruits (14,4), the opening of the Sanctuary (11,19; 15,5), the filling of the Sanctuary with glory (15,8), the pouring of libation bowls (Rev 15–16), the divine worship (4,8-11; 5,12-14; 7,10-12; 12,10-12; 16,5-7), thanksgiving (11,15-18; 19,1-8) and singing of hymns of praise (5,9-10; 15,3-4).

Certain figures can also be identified with temple personnel: the ‘One like a Son of Man’ appears dressed in the clothes of the high priest on the Day of Atonement (1,13), the angels are dressed like priests (15,6) and perform priestly functions (8,2.3.6; 16,1; 7,11-12). The assembly of saints and martyrs fulfill the function of the order of Levites. The 24 elders correspond to the number of the heads of the courses of priests and Levites (1Chron 24–25), and they also perform both priestly and Levitical functions (Rev 5,8-9).

It should be noted that the temple symbolism is not restricted to the area around the throne in heaven. At a certain point, the author John is commanded to metaphorically “*measure the sanctuary and the altar and those worshipping there, and reject the court which is outside the sanctuary...*” (11,1-2) and the two witnesses that follow are “*the two lampstands and the two olive trees standing before the Lord of the earth*” (11,4; cf. Zech 4,1-6a.10b-14). In both these passages, the temple imagery points to the construction of a new temple on earth, whose sanctuary is the heavenly sanctuary and whose components are the faithful themselves: “*The one who overcomes—I will make him a pillar in the sanctuary of my God...*” (Rev 3,12).

Another crucial point is that the new temple now under construction, spanning heaven and earth, will not be present in the final consummation, the new Jerusalem, since the author reports: “*And I did not see a sanctuary in her, because the Lord God Almighty is her sanctuary, and the Lamb*” (Rev 21,22). In those days, there will no longer be a need for people to retire to a separate and sacred place to encounter God, for everyone in the new Jerusalem will be able to enjoy immediate and direct contact with his divine Presence. As an integral part of ‘the first heaven and the first earth’, the new temple will simply pass away with the realization of ‘the new heaven and the new earth’.

Discussion

The identification of these five symbolical themes shows something of the depth and breadth of the symbolical dimension of the text. They also say something of the book of Revelation’s content, which can be summarized as a vision that foresees a lengthy

messianic conflict ending in divine salvation, judgment and eschatological transformation, all in the setting of a heavenly liturgy centered on Jesus Christ as redeemer and judge. With its main themes of holy war, exodus, divine justice and judgment, the new creation as the Promised Land and divine liturgical service, the content of Revelation reflects the major themes of the Pentateuch, or Torah, and provides yet another reason for considering this work as the Messiah's new Torah.⁷³

However, the main purpose of this exposition of major symbolical themes is to determine whether there exists a symbolic framework which unites all the separate visions of Revelation into a single vision, and to identify it. The foregoing analysis has shown that all five of the themes are present extensively in the text, often combining or running in parallel with each other. However, it is difficult to maintain, as do some scholars, that the themes of messianic war, eschatological exodus and cosmic transformation have a structural role, or that they, in any way, give order to the vision sequence. Many parts of the text are not sufficiently controlled by these particular themes to allow them to be regarded as an organizing principle or framework: for example, large parts of the messages to the churches (Rev 2–3), the trumpet series (Rev 8–9) and the bowl series (Rev 15–16), have no relation to the ongoing messianic war. It has already been noted that the exodus theme disappears from the text after the bowl plagues (Rev 16), only to reappear at the end of the text, in the vision of the holy city as the Promised Land (Rev 21–22). The exodus theme is also absent from the messages to the churches (Rev 2–3). Similarly, the theme of cosmic transformation is absent from the early parts of the text and does not appear until the Lamb opens the sixth seal of the scroll (6,12-17). So none of these three themes can be said to be controlling or uniting all the various parts of the text.

The theme of justice and judgment differs since it appears in virtually every part of the text and in many chapters it seems to be the dominant theme (e.g., Rev 15–20). However, although the theme is both pervasive and comprehensive, it falls short of being the organizing principle of the entire text. For example, although the theme of justice and judgment is a feature of many of the messages to the churches (Rev 2–3), it is absent from the introductory vision of the 'One like a Son of Man' among the seven lampstands (1,10-20), which is the vision that gives meaning and structure to the subsequent messages to the churches. In a similar way, although justice and judgment is clearly a major theme in the trumpet and bowl series (Rev 8–9; 15–16), it is not apparent why the author should have chosen trumpets and bowls as the structuring principle of these parts of the text. The activities which truly impose order upon, and unite, the various visions described in the text are those which have a liturgical character and take place around the throne in heaven. As noted above, it is not the theme of justice and judgment that lies behind these activities, but rather the theme of the heavenly temple and its liturgy. So in order to determine and identify the dominant and organizing theme of the text, the one which unites and structures all its various visions and themes into a single vision, it is to the temple and liturgical theme that we should turn.

The liturgical dimension of Revelation has long been acknowledged and studied by modern scholarship.⁷⁴ What, perhaps, has not been grasped sufficiently is the degree to

⁷³ For the other reasons, see above, under 'The Eschatological Exodus' (6th paragraph).

⁷⁴ Cf. Ugo Vanni: "L'Apocalisse ha una sua dimensione liturgica. È questo, un fatto che l'esegesi e la teologia biblica dell'Apocalisse possono considerare acquisito, specialmente dopo gli studi che si sono susseguiti sull'argomento in questi ultimi anni", *L'Apocalisse*, 101 (the relevant bibliography is given in the footnote to this passage). Useful summaries of this research are to be found in Ulfgard, *Feast and Future*, 21-27;

which the liturgical features are combined with temple symbolism and correspond to specific liturgical activities in the former temple at Jerusalem. This is to be expected since the heavenly sanctuary that was revealed to the author of Revelation is the same as the one that was revealed to Moses, as a plan for the tabernacle that he was asked to construct (Exod 25,8-9.40; 26,30; 27,8).⁷⁵ There is, therefore, a typological correspondence between the heavenly sanctuary described in Revelation, the tabernacle built by Moses, and the former temple in Jerusalem that was modeled on this. Because of this correspondence, references to the divine cult in the OT, and even in the Jewish oral tradition recorded in the *Mishnah* (especially m. *Tamid* and m. *Yoma*), provide the necessary information for interpreting the temple-liturgical imagery in the book of Revelation.⁷⁶

Using these sources, the following liturgical structure can be discerned: the opening vision of the seven golden lampstands and the subsequent messages to the churches (Rev 1,10-20; Rev 2–3) represent the trimming and refueling of the seven-branched lampstand, the *menorah*, at the start of the morning service in the ancient temple. The appearance of the Lamb before the throne of God in heaven (Rev 4–5) corresponds to the entrance of the high priest into the most sacred part of the temple on the annual Day of Atonement, in order to perform expiation for the sanctuary with the blood of the victims (12,7-12). The taking of the scroll and the opening of its first four seals (Rev 5; 6,1-8) represent the part of the morning service reserved for the reading of the Ten Commandments and other parts of the Law. The souls of the martyrs who appear under the altar in heaven (6,9) correspond to the members of the sacrifice, after being transferred to the base of the outer altar in the former temple. The sealing of the 144,000 men that is described in Revelation (7,1-8) corresponds to the pronouncement of the priestly blessing. The offering of a great quantity of incense with the prayers of the saints on the golden altar in heaven (8,3-4) recalls the same action in the morning service of the former temple, which was also considered as a time of prayer for all the community. The angel who throws fire on to the earth from the altar in heaven (8,5) evokes the act of throwing the offerings on to the fire that was always kept alight on the outer altar. The sounding of the seven trumpets (Rev 8–11) and the outpouring of the bowls (Rev 15–16) together with the singing of the celestial choirs described in Revelation (7,9-17; 14,2-3; 15,3-4; 19,1-8) are analogous to the use of the trumpets and bowls at the culmination of the morning service, the time when the Levitical musicians used to sing psalms and praise to God.

At the conclusion of the heavenly liturgy, the scroll that had been given to the Lamb a long time previously (5,7-14) is opened and read out at the final Judgment (20,11-12), just as the high priest used to read from the scroll of the Law at the end of the special rite of expiation on the Day of Atonement. In Revelation all the agents of iniquity, including Satan himself, are thrown alive into the lake of fire (Rev 19,20; 20,10), to bring an end to sin

Donaziano Mollat, 'La Liturgia Dell'Apocalisse' in *L'Apocalisse* (Associazione Biblica Italiana—Studi Biblici Pastoral), Brescia: Paideia 1967, 135-46; and R. Nusca, 'Liturgia e Apocalisse' in *Apokalypsis* (in onore di Ugo Vanni), eds. E. Bosetti and A. Colacrai, Assisi: Citadella Editrice 2005, 459-72.

⁷⁵ See above, under 'The Heavenly Temple and its Liturgy' (1st paragraph).

⁷⁶ For a full treatment of what follows, see Pt. I of John and Gloria Ben-Daniel, *The Apocalypse in the Light of the Temple: A New Approach to the Book of Revelation*, Jerusalem: Beit Yochanan 2003, also available at <http://www.newtorah.org>. A summary can be found at <http://www.newtorah.org/The%20Symbolism%20of%20the%20Lamb.html>.

forever, whilst in the annual rite of expiation the scapegoat was thrown alive from a cliff, only temporarily removing sins from the community.⁷⁷

In comparing the characteristics of the heavenly liturgy with liturgical practice in the former temple, we find that it not only corresponds to the content and sequence of the daily morning service, but also includes features analogous to specific rites that were performed on the annual Day of Atonement. These observations can best be explained if the liturgy described in Revelation represents a simplification of the liturgy that used to take place annually on the Day of Atonement in the ancient temple.⁷⁸ The simplification appears to arise from the fact that the slain Lamb, as the fulfillment of every kind of sacrifice, substitutes all the sacrifices that used to be offered on the Day of Atonement, except for the live sin-offering to Azazel whose role is fulfilled, in a modified way, by the false prophet.⁷⁹ The Lamb therefore corresponds to the first sacrifice on that day: the lamb chosen to be the ‘continual holocaust’ for the morning service. As a result, the heavenly liturgy described in Revelation closely corresponds to the morning service on the Day of Atonement, and includes liturgical elements that recall the specific rite of expiation that was performed on that day.

In summary, the Passion and Resurrection of Jesus Christ constitute the starting point of a liturgy that is currently being celebrated in heaven; this liturgy continues up until the end of history and represents a synthesis of the liturgy that was performed on the Day of Atonement at the ancient temple of the Jews in Jerusalem. Being the principal activity in the heavenly sanctuary, the liturgy provides a framework that not only embraces and unites the entire sequence of visions in Revelation, but also determines the course of events of a judgmental nature, on earth. In this way, the heavenly liturgy unites every part of the book of Revelation into a single and coherent vision dominated by the theme of atonement—the love of Christ reconciling mankind with God.⁸⁰ The book of Revelation can therefore be understood as the revelation of the course of this liturgy for reconciliation taking place in

⁷⁷ The heavenly liturgy thus defined includes the majority of the liturgical elements mentioned in the text of Revelation, but not all. For example, the filling of the heavenly sanctuary with the smoke of the glory and power of God (Rev 15,8) is not included, and neither are the allusions in the text to the Jewish Feasts of Tabernacles (7,9-17) and Weeks (14,1-5). These and other liturgical themes are identified in Ben-Daniel, *Apocalypse in the Light of the Temple*, 127-211.

⁷⁸ This finding underlies the striking doctrinal agreement between the book of Revelation and the letter to the Hebrews (cf. Albert Vanhoye, ‘L’Apocalisse e la Lettera agli Ebrei’, *Apokalypsis*, 275). In the absence of any literary dependence, both works present Christ as the high-priestly redeemer and sacrificial victim in a Day of Atonement liturgy “that sees the current period of afflictions as a *Mo’ed Kippur*, a period of atonement, which began with Jesus’ death and will end with his Parousia”, Daniel Stökl Ben Ezra, *The Impact of Yom Kippur on Early Christianity: The Day of Atonement from Second Temple Judaism to the Fifth Century*, WUNT 163, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2003, 193.

⁷⁹ The false prophet is described as a beast “having two horns like a lamb and speaking like a dragon” (Rev 13,11)—a description that indicates the false prophet performs a diabolical counterpart to the expiatory role of Christ the seven-horned Lamb. Compelling people to worship the beast (13,12-17) to whom Satan had given his power, throne and great authority (13,1-2), the false prophet does indeed cause the removal of sin, not in the way brought about by Christ the Lamb—through the sinner’s repentance and reconciliation with God—but by means of the tragic and eternal condemnation of the unrepentant sinner (14,9-11; cf. 2Thess 2,11-12).

⁸⁰ The dominant theme of atonement in Revelation, expressed through its liturgical symbolism, merely subordinates, but does not invalidate, the exodus imagery in the text. In this way the full significance of the final messianic redemption is conveyed: it is a redemption (exodus typology) from sin through divine reconciliation (atonement).

heaven, and of its consequences for the lives of the peoples on earth, believers and non-believers.

Conclusions

This study of the major symbolic themes in the book of Revelation has demonstrated a certain level of organization in the variety of its imagery. These themes represent messianic redemption in ways reminiscent of the redemption of the Israelites from Egypt and shape the book of Revelation as the new Torah of the Messiah. However, the symbolism of the text is not just for establishing links with the OT, or showing how the OT is fulfilled by Jesus Christ, but as indicated above it helps to provide the background, or setting, in which the literal sense of the text must be understood. The finding of a symbolic theme that embraces all the visions of the book is therefore of particular significance. The theme of the heavenly temple and its liturgy not only provides that dominant symbolic framework that gives order to, and maintains the unity of, the variety of visions related in the text, but it also qualifies as the hermeneutical lens through which the various parts of the text can be understood as a whole. This, we propose, is the dominant theme or ‘organizing principle’ which interpreters require in order to understand the relation of the parts to the whole, and vice versa. It would be surprising if this discovery did not carry certain implications, though there is little space to discuss them here. Let it suffice to briefly mention three:

1. As noted by Jon Paulien, the liturgical development in Revelation suggests a “linear plot to the Apocalypse”.⁸¹ Circular theories of ‘recapitulation’ should be discarded.⁸²
2. By analogy with the liturgy in the Jerusalem temple, the culmination and conclusion of the heavenly liturgy is signaled by trumpets and libation bowls. As this concluding phase of the heavenly liturgy occupies the greater part of the book of Revelation (8,2–end), it follows that this greater part of the text is concerned with events at the end of history. It is an eschatological prophecy and should be interpreted as such.
3. Since the heavenly liturgy, from beginning to end, corresponds to the annual day of Atonement, and “one day with the Lord is like a thousand years” (2Pet 3,8; cf. Ps 90,4), the thousand year reign of Christ (Rev 20,4-6) presents itself as the period of time on earth that corresponds to the duration of the heavenly liturgy.⁸³ The author’s vision of this ‘millennium’ should therefore be interpreted as a retrospective vision of the current era of salvation.

These three simple conditions define a general approach to the text, which, if followed, would promote a far greater consensus over the interpretation of the text and eliminate many of the unfruitful lines of interpretation currently proposed.⁸⁴

John Ben-Daniel,
P.O.Box 1106,
91010 Jerusalem.

⁸¹ Jon Paulien, ‘The Role of the Hebrew Cultus, Sanctuary and Temple in the Plot and Structure of the Book of Revelation’, *Andrews University Seminary Studies*, vol. 33, no. 2 [1995] 261.

⁸² Cf. Marko Jauhiainen, ‘Recapitulation and Chronological Progression in John’s Apocalypse: Towards a New Perspective’, *New Testament Studies*, 49 (2003), 543-59.

⁸³ For further discussion of these implications, see Ben-Daniel, *Apocalypse in the Light of the Temple*, 74-79.

⁸⁴ All millennialist interpretations of the text, including the notorious dispensationalist interpretation of the fundamentalist school, are excluded by (3), and the Preterist approach beloved by many biblical scholars and commentators is excluded on the basis of (1) and (2).