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978-0-521-07896-2 - The People of God in the Apocalypse: Discourse, Structure, and Exegesis

Stephen Pattemore

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1

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.¹ By the 1990s it could still be described as ‘only marginally canonical’.² In between it has both influenced art, literature, and politics and yet suffered from neglect and abuse.³

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 2000.⁴ But it has also been used by those with power, to bolster their position by

¹ On the early reception of the Apocalypse see R. H. Charles, *The Revelation of St. John* (2 vols., ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1920), vol. I, pp. xxvii–ciii; H. B. Swete, *The Apocalypse of John* (London: Macmillan, 1911), pp. cvi–cxix; N. B. Stonehouse, *The Apocalypse in the Ancient Church: A Study in the History of the New Testament Canon* (Goes, the Netherlands: Oosterbaan & Le Cointre, 1929), especially pp. 150–5. On authorship see Charles, *Revelation*, vol. I, pp. xxxviii–l, and further below, Chapter 3, pp. 52–3.

² T. Pippin, *Death and Desire: The Rhetoric of Gender in the Apocalypse of John* (Literary Currents in Biblical Interpretation; Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1992), p. 46.

³ See summaries in M. E. Boring, *Revelation* (Interpretation; Louisville: John Knox Press, 1989), p. 61; J. Roloff, *The Revelation of John*, trans. John E. Alsup (A Continental Commentary; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), pp. 1–3; and, in more detail, in R. K. Emmerson and B. McGinn (eds.), *The Apocalypse in the Middle Ages* (Thought, Art and Culture; Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992). On the abuse of Revelation through history see K. G. C. Newport, *Apocalypse and Millennium: Studies in Biblical Eisegesis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). On the influence of the Apocalypse on art see F. Carey (ed.), *The Apocalypse and the Shape of Things to Come* (London: British Museum, 1999).

⁴ See especially N. Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1961). The influence of the Apocalypse on the Branch Dravidian cult of Waco, Texas has been discussed by J. M. Court, ‘A Future for Eschatology?’, in M. D. Carroll, D. J. A. Clines, and P. R. Davies (eds.), *The Bible in Human Society: Essays in Honour of John Rogerson* (JSOTSup, 200; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), pp. 191–3; and especially Newport, *Apocalypse*, pp. 197–236.

Cambridge University Press

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Excerpt

[More information](#)2 *The People of God in the Apocalypse*

marginalizing or demonizing others.⁵ 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.⁶ 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.⁷

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.⁸ 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.⁹ 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.'¹⁰

⁵ See Newport, *Apocalypse*, pp. 48–65; S. L. Cook, *Prophecy and Apocalypticism: The Post-Exilic Social Setting* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), pp. 55–84.

⁶ See E. R. Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism: British and American Millenarianism 1800–1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970); H. Dunton, 'Millennial Hopes and Fears: Great Britain, 1780–1960', *AUSS* 37 (1999), pp. 179–208.

⁷ J. Paulien, 'The Millennium is Here Again: Is it Panic Time?', *AUSS* 37 (1999), pp. 167–78, avoids the hysteria but retains focus on the hope of Christ's return.

⁸ See Roloff, *Revelation*, pp. 1–3. For strong reactions to conservative evangelical viewpoints see A. Yarbro Collins, *Crisis and Catharsis: The Power of the Apocalypse* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984), pp. 13–14; E. Schüssler Fiorenza, *Revelation: Vision of a Just World* (Proclamation Commentaries; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), pp. 7–10.

⁹ See the introductory remarks by Hanson in P. D. Hanson (ed.), *Visionaries and their Apocalypses* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), p. 8.

¹⁰ A. M. Jack, *Texts Reading Texts, Sacred and Secular* (JSNTSup, 179; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), p. 208. See also T. Pippin, 'Eros and the End: Reading for Gender in the Apocalypse of John', *Semeia* 59 (1992), pp. 193–210; S. D. Moore, 'The Beatific Vision as a Posing Exhibition: Revelation's Hypermasculine Deity', *JSNT* 60 (1995), pp. 27–55; Pippin, *Death and Desire*; Schüssler Fiorenza, *Revelation*, pp. 117–39. A more measured approach to the book's ethical problems is D. L. Barr, 'Towards an Ethical

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

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.¹¹ 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.¹² 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,

Reading of the Apocalypse: Reflections on John's Use of Power, Violence and Misogyny', in *SBL Seminar Papers 1997* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997), pp. 358–73.

¹¹ D. L. Barr, 'The Apocalypse as a Symbolic Transformation of the World: A Literary Analysis', *Int* 38 (1984), p. 39.

¹² The seminal work is D. Sperber and D. Wilson, *Relevance: Communication and Cognition* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1st edn, 1986, 2nd edn, 1995). See p. 13 n. 2 below for a brief discussion of pragmatics.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)4 *The People of God in the Apocalypse*

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.¹³ 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.¹⁴

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.¹⁵ The influence of the OT background will play a major role in this study, but consideration must

¹³ W. M. Ramsay, *The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia and their Place in the Plan of the Apocalypse* (Reprint of 1904 edn; Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979); C. J. Hemer, *The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia in their Local Setting* (JSNTSup, 11; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1986). The view that the local references have little significance and that John is opposing a single Gnostic sect is championed by P. Prigent, 'L'Hérésie asiatique et l'Eglise confessante', *VC* 31 (1977), pp. 1–22; P. Prigent, *L'Apocalypse de Saint Jean* (CNT, 14; Geneva: Labor et Fides, 2nd corrected edn, 1988), pp. 25–6, 37–9, 80. See also C. H. H. Scobie, 'Local References in the Letters to the Seven Churches', *NTS* 39 (1993), pp. 606–24; J. M. Court, *Myth and History in the Book of Revelation* (London: SPCK, 1979), pp. 20–42; J. R. Michaels, *Interpreting the Book of Revelation* (GNTE, 7; Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1992), pp. 35–42; S. J. Friesen, 'Revelation, Realia, and Religion: Archaeology in the Interpretation of the Apocalypse', *HTR* 88 (1995), pp. 291–314. My assumptions will be made explicit below, pp. 51–60.

¹⁴ S. E. Johnson, 'Asia Minor and Early Christianity', in J. Neusner (ed.), *Christianity, Judaism and Other Greco-Roman Cults. Part Two: Early Christianity* (Studies in Judaism in Late Antiquity; Leiden: Brill, 1975), pp. 77–145; D. Flusser, *Judaism and the Origins of Christianity* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1988); L. L. Thompson, *The Book of Revelation: Apocalypse and Empire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990); P. Trebilco, *Jewish Communities in Asia Minor* (SNTSMS, 69; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); L. L. Thompson, 'Mooring the Revelation in the Mediterranean', in E. H. Lovering Jr (ed.), *SBL Seminar Papers 1992* (Atlanta: Scholar's Press, 1992), pp. 635–53; P. Borgen, *Early Christianity and Hellenistic Judaism* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1996); R. Garrison, *The Graeco-Roman Context of Early Christian Literature* (JSNTSup, 137; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997).

¹⁵ On the location of Revelation in the first-century literary environment see D. E. Aune, *The New Testament in its Literary Environment* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1987), pp. 226–52. On the relationship with the OT see G. K. Beale, *John's Use of the Old Testament in Revelation* (JSNTSup, 166; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998); J. Cambier, 'Les Images de l'Ancien Testament dans l'Apocalypse de saint Jean', *NRT* 77 (1955), pp. 113–22; A. Vanhoye, 'L'Utilisation du livre d'Ezéchiel dans l'Apocalypse', *Bib* 43 (1962), pp. 436–76; A. Lancellotti, 'L'Antico Testamento nell'Apocalisse', *RivB* 14 (1966), pp. 369–84; G. K. Beale, 'Revelation', in D. A. Carson and H. G. M. Williamson (eds.), *It is Written: Scripture Citing Scripture. Essays in Honour of Barnabas Lindars, SSF* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 318–36; J. Paulien, *Decoding Revelation's Trumpets: Literary Allusions and the Interpretation of Revelation 8:7–12* (AUS-DDS, 11; Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1988); J.-P. Ruiz, *Ezekiel in the*

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-07896-2 - The People of God in the Apocalypse: Discourse, Structure, and Exegesis

Stephen Pattemore

Excerpt

[More information](#)

also be given to the influence of later Palestinian Judaism and the traditions stemming from (or reflected by) Qumran.¹⁶ 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.¹⁷

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.¹⁸ A significant

Apocalypse: The Transformation of Prophetic Language in Revelation 16, 17–19, 10 (EUS23, 376; Frankfurt-on-Main: Peter Lang, 1989); J. Fekkes, *Isaiah and Prophetic Traditions in the Book of Revelation: Visionary Antecedents and their Development* (JSNTSup, 93; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994); S. Moyise, *The Old Testament in the Book of Revelation* (JSNTSup, 115; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995).

¹⁶ For the background in Palestinian Judaism see M. McNamara, *The New Testament and the Palestinian Targum to the Pentateuch* (AnBib, 27; Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1966); M. McNamara, *Palestinian Judaism and the New Testament* (GNS; Dublin: Veritas, 1983); P. Trudinger, 'The Apocalypse and the Palestinian Targum', *BTB* 16 (1986), pp. 78–9. For Qumran see H. Braun, *Qumran und das Neue Testament*, vol. I (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1966); F. García Martínez, *Qumran and Apocalyptic: Studies on the Aramaic Text from Qumran* (STDJ, 9; Leiden: Brill, 1992); M. Chyutin, *The New Jerusalem Scroll from Qumran: A Comprehensive Reconstruction* (JSPSup, 25; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997); D. E. Aune, 'Qumran and the Book of Revelation', in P. W. Flint and J. C. Vanderkam (eds.), *The Dead Sea Scrolls after Fifty Years: A Comprehensive Assessment*, vol. II (Leiden: Brill, 1999), pp. 622–50.

¹⁷ L. A. Vos, *The Synoptic Traditions in the Apocalypse* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1965); R. J. McKelvey, *The New Temple: The Church in the New Testament* (OTM; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969); A. A. Trites, *The New Testament Concept of Witness* (SNTSMS, 31; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977); G. K. Beale, 'The Use of Daniel in the Synoptic Eschatological Discourse and in the Book of Revelation', in D. Wenham (ed.), *The Jesus Tradition Outside the Gospels* (Gospel Perspectives, 5; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1984), pp. 129–53; A.-M. Enroth, 'The Hearing Formula in the Book of Revelation', *NTS* 36 (1990), pp. 598–608; M. E. Boring, *The Continuing Voice of Jesus: Christian Prophecy and the Gospel Tradition* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1991); R. Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy: Studies in the Book of Revelation* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1993), pp. 92–117; S. S. Smalley, *Thunder and Love: John's Revelation and John's Community* (Milton Keynes: Word, 1994). Studies which trace the dependence of, for example, Revelation 4–5 on early Christian liturgy include L. Mowry, 'Revelation 4–5 and Early Christian Liturgical Usage', *JBL* 71 (1952), pp. 75–84; P. Prigent, *Apocalypse et liturgie* (CT, 52; Neuchâtel: Editions Delachaux et Niestlé, 1964); J.-P. Ruiz, 'Revelation 4:8–11; 5:9–14: Hymns of the Heavenly Liturgy', in E. H. Lovering Jr (ed.), *SBL Seminar Papers 1995* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995), pp. 216–20. On supposed liturgical usage of the text of Revelation see U. Vanni, 'Un esempio di dialogo liturgico in Ap 1, 4–8', *Bib* 57 (1976), pp. 453–67; U. Vanni, 'Liturgical Dialogue as a Literary Form in the Book of Revelation', *NTS* 37 (1991), pp. 348–72; J.-P. Ruiz, 'Betwixt and Between on the Lord's Day: Liturgy and the Apocalypse', in E. H. Lovering Jr (ed.), *SBL Seminar Papers 1992* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992), pp. 654–72.

¹⁸ See J. H. Charlesworth, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, vol. I, *Apocalyptic Literature and Testaments* (New York: Doubleday, 1983); J. J. Collins and J. H. Charlesworth

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-07896-2 - The People of God in the Apocalypse: Discourse, Structure, and Exegesis

Stephen Pattemore

Excerpt

[More information](#)6 *The People of God in the Apocalypse*

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

(eds.), *Mysteries and Revelations: Apocalyptic Studies since the Uppsala Colloquium* (JSP-Sup, 9; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991); J. J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to Jewish Apocalyptic Literature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2nd edn, 1998); Cook, *Prophecy and Apocalypticism*; Hanson (ed.), *Visionaries and their Apocalypses*; H. H. Rowley, *The Relevance of Apocalyptic: A Study of Jewish and Christian Apocalypses from Daniel to the Revelation* (London: Lutterworth Press, revised edn, 1963); D. S. Russell, *The Method and Message of Jewish Apocalyptic* (London: SCM Press, 1964); P. Vielhauer, 'Apocalyptic', in E. Henneke (ed.), *New Testament Apocrypha* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1965), pp. 587–94; K. Koch, *The Rediscovery of Apocalyptic* (SBT2, 22; London: SCM Press, 1972); P. D. Hanson, *The Dawn of Apocalyptic: The Historical and Sociological Roots of Jewish Apocalyptic Eschatology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975); D. Hellholm (ed.), *Apocalypticism in the Mediterranean World and the Near East: Proceedings of the International Colloquium on Apocalypticism, Uppsala, August 12–17, 1979* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 2nd edn, 1979); J. Lambrecht (ed.), *L'Apocalypse johannique et l'Apocalyptique dans le Nouveau Testament* (BETL, 53; Gembloux: J. Duculot, 1980); J. C. VanderKam, *Enoch and the Growth of an Apocalyptic Tradition* (CBQMS, 16; Washington: Catholic Biblical Association, 1984); H. S. Kvanvig, *Roots of Apocalyptic: The Mesopotamian Background of the Enoch Figure and of the Son of Man* (WMANT, 61; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1988); P. Sacchi, *Jewish Apocalyptic and its History* (JSPSup, 20; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990); D. S. Russell, *Prophecy and the Apocalyptic Dream: Protest and Promise* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994); J. C. VanderKam and W. Adler (eds.), *The Jewish Apocalyptic Heritage in Early Christianity* (CRINT, 4; Assen: Van Gorcum, 1996).

¹⁹ See the two issues of *Semeia* which focus on apocalyptic, J. J. Collins (ed.), *Apocalypse: Morphology of a Genre* (*Semeia*, 14; Missoula: Scholars Press, 1979), and A. Yarbro Collins (ed.), *Early Christian Apocalypticism: Genre and Social Setting* (*Semeia*, 36; Decatur, GA: Scholars Press, 1986). The earlier formal definition is found in J. J. Collins, 'Introduction: Towards the Morphology of a Genre', *Semeia* 14 (1979), p. 9.

²⁰ D. E. Aune, 'The Apocalypse of John and the Problem of Genre', *Semeia* 36 (1986), p. 87. See also D. Hellholm, 'The Problem of Apocalyptic Genre and the Apocalypse of John', *Semeia* 36 (1986), pp. 13–64, and the evaluation by A. Yarbro Collins, 'Introduction: Early Christian Apocalypticism', *Semeia* 36 (1986), pp. 1–12.

Cambridge University Press

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Stephen Pattemore

Excerpt

[More information](#)

‘Apocalypse’.²¹ 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.²² 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.²³ 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.²⁴

²¹ On the genre of Revelation see D. E. Aune, *Revelation 1–5* (WBC, 52a; Dallas: Word, 1997), pp. lxx–xc; G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), pp. 37–43; R. Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 1–17; B. J. Malina, *On the Genre and Message of Revelation: Star Visions and Sky Journeys* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1995); F. D. Mazzaferri, *The Genre of the Book of Revelation from a Source-critical Perspective* (BZNTW, 54; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1989); Thompson, *Apocalypse and Empire*, pp. 18–24. Studies on apocalyptic genre with relationship to the Apocalypse include L. Hartman, ‘Form and Message: A Preliminary Discussion of “Partial Texts” in Rev 1–3 and 22, 6ff.’, in Lambrecht, *L’Apocalypse johannique*, pp. 129–49; W. W. Vorster, ‘“Genre” and the Revelation of John: A Study in Text, Context and Intertext’, *Neot* 22 (1988), pp. 103–23; J. J. Collins, ‘The Genre Apocalypse in Hellenistic Judaism’, in Hellholm, *Apocalypticism in the Mediterranean World*, pp. 531–48; E. Schüssler Fiorenza, ‘The Phenomenon of Early Christian Apocalyptic: Some Reflections on Method’, in Hellholm, *Apocalypticism in the Mediterranean World*, pp. 295–316; R. E. Sturm, ‘Defining the Word “Apocalyptic”’: A Problem in Biblical Criticism’, in J. Marcus and M. L. Soards (eds.), *Apocalyptic and the New Testament: Essays in Honour of J. Louis Martyn* (JSNTSup, 24; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1989), pp. 17–48; D. E. Aune, ‘Intertextuality and the Genre of the Apocalypse’, in E. H. Lovering Jr (ed.), *SBL Seminar Papers 1991* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1991), pp. 142–60; G. Linton, ‘Reading the Apocalypse as an Apocalypse’, in E. H. Lovering Jr (ed.), *SBL Seminar Papers 1991* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1991), pp. 161–86; J. J. Collins, ‘The Christian Appropriation of the Apocalyptic Tradition’, in *Seers, Sibyls and Sages in Hellenistic-Roman Judaism* (JSJSup, 54; Leiden: Brill, 1997), pp. 115–27.

²² See Rev. 1:1–8. See Michaels, *Interpreting*, pp. 21–33; Beale, *Revelation*, pp. 37–43. On the letter form of the Apocalypse see M. Karrer, *Die Johannesoffenbarung als Brief* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1986).

²³ Schüssler Fiorenza, *Revelation*, pp. 23–6.

²⁴ See Barr, ‘Symbolic Transformation’; D. L. Barr, ‘The Apocalypse of John as Oral Enactment’, *Int* 40 (1986), pp. 243–56. Social-science approaches undergird Yarbro Collins, *Crisis and Catharsis*; Thompson, *Apocalypse and Empire*; J. N. Kraybill, *Imperial Cult and Commerce in John’s Apocalypse* (JSNTSup, 132; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996); T. B. Slater, *Christ and Community: A Socio-Historical Study of the Christology of Revelation* (JSNTSup, 178; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999). Rhetorical strategy plays an important part in the approach of Schüssler Fiorenza, *Revelation*; J. T. Kirby, ‘The Rhetorical Situations of Revelation 1–3’, *NTS* 34 (1988), pp. 197–207; D. E. Aune, ‘The Form and Function of the Proclamations to the Seven Churches (Revelation 2–3)’, *NTS* 36 (1990), pp. 182–204; R. M. Royalty Jr, ‘The Rhetoric of Revelation’, in *SBL Seminar Papers 1997* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997), pp. 596–617; D. A. deSilva, ‘Honor Discourse and the Rhetorical Strategy of the Apocalypse of John’, *JSNT* 71 (1998), pp. 79–110.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-07896-2 - The People of God in the Apocalypse: Discourse, Structure, and Exegesis

Stephen Pattemore

Excerpt

[More information](#)8 *The People of God in the Apocalypse*

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.²⁵ 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.'²⁶ While explicit imperatives occur mainly in the messages of chs. 2–3, the later visions contribute significantly to several of the other forms.²⁷ 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.²⁸ 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.²⁹ 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.³⁰ Schüssler Fiorenza and Aune have both published studies which take as their starting point the 144,000 followers of the Lamb in Rev. 14:1–5.³¹ But while Schüssler Fiorenza uses this as a springboard

²⁵ J. L. Resseguie, *Revelation Unsealed: A Narrative Critical Approach to John's Apocalypse* (Biblical Interpretation Series, 32; Leiden: Brill, 1998) does not even list them among the main characters. John uses many terms to refer to God's people – slaves of God, saints, witnesses, churches, prophets, and other descriptive phrases. Although *λαός* with a possessive pronoun referring to God occurs only twice (18:4; 21:3), I shall use the phrase 'people of God' throughout this study as a conveniently inclusive expression.

²⁶ P. S. Minear, *I Saw a New Earth: An Introduction to the Visions of the Apocalypse* (Washington: Corpus Books, 1968), p. 214.

²⁷ Minear's list, in brief, consists of ὅσες ἐστὶν phrases, beatitudes, conditional clauses, hortatory subjunctives, 'he who conquers' phrases, vice and virtue, lists and explicit imperatives (*ibid.*, pp. 214–223).

²⁸ Trites, *Witness*, pp. 154–74. ²⁹ See pp. 160–4 below.

³⁰ J. P. M. Sweet, 'Maintaining the Testimony of Jesus: The Suffering of Christians in the Revelation of John', in W. Horbury and B. McNeil (eds.), *Suffering and Martyrdom in the New Testament: Studies Presented to G. M. Styler by the Cambridge New Testament Seminar* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 101–17. The results of this seminal study will be seen to be largely borne out by my thematic investigations below.

³¹ E. Schüssler Fiorenza, 'The Followers of the Lamb: Visionary Rhetoric and Socio-Political Situation', *Semeia* 36 (1986), pp. 123–46; D. E. Aune, 'Following the Lamb: Discipleship in the Apocalypse', in R. N. Longenecker (ed.), *Patterns of Discipleship in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), pp. 269–84.

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Stephen Pattemore

Excerpt

[More information](#)

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.³² 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.³³

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.'³⁴ 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,

³² Bauckham, *Climax*, pp. 210–37.

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* (BZBW, 107; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2001), who also provides detailed background to the significance of temple imagery in Jewish and Greco-Roman contexts.

³⁴ A. Yarbro Collins, 'Reading the Book of Revelation in the Twentieth Century', *Int* 40 (1986), p. 242.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)10 *The People of God in the Apocalypse*

between Jesus and John, and between Jesus and the churches.³⁵ 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’.³⁶ 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’.³⁷ 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.³⁸ 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

³⁵ Kirby, ‘Rhetorical Situations’, pp. 198–9.

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

³⁸ A. J. P. Garrow, *Revelation* (New Testament Readings; London: Routledge, 1997). See especially the summary of his approach, p. 2.