A QUESTION OF RELEVANCE

1.1 The relevance of the Apocalypse

The Apocalypse of St John has always provoked the question of its own relevance. In the second century its place in the canon was far from assured, with questions raised about its apparent Jewish character, its symbolism, and its apostolic authorship. By the 1990s it could still be described as ‘only marginally canonical’. In between it has both influenced art, literature, and politics and yet suffered from neglect and abuse.

The Apocalypse has been the handbook for millenarian sects of many shades throughout the past two millennia, with increasing frequency and intensity in the periods leading up to the years 1000 and 2000. But it has also been used by those with power, to bolster their position by...
marginalizing or demonizing others. Through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, millenarianism of one kind or another, usually formed by an eclectic and harmonizing approach to the books of Revelation and Daniel, has been an important focus, and sometimes a touchstone of orthodoxy, for evangelical Christianity. Millennial anxiety prior to the year 2000, compounded by apocalyptic scenarios proposed for the Y2K computer bug, led to an increase in interest in the Apocalypse and in apocalyptic language and imagery, not only in evangelical circles but in the popular press and media.

Perhaps because of these phenomena, but also simply because of the difficulty of the language and symbolism of the book, and its apparent lack of connection with the modern world, the Apocalypse has, until comparatively recently, suffered considerable neglect in reformed, mainstream, and liberal Christianity. But in scholarly circles the second half of the twentieth century saw a remarkable recovery of interest in apocalyptic literature in general, partly as a result of mid-century wars and the possibilities of nuclear holocaust. The book from which the genre takes its name has ridden the wave of interest, with considerable progress made in understanding it in the context of its own socio-historical world. But despite, or provoked by, this revival of interest there has also been a stream of thought, drawing on reader-centred, deconstructionist methodologies, strongly antagonistic to the Apocalypse and the world-views it allegedly promotes. Ethical problems such as anti-semitism, misogyny, militarism, and patriarchal colonialism have been attributed to it, leading one recent writer to hold that ‘Revelation is unreclaimable.’

7 J. Paulien, ‘The Millennium is Here Again: Is it Panic Time?’, *A/SS* 37 (1999), pp. 167–78, avoids the hysteria but retains focus on the hope of Christ’s return.
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Questions of relevance have also been my own entry point into the study of John’s Apocalypse, through involvement in the translation of the New Testament into indigenous language of the Asia-Pacific region. Although the language of Revelation presents surprisingly few translation problems, few communities possess the background knowledge needed to understand the bizarre imagery. How responsible is it to give such a book to people who can know so little of its origins, who are so remote from its world of ideas? Yet the translator of the NT works under canonical constraints, and this shifts the domain of questions of relevance back from the contemporary community to the community involved with the original communication event. For the Apocalypse’s canonical status is evidence of its relevance to that original community. How did it achieve that relevance? How did the original audience find themselves in the text? How did they relate to ‘the souls of those who had been slaughtered’ or the 144,000 male virgin followers of the Lamb? In what directions did the Apocalypse’s text move them? Answering such questions should provide a basis from which to address questions of relevance to the contemporary community.

The concept of ‘relevance’ has thus far remained undefined and yet central to the discussion. What does it mean to be ‘relevant’? Can relevance be measured so as to discriminate between things which are more or less relevant? Relevant to whom? Relevance Theory, a development in the linguistic field of pragmatics, offers a promising way forward. By defining ‘relevance’ precisely and locating its effect in the cognitive processes of the human mind it provides a framework both for an explanation of the process of understanding utterances and for measuring, at least comparatively, the relevance of a particular concept in a particular context. It is the burden of the central part of this study to investigate, using Relevance Theory, how the Apocalypse captured its audience, how it led them to identify with characters in the drama being portrayed, and in what directions it motivated them.

1.2 The people of the Apocalypse

Locating our interest in the relevance of the Apocalypse to its original audience raises questions about the community that gave rise to the book,


both in its geographical, social, and political context and in its world of ideas. Both areas have received considerable attention. On the assumption that the intended recipients of the book were the churches of Asia Minor mentioned in chs. 1–3, Hemer has provided a detailed description, updating the earlier work of Ramsay. Others have described in more general terms the location of early Christian communities in the Greco-Roman and Jewish Diaspora contexts of the first century.

For the major part of the book, it is the thought-world of Jewish and Christian traditions and literature that must provide the most important clues to relevance. The relationship of Revelation to the Old Testament has been an area of intensive research, and numerous approaches to understanding this relationship have been advanced. The influence of the OT background will play a major role in this study, but consideration must


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also be given to the influence of later Palestinian Judaism and the traditions stemming from (or reflected by) Qumran. Despite its heavy reliance on Jewish traditions, the Apocalypse as it stands is unmistakably a Christian document, and the connections it displays to the traditions, both textual and liturgical, of early Christianity have understandably attracted significant attention.

Another world-view which contributes to the relevance of the Apocalypse in its original context is that of Jewish and Christian apocalyptic. Revived interest in apocalyptic literature and the communities that produced it has had a vast and growing literary output.


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outcome of this research for the present study has been the extension of the definition of apocalyptic literature from a primarily formal one, to include a statement about its function.19 The close relationship which has emerged between form and function is illustrated by Aune’s definition of the function of an apocalypse:

Function: (a) to legitimate the transcendent authorization of the message, (b) by mediating a new actualization of the original revelatory experience through literary devices, structures and imagery, which function to ‘conceal’ the message which the text ‘reveals’, so that (c) the recipients of the message will be encouraged to modify their cognitive and behavioral stance in conformity with transcendent perspectives.20

The applicability of this description to the book of Revelation may be thought to hinge on the precise relationship of the book to the genre

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‘Apocalypse’. But this is to assume an understanding of genre which is too deterministic, especially for a book which appears to claim membership of three genres – apocalypse, prophecy, and letter. More helpful is Schüssler Fiorenza’s pragmatic approach, speaking of the ‘generic tenor’ of the book in a way that allows exploration of the contribution of elements of each generic type to the function of the book. A number of studies, reflecting this functional approach to apocalyptic genre but drawing also on social-scientific methodology and on the study of ancient rhetorical strategies, have attempted to explain how the Apocalypse might have transformed the world-view and thus altered the behaviour patterns of its audience.


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Yet for all this interest in the function of the Apocalypse, there is surprisingly little written about the way in which the vision narratives, particularly those that depict the people of God in some form or other, interact with the audience’s self-understanding to motivate them towards belief and behaviour. In fact the visionary depictions of the people of God themselves have received relatively little attention. Several important studies must be noted, however, and their influence acknowledged. First, Minear suggested that ‘John expressed a distinct hortatory intention in at least eight different literary forms.’ While explicit imperatives occur mainly in the messages of chs. 2–3, the later visions contribute significantly to several of the other forms. This study will have occasion to explore how some of these work in greater detail. Trites’ *The New Testament Concept of Witness* included a helpful chapter on ‘witness’ in the book of Revelation. Trites emphasizes the forensic aspect of witness, and the importance of this to the audience’s potential conflict with state or civic law, but also presents a perceptive study on the two witnesses in Revelation 11, and their importance to the audience’s understanding of their responsibilities. Sweet also focusses on the idea of witness, but emphasizes its inevitable outcome in suffering for the witnesses, and the identification that this entails between them and their Lord. Further, he interprets the victory of God’s people as a victory through suffering and sacrifice. Schüssler Fiorenza and Aune have both published studies which take as their starting point the 144,000 followers of the Lamb in Rev. 14:1–5. But while Schüssler Fiorenza uses this as a springboard...
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for discussion of John’s rhetorical strategy, Aune focusses on the nature of the discipleship to which John is urging his audience, with emphasis on following Jesus through suffering, and discipleship as an expression of sacrifice. A significant influence on Aune’s approach is Bauckham’s treatment of the 144,000 as a messianic army. Bauckham’s work not only identifies an extended military metaphor in the visions, but links these visions to the theme of messianic fulfilment and highlights the fact that the only warfare which this army engages in is ‘ironic warfare’ through its experience of suffering, and its victory is a victory through death. The links between the Messiah and his people are further developed in a recent christological study, Slater’s Christ and Community. Slater examines three primary christological images, the son of man, the Lamb, and the Divine Warrior, and concludes each section with a discussion of the meaning of these images for the community to which the book is addressed. This study is important for what it affirms about the significance of the christology of Revelation for the people of God, and in particular the relationship of the presentation of Christ as son of man with the messages to the seven churches. But apart from this, and precisely because his is a study of christology, he does not deal directly with the ecclesiology of the book or with the images of the people of God in the visionary accounts.

1.3 Aims and scope of this study

Adela Yarbro Collins concluded a survey of twentieth-century interpretations of the Apocalypse with these words: ‘Revelation . . . provides a story in and through which the people of God discover who they are and what they are to do.’ My study aims to elucidate this process of discovery on both fronts, identity and action.

The Apocalypse, however, is not one story but a nesting of embedded stories. Kirby distinguishes three rhetorical situations involved in the book, namely the communication situations between John and his readers,

33 See Slater, Christ and Community, pp. 116–53. Apart from Slater, the most significant links between christology and ecclesiology have been made by Bauckham in the studies discussed here and in his Theology, pp. 66–108. A recent addition to works discussing the depiction of the people of God is G. Stevenson, Power and Place: Temple and Identity in the Book of Revelation (BZNW, 107; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2001), who also provides detailed background to the significance of temple imagery in Jewish and Greco-Roman contexts.
between Jesus and John, and between Jesus and the churches. But this still does not adequately cover the difference in rhetorical situation between, say, chs. 1–3 and chs. 4–22. Barr moves the discussion further by distinguishing ‘three basic narrative levels, each with its own narrator and narratee’. On the outer level, the reader of the Apocalypse is the narrator and his audience the narratee, whom Barr links most closely with the implied audience. On the second level, John narrates his visions to a narratee ‘named as the seven churches’. On the innermost level, characters within John’s narrative themselves narrate to other characters. Although technically distinct, from a pragmatic perspective Barr’s narratees on the first and second levels are hard to separate from each other or from the implied audience, since they share the same social location.

We shall assume in this study that they represent real Christians in real first-century churches in Asia Minor. Characters on the innermost level, narrators and narratees, are elements of a vision, and it will be part of our task to identify which of these are representing the people of God. Within this framework, we shall seek to answer the following questions. How do the narratees on Barr’s first and second levels relate to the characters which depict the people of God on the innermost level, whether narrators or narratees? Do the stories in which these characters participate reflect the actual situation of the audience, or some hypothetical situation, whether idealized or future? How does the depiction of the people of God in the visions contribute to the self-understanding of the audience? And finally, in what directions does it move them? What are the cognitive and behavioural outcomes to which the narrative seeks to lead them? The issue, then, is not the relationship of the first and second level narratees to a real audience, about which we have virtually no independent knowledge. Rather, assuming that these narratees correspond in general (and perhaps specific) social location to the real audience, how do the vision narratives, in particular those described in Rev. 4:1–22:9, aid their discovery of who they are and what they are to do?‘

The methodology distinctive of this study will be the use of Relevance Theory (RT) to investigate these questions. To my knowledge, among writers on the Apocalypse, only Garrow shows the influence of Sperber and Wilson’s cognitive approach. The intention is not to put forward RT as a stand-alone alternative to existing hermeneutical strategies, but to use insights from it to sharpen the interpretive focus. The extensive

36 Barr, ‘Ethical Reading’, p. 372.
37 Ibid.