

CHAPTER 7

Myth, History and End-Time Prophecy in Revelation 12–22

Introduction

A significant part of the Book of Revelation is a description of a liturgy taking place in the heavenly sanctuary. If we add up all those passages describing actions that are recognizably liturgical in character, seen in temple settings furnished with liturgical objects, and their ‘fallout’ on earth, the total is 204 verses, out of 405, exactly one half of the entire text (50%).¹ Furthermore 75% of this liturgical activity is described in chapters 1–9, and the remaining 25% is spread throughout the rest of the book. Typological comparison of these liturgical activities with those that were performed in the second temple in Jerusalem, according to the Mishnaic tractates *Yoma* and *Tamid*, helps to identify the liturgy in Revelation as a synthesis of the liturgical activity performed on the Day of Atonement, with the sacrifice of the Lamb corresponding to the first sacrifice of that day, the *tamid* offering of the daily morning service.² The liturgy begins with the sacrifice of the Lamb, ends with the final judgment and progresses through a well-defined sequence that forms a framework embracing and uniting the entire text. This structure not only stamps the entire text with the character of a liturgy for atonement, representing a day in heaven,³

¹ Rev 1,12-20; chs. 2–9; 11,14-19; 14,2-3; chs. 15–16; 19,1-10; 20,11-15.

² Cf. Chapter 6; also *The Apocalypse in the Light of the Temple: A New Approach to the Book of Revelation*, John and Gloria Ben-Daniel, Jerusalem: Beit Yochanan, 2003, Part 1, available at www.newtorah.org.

³ This will have important repercussions on the interpretation of the 1,000-year reign of Christ and his saints described in Rev 20,4-6, according to the well-known formula in Ps. 90:4: “For a thousand years in your sight (O Lord) are as a day, a yesterday that is past...”, see point 8 below.

but also provides an essential temporal frame for interpreting the events described in the book.⁴

The 50% of the text that cannot be defined as liturgical, nor as the 'fallout' of the heavenly liturgy on earth, is mostly to be found in the second half of the text. Starting in chapter 10 and continuing to the end of the book (Rev 22), this material is split by the announcement of the last trumpet (11,14-19), with a small introductory part preceding (10,1-11,13) and the main part following the announcement, merging later with the final parts of the heavenly liturgy (Rev 15 and 16; 19,1-10; 20,11-15).

In the part of the narrative that precedes the 7th trumpet (10,1-11,13), a new start is described, when a mighty angel meets the author John to give him a little scroll to eat, and then commands him to 'prophesy again'. What follows is the prophecy he was given to 'prophesy again', which begins with an account of the mission of two prophets, in realistic prophetic language.⁵ Assuming that this is not the main part of the prophecy given to John to 'prophesy again', but just describes the means by which it will be publicly announced at a certain time, it follows that the main body of this prophecy begins with chapter 12, the mid-point of the book and therefore, in biblical tradition, the central and most important part.⁶ Confirming this observation is

⁴ The liturgical time frame, composed primarily of the successive series of seven seals, trumpets and bowls, acts as an orderly progression (and a bridge) from the beginning to the end of the liturgy, with the main bulk of the text concentrated on the final stages (details to follow). It appears to fulfil the same function as the successive historical periods ("periodization of history") in other historical apocalypses.

⁵ "The passage which follows (11:3-13) is also very distinctive, within the whole book, in that it is not a vision or even an interpretation of a vision (as in 17:7-18), but a narrative prophecy (...)" Richard Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy: Studies on the Book of Revelation*, Edinburgh: T&T Clark 1993, 267.

⁶ For example the central part of the Pentateuch, Lev ch. 16, contains the description of the most important event in the ancient Hebrew calendar—the Day of Atonement. Other examples abound, in a way that is now recognized as an important feature of biblical literary tradition: "The third characteristic of Hebrew rhetoric is the specific manner in which it composes parallel dispositions and most of all concentric arrangements. Instead of developing its argumentation in a linear way, in the Graeco-Roman fashion, to a conclusion which is the point of resolution of the discourse, it is organized most of the time in an involutive manner around a centre which is the focal point, the keystone, through which the rest finds cohesion", Roland Meynet, *Rhetorical Analysis: An Introduction to Biblical*

the correspondence between the account of its transmission in chapter 10 and the first verse of the text: “The Revelation of Jesus Christ which God gave to him to show his servants what must happen soon, making it known by sending his angel to his servant John, who bears witness to the Word of God and the Witness of Jesus Christ, of all that he saw” (Rev 1,1-2). The account in chapter 10 actually describes the angel transmitting this divine message to John—the message earlier called “The Revelation of Jesus Christ”, and the “Word of God and the Witness of Jesus”. It would seem that the prophecy that begins at this central point of the text embodies the content and purpose of the entire book written by John “to show his servants what must happen soon” (1,1).

Beginning at chapter 12, this central message of the Book of Revelation can be summarized as follows: it begins with a vision of a royal woman giving birth to a male child, while being confronted by a fiery-red seven-headed dragon wanting to devour her child. As soon as he is born, the child is seized up to God’s throne in heaven and the woman escapes to a refuge prepared for her in the desert. There is a battle in heaven, in which the archangel Michael and his angels defeat the dragon and its angels by throwing them down from heaven, never to return. The irate dragon now pursues the woman on earth but fails to dislodge her from her desert refuge. So it delegates all its power to a scarlet sea-monster, a seven-headed beast from the sea, which lives in the waters of the abyss and supports a gaudily-dressed woman, who claims to be a queen, but is in fact a prostitute. The seven heads of the beast appear above the water as rulers who reign in succession until the seventh and final head, which receives a severe wounding that endangers the life of the entire beast. However, the wound heals and the sea-beast revives, enabling the entire beast to ascend out of the abyss, or sea, and rule as an eighth head, with power to rule over the whole earth. It shares its power with another beast, a beast from the land, which coerces people to worship the sea-beast and kills all who refuse. In this and other ways, the two beasts persecute the people of God and, in alliance with ten other rulers, they turn against and destroy the prostitute previously supported by the sea-beast. After their

Rhetoric, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998; 175. See also E. Schüssler Fiorenza, *The Book of Revelation: Justice and Judgement*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press 1985; 175-6.

global but very brief rule, the beast's throne is darkened and its reign is terminated by defeat at the battle of the great day of God the Almighty, when the male-child returns from heaven, appearing as a divine warrior-king on a white horse, leading his celestial cavalry. The two beasts are then thrown into a lake of fire and their armies are devoured by birds. The dragon is chained and imprisoned in the abyss for a thousand years, during which the warrior-king, who is God's anointed representative, Messiah or Christ, reigns with his holy followers in the first resurrection. When this 1,000-year reign is over, the dragon is released and immediately raises an army to fight against the encampment of God's people. The dragon and its army are consumed by fire from heaven and the dragon is thrown into the lake of fire, where the two beasts had previously been thrown. The first heaven and first earth disappear and the last judgment takes place before the throne of God; the dead are raised to be judged in a general resurrection, while Death, Hades and anyone not recorded in the Scroll of Life are condemned to the lake of fire. The narrative concludes with a vision of the New Jerusalem coming down out of heaven as a bride adorned for her husband, the victorious warrior-king, and a great wedding feast is celebrated by his followers. She is then described, at the centre of a new heaven and a new earth, as a vast garden-city, a huge park surrounded by walls, in the midst of which the throne of God and the Lamb is seen. This is the consummation of God's plan for mankind, and there "will be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, nor pain will there be anymore, because the former things have passed away" (Rev 21,3-5).

Opinions differ as to what, exactly, this narrative is about. There are at least three levels on which it can be read and understood: the mythological level, the historical level, and the end-time prophetic level, with each level representing a closer reading of the text and greater attention to its precise wording. For a comprehensive understanding of the text, each level must be examined in turn.

The Mythological Level

A superficial reading of chapters 12–22 reveals a compelling narrative of divine combat against the devil, depicted as a serpent-like dragon, leading to its total defeat in several stages. It has the typical form of an ancient Near-Eastern combat myth, in which a new god

responds to an existential threat to his people by fighting and defeating a destructive dragon or monster, with divine help. The god's victory is then celebrated with a feast and his reign begins with the construction of a new residence, usually in the form of a temple. In some cases these myths are cosmogonic, which is to say that they happen 'outside of time' and explain the creation of the civilized world from darkness and chaos. In many cases they were associated with a priestly ritual for establishing or confirming the sovereignty of the appointed king, regarded as the victorious god's representative on earth. Regular performance of the ritual was seen as a way to ensure stability, fertility and prosperity in the religious and social order governed by the king.⁷

The same mythical images were then taken up by the earliest authors of the Old Testament and applied to the God of Israel, the Divine Warrior, YHWH Sebaoth, in passages originally used in the ritual celebration of major events in the history of ancient Israel (e.g., Exod 15; Pss. 93, 96, 114).⁸ Later authors recalled these events when faced with impending calamity, petitioning the Lord to repeat his ancient victories (e.g., Pss. 74, 77, 89). In exilic and postexilic prophecy, the same mythical themes were transferred from the past to the present and future (e.g., Ezek 28; Isa 24-27, 40-66; Zech 9-14), before passing directly into the apocalypses of second temple times (e.g., Dan 7-12) and reaching a climax in the Book of Revelation at the end of the New Testament.⁹ Although it is totally inappropriate to refer to chapters

⁷ Cf. Richard J. Clifford 'The Roots of Apocalypticism in Near Eastern Myth', ch. 1 in *The Encyclopedia of Apocalypticism*, Vol. 1, Ed. John J. Collins, New York, London: Continuum, 2000; 3-38.

⁸ "In both the structure of the great complex of tradition and in individual poetic units embedded therein, a familiar mythic pattern may be discerned. The Divine Warrior marched forth in wrath to win a crucial victory—at the sea, or in variant tradition by cleaving through the sea—and then led a triumphal procession to his mountain, where he appeared in glory, constructed his sanctuary, and established his kingdom. A similar if not identical pattern of themes is found in the mythic cycle of Ba'l in Late Bronze Age Canaan (Ugarit) and in the classic Akkadian cosmogony known as *Enūma eliš*", Frank Moore Cross, *From Epic to Canon: History and Literature in Ancient Israel*, Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 1998; 22.

⁹ "When the prophets attempt to describe the final situation they have to fall back on the language of myth. The description of the conquest of the chaos-dragon by Marduk in the Babylonian epic of Creation supplies them with the imagery which they use to describe Yahweh's final victory over the forces of evil. Just as the

12–22 of the Book of Revelation as a “myth” in the popular sense of that word, as a fabricated story or fable,¹⁰ it is impossible to deny that the mythical imagery and plotline of this part of the book impart to it a strong mythical character. Let us then outline the narrative plot of this book, in order to discuss its mythical character in more detail.

A basic plot can be recognized which is tightly organized, coherent and complete. Although unsaid, the background is that there has been a rebellion in Creation and the Creator is sending a messianic Redeemer to defeat it. With that in mind, the basic elements of the plot can be broken down as follows: the Redeemer’s birth is threatened by the arch rebel, an evil dragon; the Redeemer and his mother receive divine protection while divine forces fight and partially neutralize the dragon; the defeated adversary then delegates another evil agent, a sea-beast, who is aided secretly by a wealthy and glamorous female prostitute. At a certain point, the delegated sea-beast succeeds in receiving authority over the entire world, whereupon he rejects the female accomplice and replaces her with a male associate, a beast from the land. This partnership leads to intense persecution of the Redeemer’s family and followers; after a short while, the Redeemer returns as a warrior to defeat the evil beasts in a final battle; the original arch rebel, the evil dragon, is imprisoned and the Redeemer rules for a protracted period. At the end of this period the dragon is released, stirs up more rebellion and is immediately destroyed forever. All evil is eternally condemned through a general judgment as the old creation collapses and a new creation is realized and celebrated. In the new creation perfect harmony and peace is restored in the presence of the Creator and the Redeemer.

divine act of creation lies outside the horizon of history and can only be described in the language of myth, so the divine act bringing history to a close can only be described in the same terms. The eschatological use of myth was carried over from Judaism into Christianity and appears in its fullest display in the Apocalypse of St. John”, S.H. Hooke, *Middle Eastern Mythology*, Harmondsworth: Penguin 1963, 16. Also see Adela Yarbro Collins, *The Combat Myth in the Book of Revelation*, Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2001.

¹⁰ This very negative sense of the term ‘myth’ seems to be the result of its use in some of the Pastoral Letters of the New Testament (1Tim 1,4; 4,7; 2Tim 4,4; Tit 1,14; 2Pet 1,16). The discovery of the actual texts of some ancient Near Eastern myths has helped to rehabilitate the term as a distinct literary genre of its own—one that has had an important role in the establishment of virtually every ancient religion.

From this brief outline, it becomes clear that the mythical language of this part of the Book of Revelation represents the complete history of divine redemption from its inception at the messianic Redeemer's birth to its ending in the final judgment and the new creation. It symbolically envisions actual entities, actions and realities in this world and in the next, showing how the created world was, is and will be saved and renewed by God and his Messiah.¹¹ Its mythical character not only functions as an extension of its symbolism, but also gives the narrative a pan-historical, temporally-indeterminate appearance.¹²

In stating this, the superficial nature of the book's mythical character is exposed and also its divergence from authentic myth. Whereas ancient myth looked backwards to the *Urzeit*—an imaginary primeval time in the remote past—for endorsement and regeneration of the present, the text in Revelation looks forwards to the *Endzeit*, or end-time, to endorse, encourage and justify present actions.¹³ While ancient myth is a description of past origins that has a role in determining the present and future, the same role is fulfilled in the Book of Revelation by the prophetic vision of future consummation. There is indeed a superficial resemblance with myth, but in Revelation the perspective is reversed and the objective is qualitatively different: it is

¹¹ In the New Testament "the function of myth is to express in symbolical terms, by means of images, what cannot be otherwise put into human speech. Here myth has become an expansion of symbolism", S.H. Hooke, *Middle Eastern Mythology*; 16. Cf. John J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to Jewish Apocalyptic Literature*, 2nd ed, Grand Rapids MI/ Cambridge UK: Eerdmans, 1998; 18-19.

¹² This book is undoubtedly the most sustained and unashamedly 'mythical' piece of writing in the New Testament, and possibly in the whole Bible, a fact that has complicated its interpretation and earned it scorn and opprobrium from the undiscerning. It is no exaggeration to say "The book of Revelation is one of the most sustained examples of symbolic reality in existence", Introduction to Revelation, *ESV: Study Bible English Standard Version*, Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2008; 2546.

¹³ This indication of the functional role of the Book of Revelation closely corresponds to the one proposed as an addition to the definition of Apocalypse (SBL Genres Project, *Semeia* 14, 1979) by a later committee headed by Adela Yarbro Collins: apocalypses were "intended to interpret present, earthly circumstances in light of the supernatural world and of the future, and to influence both the understanding and the behaviour of the audience by means of divine authority", 'Introduction: Early Christian Apocalypticism', *Semeia* 36 (1989): 7.

not the past but the future that is determinative, and the *Urzeit* does not become the *Endzeit*, because the *Endzeit* is a new creation.¹⁴ This part of the Book of Revelation should not therefore be identified as 'myth', because it is essentially prophecy that has been 'mythologized'—a process that characterizes the apocalyptic genre and had its roots in the late exilic and early post-exilic prophecy of Israel.¹⁵

Furthermore, as one might expect in a prophecy, the narrative plot in the Book of Revelation is more complex and sophisticated than any extant examples of combat myth. This can be seen in the multiplication of villains (i.e., the dragon, the two beasts, the prostitute, and the inhabitants of the earth) cooperating with each other in various ways to oppose God and his agents. It is especially from the intra-textual interpretations, provided by the interpreting angel and identifying these villains with historical entities, that the reader perceives this part of the Book of Revelation has much more to say about history than a timeless myth whose main function was to explain, establish and maintain a particular religious or social system in the ancient world. Realizing this, the reader is ready to proceed to the next level of reading the text.

¹⁴ It was the German scholar Hermann Gunkel who asserted in his *Schöpfung und Chaos* (1895) that '*Urzeit wird Endzeit*', meaning 'the time of the Beginning becomes the End-time'. Commenting on this simplistic formula, Paul D. Hanson writes: "While recognizing the profound influence that mythic elements had upon eschatology, whether these elements were borrowed directly or through the mediation of earlier Israelite institutions, we must never overlook the thorough transformation to which these elements were subjected in being drawn into Yahwism, even in late post-exilic times. This can be illustrated especially in connection with the phrase commonly used to describe the relation of Jewish apocalyptic to ancient Near Eastern myth: *Urzeit wird Endzeit*, for to translate *wird* in terms of total identification is very misleading. In borrowing mythic forms such as the Divine Warrior Hymn, the prophets and apocalyptic seers never departed completely from the temporal framework of the classical period of prophetic thought. For while the *Urzeit* of myth was recurrent and bound up with the cycles of nature, the *Endzeit* of late prophecy and apocalyptic was construed as occurring once-and-for-all and as a culmination of the long history of Yahweh's relationship to his people", *The Dawn of Apocalyptic: The Historical and Sociological Roots of Jewish Apocalyptic Eschatology*, Rev. ed., Philadelphia, Fortress, 1979; note 84, 131-2.

¹⁵ For the most complete account of this process, see Paul D. Hanson's *Dawn of Apocalyptic*, 1-31, and also John J. Collins, 'From Prophecy to Apocalypticism: The Expectation of the End', ch. 4 in *Encyclopedia of Apocalypticism*, Vol. 1, 129-161.

The Historical Level

The historical level is reached when aspects of the narrative are identified with historical events in the past. This would confirm that the text is not a mythical story from outside of historical time, for there are real points of contact with human history. For example, the divine Redeemer, who is the male child born to a very special woman (Rev 12, 5), is asking to be identified with Jesus Christ, called the Lamb elsewhere in the text, whose life, death and resurrection are real historical events recorded by reliable witnesses in the New Testament and other ancient documents.¹⁶ Similarly, in chapter 12, the downfall of the dragon is ascribed to the “blood of the Lamb and because of the word of their witness, and they loved not their life up to death” (12,11), which refer to the historical acts of martyrdom of Christ and Christians. Oddly enough, though, there is little else in chapters 12–22 that can definitely be linked to known historical events.

There are, nevertheless, some allusions to circumstances known to historians of the Roman Empire, as for example the similarity between the cult worship of the image of the first beast instituted by the second beast (13,12) and the offering of incense to Caesar’s image in the imperial cult, instituted by the priests of provincial temples dedicated to the Roman Emperor, and sometimes employed as a test of loyalty.¹⁷ However, many other details of the personality cult in the Book of Revelation have never been verified at any time in history, such as conditioning commercial transactions to the possession of a mark on the hand or forehead (13,16-17), or the worship of an image that actually speaks (13,15), or the signs performed to deceive (13,13-14). Furthermore, the second beast is not called a priest, but a false prophet (cf. 19,20).

There are other important features of the text which evoke aspects of Roman Imperial history. On information disclosed by the interpreting angel, the author writes of the sea-beast with seven heads: “The seven heads are seven hills on which the woman sits, and are seven rulers: five have fallen, one is, the other has not yet come, and whenever he comes he must remain for just a short time. And the

¹⁶ It should be noted, though, that this birth takes place in heaven, as a heavenly birth, and differs in important ways from the historical accounts of Christ’s birth, see point 9 in next section below.

¹⁷ See chapter 4.

beast which was and is not, even he is an eighth, is also of the seven, and goes to destruction" (17,9-11). This is the same beast that comes out of the sea (13,1-8), and out of the abyss (17,3.8; also 11,7), to rule the world for a brief time on behalf of the evil dragon. Here the 'seven hills on which the woman sits' (17,9) and the name given to the woman, Babylon, (17,3-5) are both references to the historical city of Rome in common usage at the time of the author.¹⁸ The sea-beast that supports this city is therefore presumed to be a metaphor for the Roman Empire, and the seven heads of the beast, identified as rulers in the text (17,9), are said to be Roman Emperors.¹⁹

The decoding of this complex set of images therefore points squarely to an original setting within the historical Roman Empire. It should be said, however, that no indication is given of the identity of the first, or of any, of the seven emperors of which "five have fallen, one is now, and one is to come..." and all attempts to identify them from historical sources have been unconvincing.²⁰ As seven is a symbolic number representing the totality, it is likely that no particular emperors are intended. Furthermore, the actual identity of the fallen emperors is of no concern to the author, since he focuses only the last two of the series: the seventh and especially the one that comes after, an 'eighth', who is also one of the seven and is still very much in the future from the textual point of view.²¹ The conclusion is therefore

¹⁸ Regarding the name of Babylon for Rome, cf. 1Pet 5,13; 2Baruch 11,1; 33,2; 67,7; 79,1; 4Ezra 3,2.31; *Sibylline Oracles* 5,143.434; *Midr. Rab. Lev* 6.6. The origin and use of this name relate to the events of 70CE, when Rome repeated what Babylon had done in 586 BC by destroying the Jerusalem temple and exiling the Jewish people. Rome also resembled the ancient city of Babylon by becoming the political and religious capital of a vast empire. Regarding the city on seven hills, see David E. Aune, *Revelation 17-22*, Word Biblical Commentary, Vol. 52c, Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998; 944-45.

¹⁹ The identification of the sea-beast with the ancient Roman Empire and its heads as Emperors is based on the assumption that Babylon represents ancient Rome. In point 6 of the next section below, this assumption is challenged on the grounds that Babylon (Rome) still exists, in which case the Empire and the rulers that support her must also exist: they are international empires that exist up until the end of history.

²⁰ There have been scores of attempts at identifying the emperors, with the aim of estimating the date of authorship; cf. Aune, *Revelation 17-22*, 946-49.

²¹ The head to which the eighth head corresponds is left as an enigma, although it is reasonable to conclude that it is the seventh, since the entire beast would have

clear: although the vision of Babylon and the sea-beast is set against the background of the historical Roman Empire, the main characters are not yet seen as present realities according to the temporal orientation of the author in this vision, but will only become historical realities in the future. To interpret these realities as already past involves the assumption that, at some point future to the author, but in the past relative to our own time, all that is described concerning the prostitute and the sea-beast has actually happened, including the eternal destruction of the prostitute by the sea-beast (17,16-17).²² This is contradicted by the fact that there is no historical record of a Roman Emperor turning against his own capital city and destroying it forever (cf. 19,3), and neither has any other ruler done this, for Rome still exists and so witnesses to the continuing validity of the author's words. The author's emphasis on the future is therefore still up to date and brings us to the third and final level for reading and understanding the visions in this part of the Book of Revelation (Rev 12–22).

End-Time Prophetic Level

On the mythological level, chapters 12–22 contain a unified and seamless narrative about the war between God and his people and the devil and its people, ending with a vision of final judgment followed by eternal salvation and peace. On the historical level there are a few traces of recorded historical events and circumstances, referring mainly to the times of Jesus, the persecution of Christians, Rome and her ancient Empire. However, this historical material is no more than a background to this section of the book, which is mainly focused on events and situations that are future to the author's time (cf. 1,1; 4,1; 22,6). Furthermore, helped by the temporal structure defined by the heavenly liturgy, the precise chronology of this prophesied future can be inferred from a close inspection of the text and the context.

Starting with the context, a connection between chapters 12–22, and chapters 10–11 has already been mentioned. Chapter 10 represents a new start at the end of the narrative of the heavenly liturgy, which results in the delivery of a new prophecy to the author, who

died if the wound on the seventh head had not been cured (Rev 13,3.14), i.e. the wounded head was the seventh and last head of the beast.

²² This is the main assumption of the 'Preterist' approach to interpretation.

first describes, in chapter 11, the way it will be prophesied publicly by two prophets. It is written that the two prophets will prophesy for 1,260 days before being killed by the sea-beast ascending from the abyss (11,3,7-8). Not by accident this time span of 1,260 days is repeated in chapter 12, regarding the 'exodus' of the celestial woman to her place of refuge in the desert (12,6), indicating a temporal overlap between the two passages. This overlap is seen again with the repetition of another period, 42 months in this instance, which represents the time of trampling the holy city in the first part (11,2) and the brief but brutal reign of the sea-beast in the second (13,5).²³ Regardless of the way they are interpreted,²⁴ these two periods of time, the 1,260 days and the 42 months, confirm a synchronicity between events described in chapter 11 and events at the start of the chapters we are considering (Rev 12-14), and identify the latter as an expansion of the former.²⁵ This simple temporal parallel therefore verifies the assumption, mentioned in the introduction above, that chapter 12 opens the main part of the prophecy that John was instructed to 'prophesy again' after ingesting the little scroll (10,11). Since this prophecy refers back to chapter 11, where the mission of two prophets is described, it follows that this is indeed the prophecy they announce. Furthermore, since this mission immediately precedes the seventh and last trumpet, signaling the end of history (10,6-7), it also follows that the prophecy concerns events leading up to the end-time. It is an eschatological, or end-time, prophecy that blends seamlessly into the prophecy of the

²³ The brief reign of the beast for 42 months (Rev 13,5) recalls the reign of the tyrannical 'little horn' of Daniel, for a 'time, two times and half a time' (Dan 7,23-25), and identifies this reign with the second mention of the period of the refuge of the woman at her place in the desert (Rev 12,14).

²⁴ Most scholars and commentators interpret these two periods (1,260 days and 42 months) non-literally, as different expressions for the same final period of unspecified length. As set out in point 2 below, a literal interpretation is probable and more compelling than the non-literal.

²⁵ Indeed, from a literary critical point of view, Rev 12,1-15,4 is an '*inclusio*' (an 'inclusion', 'intercalation' or 'interpolation') enclosed by a 'doublet' (a pair of similar expressions) at 11,19 and 15,5, about 'the opening of the sanctuary in heaven'. The doublet identifies the inclusion and functions as a parenthesis, marking the included passage as an explanation or expansion of what preceded.

final judgments and consummation announced by the seventh trumpet (11,15-19).²⁶

If there is any doubt about this conclusion, the textual content of these chapters (Rev 12–22) can be cited as evidence in support, for they describe events that Christian tradition has always identified with the end-time, especially the eschatological harvest (14,14-20), the return of Christ (19,11-21), the general resurrection and the final judgment (20,11-15).

The conclusion that chapters 12–22 contain a prophecy for the end-time, forces us to revisit those features of the text that may seem to be contradictory, confusing or just difficult to reconcile with this view.

1. The imminence of the End

If the events recounted in this prophecy all refer to the end-time, and have not yet been fulfilled in our own time, it is either irrational or mistaken for the author, writing about 19 centuries ago, to claim that they would happen very soon (1,1; 4,1; 22,6) and that between himself and the final manifestation of the historical sea-beast, there was only one short reign: “five have fallen, one is now, and one is to come, and whenever he comes he must remain for just a short time” (17,9). The author clearly writes as if he is only a short time away from the events he prophesies. Scholars have noted a similar perspective in other parts of the text: “The Apocalypse’s overall understanding of time is that the consummation of history is ‘only a little while’ away, whether this is viewed from the vantage point of Christians (1:1-2; 22:6-7,10,20), of exalted heavenly saints (6,11) or of Satan... (12:12)”.²⁷

²⁶ The conjunction of the seventh trumpet with the end of history barely needs any confirmation after the angelic oath in Rev 10,6-7. But if confirmation is needed it is here in the list of divine interventions following the seventh trumpet blast, and for which God is praised by the 24 elders (11,15-19).

²⁷ G.K.Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1999; 993, following E. Schüssler Fiorenza, *Justice and Judgment*, 46. So prominent is the theme of eschatological salvation and judgment, that Schüssler Fiorenza presents a compelling case for eschatology, and not history, as the proper horizon for the understanding of Revelation. She argues that the whole composition of the text is organized by three main themes: the Christian community as the already established kingdom of God and Christ in heaven and on earth, the imminent expectation of the eschatological fulfilment of this kingdom from

The imminence of the prophesied end-time events makes good sense, however, if the author is actually placing himself in the eschatological future, as represented in chapter 10 by his encounter with the mighty angel, his ingestion of the little scroll and the instruction to 'prophesy again' (10,1-11), all of which are described after the sixth and a short time before the seventh and last trumpet blast (11,14-19). This appears to be the standpoint for the renewal of his prophetic vocation and explains his otherwise inexplicable proximity to the end-time events he prophesies.

2. *The relationship between the two time periods*

If the two time-periods, 1,260 days (11,3; 12,6) and 42 months (11,2; 13,5), refer to the same period of time, as most scholars assert, then it is legitimate to ask why the author has chosen two different temporal expressions when one would suffice. Firstly, whichever calendar was used, 1,260 days is not exactly the same as 42 months, and the author must have been aware of this.²⁸ Secondly, according to the text, the mission of the two prophets during the 1,260 days cannot take place during the 42-month reign of the sea-beast, as they are adversaries of each other, and both the prophets and the sea-beast have

the point of view of being only a short time before (cf. Rev 6,9-11); and the ultimate fulfilment of the kingdom of God and Christ through their judgment on this world (*Justice and Judgment*, 46-56). In her words: "This means that in Rev. 'history' is completely subordinated to eschatology and receives its significance from the future" (op. cit. 46); "The goal and high point of the composition of the whole book, as of the individual 'little apocalypses', is the final judgment and the eschatological salvation" (op. cit. 47); "The whole book, and especially the cycles of visions within its apocalyptic section, reaches a climax in the description of judgment and of eschatological salvation. The reader thereby is constantly confronted with the end" (op. cit. 55).

²⁸ At the author's time, two calendars were known: the Hebrew luni-solar calendar in which 42 months lasted 1,239 days (21 days less than 1,260) and the sectarian (Essene) 364-day solar calendar in which 42 months lasted 1,274 days (14 days more than 1,260). The expression "time, two times and half-a-time", cited at Rev 12,14 and meaning 'three and a half years', informs us exactly which calendar the author had in mind. By evoking the time of persecution under the tyrannical "little horn" of Daniel (Dan 7,23-25; 12,7), this expression corresponds to the 42-month reign of the beast, which therefore lasts three and a half years. Under the Hebrew luni-solar calendar, three and a half years contained at least 43 months, due to the 'intercalated' month added every 2-3 years. The author was therefore guided by the sectarian 364-day solar calendar in which 42 months were equal to 3½ years and 1,274 days.

the power to destroy their enemies (11,5 and 13,7). If the mission of the two prophets and the reign of the beast were concurrent, they would quickly degenerate into mortal combat, but instead the text notes: "whenever they finish their witnessing, the beast that is coming up out of the abyss will make war against them and overcome them and kill them" (11,7), which is to say that the mission of the two prophets for 1,260 days comes first and is then followed by the reign of the beast for 42 months. These two temporal expressions refer to two different but consecutive time periods of more or less the same duration, which together add up to seven years and provide a clear temporal structure to this end-time prophecy. Moreover, the 42-month reign of the beast is terminated at the final battle and the second coming of Christ (16,12-16; 19,11-21), so the seven-year period is indeed a final 'week of years', or septennium (cf. Dan 9,24-27).

3. *To whom does the title 'great city' refer?*

There is considerable confusion about the identity of the 'great city'. In the text, this title is attributed mainly to Babylon the prostitute city (Rev 17,18; 18,16.18.19.21), except on two occasions. In the first it refers to the holy city at the end of the mission of the two prophets (11,8), which coincides with the start of the trampling of that city (11,2) and of the reign of the sea-beast for 42 months (11,7; 13,5). The holy city in this context is clearly historical Jerusalem, for it is also called the place where the Lord was crucified (11,7). The second application of this title to historical Jerusalem is in the description of the effects of a great earthquake that follows the out-pouring of the final bowl judgment: "And the great city came to be in three parts and the cities of the nations fell. And Babylon the great was remembered before God, to give her the cup with the wine of the passion of his anger" (16,19). The link is more subtle here and lies in the contrast between the fate of the great city, which was 'split into three parts' (cf. Zech 14,4-5), and that of the cities of the nations, including Babylon, which just 'fell' (cf. Rev 14,8; 18,2). In a biblical context, Jerusalem, the holy city, is often contrasted with 'the cities of the nations', of which Babylon is among the most prominent.²⁹ It therefore appears that at a certain point, more specifically at the start of the 42-month period when

²⁹ For the full defence of this view, see J.-P. Ruiz, *Ezekiel in the Apocalypse: The Transformation of Prophetic Language in Revelation 16,17-19,10*, Frankfurt am Main: P. Lang, 1989; 281-89).

the holy city is 'trampled' and the sea-beast rules over the world, the title 'great city' is transferred from Babylon to the historical Jerusalem. As to the question why Babylon is called 'great city', it would be reasonable to attribute this to her close relationship with the sea-beast (17,3.7), since it is this 'favoured status' that makes her great. Using the same argument, it can be inferred that the transfer of the title 'great city' to historical Jerusalem signifies the transfer of the beast's favour and power-base to this city.

4. The 'trampling' of the holy city and its consequences

The transfer of the beast's power-base, or throne (16,10-11), to Jerusalem and the trampling (i.e. profanation) of the holy city during his 42-month reign is not without consequences. As seen above, Jerusalem is no longer called the holy city, but the great city. It is also "spiritually called Sodom and Egypt" (11,8). The former spiritual name of Jerusalem was Zion, after the name of the part of the city, Mount Zion, where the dwelling of God once stood. The change from Zion to 'Sodom and Egypt' is very significant: Sodom and Egypt not only represent immorality and oppression respectively, but they are also places from which the people of God departed in a hurry. In other words, the people of God, or Zion, have left Jerusalem completely by this stage, and are seen later, on a new Mount Zion, as a private army of 144,000 saintly males in the presence of Christ (14,1-5). Mount Zion has always been a movable mountain, relocated during the Crusader era from the south east corner of Jerusalem, to the south west corner. In this prophecy the move is clearly further afield and its possible future location will be discussed later. For now, though, it is important to note that this new Mount Zion is a real place, because its inhabitants, the 144,000 males, are described in physical terms as real, though exceptionally pure, people on this earth (cf. 14,1-5).³⁰ Identifying Zion with 'the beloved city' of biblical tradition (Ps 78,68; 87,2), and therefore with the 'camp of the saints' (Rev 20,9), confirms it has a physical location, since it is later surrounded by the armies of Gog

³⁰ They are real people because they are described in comparison to other people: unlike other people, they can learn the new song being sung by the heavenly choirs; unlike others, they have not fallen into temptation with women and remain virgins; unlike others, they have never resorted to lies. They are described in very human terms, in their avoidance of very human weaknesses. Disembodied souls would not be described in this way.

and Magog after traversing the land, and only a physical location can thus be described as surrounded by armies on earth.

5. The identification of the two beasts and their cult

In the context of end-time prophecy, it is clearly no longer possible to assert the identity of the sea-beast as an emperor from ancient Rome. There is nevertheless enough information to grasp that this is a man (13,18) who will wield more power than anyone the world has ever seen. His brief 42-month rule over all the earth, immediately prior to Christ's second coming (13,5-7, cf. 17,14) presumes the establishment of a one-world government.³¹ During his reign, he acts decisively against Christ and his followers: he kills the two prophets (11,7), persecutes the saints (12,17;13,7; 15,2) and goes off to make war against the Lamb (17,14). However, many aspects of his rule emulate the redemptive actions of Christ, especially his passion, resurrection, ascension and worship in heaven: one of the heads of the beast is fatally wounded (13,3), but his recovery (13,12.14) leads to the ascension of the beast from the abyss (11,7; 13,1), the full manifestation of its power in the world (13,2-8) and the worship of his person (13,4.8.12.15). This combination of terminal hostility to Christ and his followers, together with imitation of the true Redeemer, leads to the conclusion that the beast is a false redeemer, a false messiah, the last and most powerful manifestation of the antichristian spirit, known in Christian tradition as the Antichrist.

The identification of the sea-beast as a false-messiah is clinched by the fact he is promoted by another beast, called a 'false-prophet' (cf. 13,11-17; 16,13; 19,20; 20,10), who deceives people with his 'signs', especially by bringing 'fire down from heaven to earth in the sight of men' (13,13). This sign is packed with significance for

³¹ "The traditional doctrine of the Antichrist does not include any possibility of knowing the date of the end of time; nor does it state that there can be no world domination save that of the Antichrist! The establishment of a World State, which is today well within the bounds of historical possibility, may quite possibly be looked upon as a legitimate goal of political endeavor. What this doctrine does state is that once this step has been taken, mankind will find itself in a condition in which the Dominion of the Antichrist has become more acutely possible than ever before: a 'world organization might become the most deadly and impregnable of tyrannies, the final establishment of the reign of the anti-Christ'", Josef Pieper, *The End of Time: A Meditation on the Philosophy of History*, trans. Michael Bullcock, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1999; 129 (German original 1950).

identifying the nature of the cult promoted by the false-prophet. Firstly it suggests that he wishes to identify himself with the ancient Israelite prophet Elijah (cf. 2Kgs 1,9-14; 1Kgs 18,30-40), who is expected to return and prepare for the messianic age (Mal 3,1-24),³² and secondly it recalls the divine consecration of a new altar (Lev 9,24; 1Chr 21,26; 2Chr 7,1; 2Macc 1,18-36). The imitation of this sign by the false prophet therefore implies his participation in the dedication of a new altar connected to the ancient Israelite cult. In view of the central importance of the temple in Jerusalem for the performance of this cult, the dedication of a new altar by the false prophet, in this impressive but inauthentic way, presumes the reconstruction of the temple in Jerusalem. Furthermore it is clear from the text that the renewed cult is not directed to the worship of God, but rather to the false messiah and his patron, the devil, even though it is based on the site of the ancient temple in Jerusalem (cf. 2Thess 2,4; Mt 24,15; Mk 13,14).

6. *The identification of Babylon the great prostitute*

Similarly, it can no longer be maintained that Babylon is the ancient city of Rome. Indeed the difficulty in identifying Babylon constitutes an essential part of the mystery of her corruption (Rev 17,5) and of her close relationship with the beast (17,7)—an implied ‘mystery of iniquity’, since it forms an evil counterpart to the ‘mystery of God’ (10,7). There is, however, an abundance of detail about this female figure, in the text, that enables the reader to have an accurate impression (14,8; 16,19; 17,1–19,6).³³ Already mentioned are the two specific features that identify Babylon with Rome, but not necessarily ancient Rome, for right up until her eternal destruction she continues to have “a kingdom over the rulers of the earth” (17,18). This international authority is also described as a drunken prostitute that forms immoral alliances with the world’s rulers and spreads her corrupt practices among all the world’s inhabitants. The language and imagery of this

³² For Christ and Christians (i.e. ‘those who are willing to accept it’ in Mt 11,14) the prophecy of Elijah’s return (Mal 3,1.22-24) has been fulfilled by John the Baptist (Mk 9,12; Mt 11,7-15; 17,11-13), even though Elijah did not return in the flesh, but in the spirit and power granted to John the Baptist (Lk 1, 13-17; cf. Mk 1,2-8; Mt 3,4). The Jews, however, never accepted the fulfilment of this prophecy of Elijah’s return by John the Baptist and still await his coming.

³³ 50 out of 405 verses, or an eighth (12%), of the whole text is dedicated to this theme.

portrait of Babylon (Rev 17) are very closely related to certain passages in the Hebrew prophets, especially Ezekiel 16 and 23, where the metaphor of prostitution refers to idolatry causing infidelity to the Covenant with God. Babylon must therefore be a religious community that knows God and his Laws.³⁴

In the next chapter (Rev 18), in which the sudden destruction of Babylon and its economic fallout are described, there is no doubt that her idolatry is directed to Mammon, and is expressed as an inordinate attachment to wealth, riches and luxury (18,3.7.14; cf. Mt 6,24; Lk 16,13; 1Tim 6,10; Heb 13,5). It is with her love of wealth and luxury that she has corrupted the entire world and seduced its rulers.

The final clue to the identity of this city is in the author's conjunction of the metaphors of prostitution and drunkenness: Babylon's lust for luxury and wealth are somehow facilitated by her state of intoxication "with the blood of the saints and the martyrs of Jesus" (Rev 17,6).³⁵ It appears that Babylon's intoxication with the blood of the saints and martyrs of Jesus refers to her appropriation of their merit and glory to herself. This leads to a state of self-exaltation (spiritual pride), that causes her to act in an irresponsible and disordered way like someone who is drunk. This explanation of her 'drunkenness' then fits neatly with her prostitution: considering the merits of the saints and martyrs as her own (being drunk with their blood), Babylon succeeds in satisfying her lust for riches and luxury (her passion for fornication). In a few words, Babylon "glorifies herself and lives luxuriously" (18,7) by exploiting the merits of the saints and martyrs of Jesus. Allying herself in this way with the saints and martyrs of Jesus, the religious community that is called Babylon cannot be anything

³⁴ And certainly not a pagan power that is ignorant of the God of Israel and unbound by a Covenant.

³⁵ Most interpreters explain Babylon's drunkenness as related in some way to her killing of the saints and martyrs of Jesus. However, this is contradicted by the fact that, in contrast to the martyrs, saints are not killed, but die a natural death. Secondly, nowhere else in the text is Babylon described as a killer or persecutor of the followers of Jesus; this is a function of the beast and his false prophet (cf. Rev 13). Thirdly, even if it were true that Babylon "gets high" on killing the faithful followers of Jesus, there is no apparent connection between this and Babylon's lust for wealth and luxury. How can Babylon get rich by killing the poor of Christ? Furthermore, from a purely literary point of view, a murderer is unlikely to succeed as a prostitute. In brief, if the metaphor of drunkenness implies murder, it becomes totally incongruent with the metaphor of prostitution.

else but Christian.³⁶ Defined as a Christian community with international authority and based in the city of Rome, it is impossible to escape the identification of Babylon with the historical and administrative centre of the Catholic Church in Rome. This shocking interpretation of Babylon goes a long way to explain the words of the author when he first beheld the vision: "And seeing her I wondered with a great wonder" (Rev 17,6b). But after reflecting on the long and sometimes scandalous history of the Roman Church, perhaps we should not be so stunned.³⁷

7. Other place names

The geographical specificity of the holy city as Jerusalem and Babylon as Rome, or at least the Church of Rome, suggests that a closer look at the other place names in the text may, in the eschatological context, turn out to be real places on the map. This is certainly true of the seven churches in the first part of the Book of the Revelation. The twice-mentioned River Euphrates (9,14; 16,12), for example, is a specific geographical feature of the Middle East and, having no particular symbolical value different from any other river, is asking to be understood literally.

Although Armageddon (16,16), meaning Mount Megiddon (Har Megiddon), is a name coined by the author, it also has a specific geographical location in the Middle East. The only place where Megiddon, with final 'n', is mentioned in the Scriptures is in an eschatological prophecy of Zechariah, which compares the mourning of Jews and Jerusalem over 'the person they pierced' to "the mourning for Hadad-

³⁶ Needless to say, there is a close correspondence between 'exploiting the merits of the saints and martyrs of Jesus' and the 'cult of the saints and martyrs' around which, it must be admitted, many and various abuses, excesses and defects have occurred in the history of the Catholic Church, and have proved to be difficult to eradicate (cf. 'Lumen Gentium', 51, *Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, Vol. 1, ed. Austin Flannery, New York: Costello, 1987).

³⁷ Especially in view of the following statement by Pope John Paul II: "Whilst the second millennium of Christianity is coming to a close, it is right that the Church assumes responsibility for the sins of her children with greater awareness, remembering all those circumstances in which, during the course of history, they have distanced themselves from the Spirit of Christ and from his Gospel, offering to the world - instead of the testimony of a life inspired by the values of the Faith - the spectacle of ways of thinking and acting which were really forms of anti-testimony and of scandal" (1994 Apostolic Letter *'Tertio Millennio Adveniente'* 33).

rimmon (Baal) in the plain of Megiddon" (Zech 12,11). This plain is elsewhere called Jezreel, or Esdraelon, and is an appropriate place for the last battle, as it has been the scene of countless battles over the last 3,500 years, some of which are documented in the Hebrew Scriptures (Jdg 5,19; 2Kgs 9,27; 2Kgs 23,29-30; 2Chr 35,22). The Mount closest to and overlooking this plain is in fact Mount Carmel, which was also strongly linked to the Baal cult (cf. 1Kgs 18,20-48), and is therefore the best location for Armageddon (Har Megiddon).³⁸ The author's use of this name, rather than Mount Carmel, may be intended to evoke Zechariah's prophecy, here, to indicate the fulfilment of the universalized version quoted earlier, about the return of Jesus Christ: "Behold, he comes with the clouds and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all the peoples of the earth will mourn over him" (Rev 1,7). Mount Carmel then, represents the place where the false messiah (the beast) will seek to demonstrate his military strength as his reign is failing (16,10-16), but is opposed by Mount Zion (14,1) from which 'the Lord will send out the rod of his strength' (Ps 110,2; Ps 2,6-9).

8. *The problematic millennial reign of Christ with his saints*

The eschatological prophecy for the final seven years of history, as delineated above, also embraces an interval of 1,000 years between the second coming and the final judgment. The impossibility of resolving this temporal incongruity has led to the various forms of millennialism, or chiliasm, whose latest and most potent incarnation is an important aspect of Christian Zionism.³⁹

³⁸ Others have proposed Tel Megiddo, on which the ancient city of Megiddo once stood until it was abandoned in 332 BCE. However, this 'tel' rises only 30 metres above the plain and cannot be called a mountain as in the 'Mount Megiddon' (Armageddon) mentioned here. For Mt. Carmel as the site of the Baal cult, see Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions*, Trans. John McHugh, London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1961; 280. In 'The Origin of Armageddon: Revelation 16:16 as an Interpretation of Zechariah 12:11', John Day carefully argues the case presented here, explaining the origin of the term but failing to make the final link between Mt. Megiddon and Mt. Carmel, or with any other place (*Crossing the Boundaries: Essays in Biblical Interpretation in Honour of Michael D. Goulder*, Eds Porter, Joyce and Orton, Leiden: E. Brill, 1994; 315-26).

³⁹ This aspect is called Dispensationalism, which is a 20th century Protestant interpretation that sees the millennium and indeed most of the Book of Revelation as a literal prophecy of future events. According to this view, Jesus Christ will return and rule for 1,000 years from the temple in Jerusalem, rebuilt by the Jews of

Nevertheless, there is a way of explaining and reframing the problem, by distinguishing between the narrative or mythological continuity of the text (level 1 above) and the full significance of the passage in its local and distant contexts (levels 2+3 above).⁴⁰ It is the difference between Myth and Fact,⁴¹ or between Schema and Reality.⁴² More precisely, it is the difference between an ideal kingdom 'of this world' to be won by force of arms (the myth or schema) and the heavenly kingdom of Christ won by service and self-sacrifice (the fact or reality). The author appears to be engaging in a subtle rewriting of

Israel who will then come to believe that Jesus is their Messiah. Dispensationalism forms an important element of Christian support for the State of Israel in 'modern Christian Zionism', although recently this element has been revised and even erased from the 'new Christian Zionism'; cf. *The New Christian Zionism: Fresh Perspectives on Israel and the Land*, ed. Gerald R. McDermott, Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2016; 13-15.

⁴⁰ Biblical scholar, J.W. Mealy, aptly explains the need for thorough contextual appraisal: "The exegetical method to be employed here has as its most salient characteristic the attempt to make fuller use of the highly self-referential and contextual character of Revelation than has been done in previous studies. In the past, commentators have most often tended to approach the idea of 'context' in a textually localized way, in spite of the fact that attention has been drawn to the extensive network of cross-references and allusions that affects the interpretation of virtually every passage in Revelation. That is, context in Revelation consists of a system of references that progressively build up hermeneutical precedents in the text, precedents that precondition the meaning of each new passage in highly significant ways. It is thus only by placing passages and their elements correctly in the network of such precedents that they can be effectively interpreted", from *After the Thousand Years: Resurrection and Judgment in Revelation 20*, J. Webb Mealy, Sheffield: JSOT, Sheffield Academic Press, 1992; 13.

⁴¹ "It is not an accidental resemblance that what, from the point of view of being, is stated in the form "God became Man," should involve, from the point of view of human knowledge, the statement "Myth became Fact". The essential meaning of all things came down from the "heaven" of myth to the "earth" of history", C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory*, New York: Harper Collins, 2001; 129-30.

⁴² Joseph Ratzinger, *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life*, 2nd Edition, Trans. Michael Waldstein, revised by Aidan Nichols OP, Washington DC: Catholic University of America, 1988; 41-47. "The decisive point is surely that the New Testament writings leave open the nature of the difference between literary schema and reality in this connection. Even when seen from the side of the author, the literary expression is schematic. After all, it can hardly tell the story of the future as it might with something past. Schema and reality are differently related by different authors, but none of them makes the bald claim to an identity between the two" (op. cit. 41).

the ancient mythic pattern in the light of Christ's first Advent, Ascension and current spiritual rule on earth.⁴³

Regarding the mythological continuity, then, the author's narrative follows the standard storyline of ancient myth, which expects the start of the new god's reign after the victory in battle and the celebratory feast (see above). A similar pattern of reign following victory is encountered in the biblical book of Daniel (Dan 7,23-27), which may have influenced the author's narrative and was itself influenced by ancient Canaanite myth.⁴⁴ The 'cosmic week' myth, which sees the creation of the world in seven days as the paradigm for world history, with each day lasting a thousand years (after Ps 90,4) and the final day representing the Sabbath rest under the rule of the Messiah, may also have influenced the author's narrative presentation. Finally, and perhaps most influential of all, however, was the contemporary late-second-temple expectation for a warrior messiah who fights God's battles, gains victory over his enemies, then reigns in an era of peace that ends in the resurrection, judgment and new creation.⁴⁵ It is in the Book of Revelation that "the fullest implementation of the traditional messianic prophecies is found",⁴⁶ even though the "traditional Davidic messianism is qualified here, as it is in the roughly contemporary 4 *Ezra* 13. The warrior messiah comes from heaven. But he is a warrior messiah".⁴⁷ Here, then, the narrative, as it stands, expresses the

⁴³ The ancient mythic pattern, which foresees the ideal kingdom of this world, is also the prevailing expectation of the non-Christian Jews. Its non-fulfilment by Jesus Christ at his first coming was the main reason they did not accept him as their messiah. By re-presenting the pattern here, the author is saying that the Jewish hope for this kingdom is going to be fulfilled by Christ's second coming at the end of history, but in reality, there is no need to wait until then for his kingdom, because he has already established his heavenly kingdom on earth and people from every tribe and nation and race and language are taking part (see below).

⁴⁴ Cf. John Day, *God's conflict with the dragon and the sea: Echoes of a Canaanite myth in the Old Testament*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1985; 158-78; John J. Collins, *The Scepter and the Star: Messianism in the Light of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, 2nd Edition, Grand Rapids, MI/Cambridge UK: Eerdmans, 2010; 44-46.

⁴⁵ Cf. Collins, *The Scepter and the Star*, 77-78.

⁴⁶ Collins, *The Scepter and the Star*, 234-5.

⁴⁷ Collins, *The Scepter and the Star*, 235. It may be objected that the warrior role is totally contradictory to the preaching of Christ in the Gospels. However, numerous passages of the Gospels, and of the other writings in the NT, have prepared the faithful for a sudden, divine, dramatic and even violent judgment at the end of

popular messianic paradigm that formed the common core of Jewish messianism in late second-temple times, showing above all that the second coming of Jesus Christ will fulfil the traditional Jewish messianic expectation in the correct order and in every detail. That is on the mythological level.

However, on the end-time prophetic level, with close attention to text and context, the reality is slightly different: while the Messiah's appearance and victory is vivid and complete (Rev 19,11-21), his reign is very tersely described as the 'first resurrection' and its main participants are called 'priests of God and Christ'; they sit on thrones, in the presence of the souls of Christ's martyrs (20,4-6). The identity of those who are seen sitting on the many thrones is left frustratingly vague and there is no mention of the throne of the Messiah in a restored Jerusalem as the popular version of the tradition expects. Earlier in the text it is affirmed that the priests of God are the people whom Christ has redeemed, with his blood, from 'every tribe and tongue and race and nation' and they will reign on earth (5,9-10). What is clear is that, ever since Christ's first coming, these 'priests' have been present in increasing numbers on earth in the community that is called the 'Church'. It is the first indication among many that the millennial kingdom of Christ is actually a current and historical reality. At the time of writing, the author refers to these priests as a 'kingdom, priests to Christ's God and Father' (1,6) and then presents himself to his hearers as "a companion in the hardship and kingdom and endurance in Jesus (1,9). Described as "the highest of the kings of the earth" (1,5), Christ is clearly the ruler of a kingdom that has already begun.

Another important indication that the kingdom has already begun is the list of events that will occur together at the end-time, after the sounding of the seventh trumpet (11,15-19; cf. 10,7), in which there is no suggestion of a thousand-year interval between the arrival of God's anger (11,18a; ch.16) and the judgment of the dead (11,18a; 20,11-15). Another is the declaration that the bowl plagues bring God's anger to an end (15,1). Another is the thematic continuity between the wedding announcement, saying the time has come and the

history (E.g., Mt 21,33-46; 22,1-14; 24,45-51; 25,14-46; Lk 19,11-27, Rom 12,19; 2Thess 1,5-10; 2,8; Jude 1,5-16) and the return of Christ as warrior-king in this passage is one aspect of that same final judgment.

bride is ready (19,7-9), the entry of the bridegroom and warrior king (19,11-21) and the entry of the bride after the battles have been won (21,22), without any indication of a delay of a thousand years in between (20,1-15). In addition, many features of the 'first resurrection', especially the presence of the souls of saints and martyrs in heaven after their death, are already evident in the liturgical background to the end-time prophecy (Rev 4-5; 7,9-17).⁴⁸ Finally, the identification of the liturgical activities in heaven as a representation of a Day of Atonement confirm, on the grounds that a thousand years on earth are like a day in heaven (Ps 90,4; 2Pet 3,8), that the thousand-year reign of Christ on earth runs concurrently with the liturgy for atonement in heaven and both are in progress now.⁴⁹

Taking all this into consideration, there can be little doubt that the millennial rule of Christ refers to the current, historical condition of the Church, in this 'era of salvation'.⁵⁰ This chimes with the true character of Christ's reign, which is a product of faith in Christ and is remarkable, not for its ostentation or worldly splendour, but for its humility, service and self-sacrifice (Mk 10,42-45; Lk 22-25-30; cf. also Mk 10,14-15; Mt 18,3-5). Its historical presence in this age is easily obscured by the persistence of evil in the world (Jn 18,36). For those who do not believe that Christ is already reigning through the obedience and service of his people in the Church, the thousand-year reign will indeed be projected into the future, as it is narrated in the Book of Revelation. But with the destruction of evil at 'the war of the great day of God the Almighty' (Rev 16,14), this reign will become apparent

⁴⁸ The heavenly post-mortem state ('afterlife') is the main feature of the 'first resurrection', which is the term that characterizes Christ's millennial reign (20,5-6). In the eschatology of the early Church, the converse has also been shown to hold, that when the heavenly post-mortem state was denied, in favour of a post-mortem abode for all in the underworld (Sheol/Hades), Christ's millennial reign was said to be delayed until after his second coming. As this was the consistent view of the millennialists, or chiliasts, in the early Church, the emphasis on the heavenly afterlife in the Book of Revelation shows it does not therefore represent the millennialist worldview; cf. *Regnum Caelorum: Patterns of Millennial Thought in Early Christianity*, by Charles Hill, 2nd Edition, Grand Rapids MI/ Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 2001.

⁴⁹ See Introduction above, and footnote 3.

⁵⁰ The thrones are the 'cathedrae' of bishops, the presence of the martyrs refers to the 'communion of saints' and the authority to rule and judge, given to the bishops, is explained in previous passages (e.g., Rev 2,17; 2,26-29; 3,21).

to those who were unable to see it before, as a 'day' that is already over, "For a thousand years in your sight (Lord) are as a day, a yesterday that is past..." (Ps 90,4).⁵¹

9. *The dragon, devil, or ancient serpent: in heaven and in the abyss?*

The final issue that seems to militate against the interpretation of Rev 12–22 as an end-time prophecy concerns the dragon, devil, or ancient serpent. According to the interpretation presented above, the millennial reign of Christ is an established historical reality, so the dragon has been imprisoned in the abyss for a long time already, and remains there (Rev 9,11; 20,1-3). But if the dragon is indeed, even now, imprisoned in the underworld of the abyss, it is incongruous for the dragon to appear in heaven, at the very start of the same prophecy (12,1-5). The dragon cannot be present in both these places at the same time.⁵² This is an objection that goes to the heart of the 'mystery of iniquity' and of Christian demonology. The short answer is that it is not the dragon itself that appears in heaven, but a 'sign' of the dragon that is seen by certain people (12,3). The most familiar 'sign' of the evil dragon is 'Sin' and the presence of this sign in heaven, in this opening vision, is explained by a passage reporting that Babylon's sins "have piled up to heaven" (18,5) and then calling for Babylon's immediate and eternal destruction (18,6-7).⁵³ Through her piles of sin, Babylon

⁵¹ Interpreted through the hermeneutic lens of Ps 90,4, the vision of the millennial reign of Christ with his saints is a retrospective vision, the vision of an era that is already ending, and consequently the battles before (Rev 19,11-21) and after (20,7-10) are two successive stages of the same war. The text concurs by alluding, in both stages of this final combat, to the same prophecy of war in Ezekiel 38–39. The entire passage (Rev 20,1-10) could be described as an expansion on 'the great day of God the Almighty'.

⁵² This point is indeed raised by Dave Matthewson in 'A Re-examination of the Millennium in Rev 20:1-6: Consummation and Recapitulation': "In my mind, it is still difficult to reconcile the binding of Satan in 20:1-3 so that he is no longer able to deceive (...) the nations with his activity in 12:9 as the one who deceives (...) the entire inhabited world" *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 44/2 [June 2001], 244.

⁵³ It may seem perverse to ask if there is any indication in the text about the nature of the sin that completes the huge pile, filling up the measure that calls out for Babylon's destruction, but there is a clue: "And one strong angel picked up a stone like a great millstone and threw it into the sea saying: Like this, with fury, Babylon the great city shall be thrown, and never again be found" (Rev 18,21). If it is no coincidence that this verse strongly evokes Christ's warning for those who cause offense to little children (Mk 9,42 et par.), then the sin that calls for destruction is

is able to raise the sign of the devil to heaven, despite the devil's imprisonment in the abyss.

This iniquitous achievement is facilitated by two important associations. The first is the clandestine liaison between Babylon and the sea-beast immersed in the waters of the abyss, submerged under the surface of the sea, before he reveals himself fully (11,7; 13,1; 17,8). Decoding this image further, the interpreting angel tells us that the waters upon which Babylon sits (17,1), and in which the sea-beast is immersed (17,3), "are races and crowds and nations and tongues" (17,15), an expression which the author uses, in parallel with the 'inhabitants of the earth', to refer to the unredeemed people of the world (5,9; 7,9; 13,7.8.12.14; 17,2.8). The waters, which are synonymous with the sea and abyss, therefore represent unredeemed humanity living on earth—people who have not, for one reason or another, opened themselves to God's offer of redemption in Christ.⁵⁴

The second important association links the sea-beast, which is the leader of this unredeemed mass of people, and the dragon. Not only does the sea-beast inherit the dragon's power, kingdom and great authority (13,2), as well as a similar form and colour (12,3; 13,1), but it is submerged in the abyss, where the dragon is said to be imprisoned (20,1-3). From these observations, and from the beast's diabolical attempt to take the place of God in the lives of his subjects (Rev 13), it can be inferred that the sea-beast is nothing less than the historical embodiment of the dragon. In other words, the beast is that unit of the abyss, or unredeemed multitude of people, in which the dragon is presently confined.⁵⁵ The dragon is locked up and chained

indeed the child sex abuse scandal that has rocked the Roman Catholic Church during the last 20-30 years.

⁵⁴ That the abyss, sea, or waters, refer to the multitude of unredeemed people on earth is strongly reminiscent of St. Augustine, for whom the abyss symbolizes "the innumerable multitude of the impious, in whose hearts there is a great depth of malignity against the Church of God" *City of God*, London: Penguin Classics, 2003; 20:7; "These are men who hate the Christians, and in the darks depths of their hearts the Devil is shut up every day, as in an abyss" (op. cit. 20:8).

⁵⁵ The incarceration of the devil in the abyss therefore refers to the removal of his purely spiritual status and his physical confinement within the unredeemed human population metaphorically called the 'abyss' or 'sea'. This severely restricts his level of operation to activities dependent on human agency—an interpretation that is entirely consistent with the fact that, in this state, he cannot "deceive the nations any more until the thousand years are finished" (Rev 20,3). This

within the sea-beast, and through the beast, Babylon is corrupted until her sins reach to heaven. In this way, through the sin of Babylon, the dragon continues to have an influence in heaven, in spite of his imprisonment in the abyss.⁵⁶

There are two important corollaries to this clarification of the network of evil associations. The first concerns the dependence of the dragon's imprisonment on the existence of the beast, and suggests that the condemnation of the beast (19,20) is the point at which the dragon is released from his imprisonment after the thousand years are finished (20,7).⁵⁷ After a short final outburst, the dragon is also condemned and the final judgment follows (20,7-10).

The second important corollary concerns the event with which the end-time prophecy opens (12,1-5)—the crucial event that sets in motion the series of actions prophesied for final period of seven years

restriction evidently does not imply that evil ceases to exist in the millennial age, but indicates, rather, that evil is restrained from perverting the truth of God embodied by Christ and his Gospel. This facilitates the propagation of the Gospel and creates the necessary conditions for every living soul to choose freely whether to accept or reject it.

⁵⁶ Pre-Christian reflection on the origin of evil led to two rival 'theories': an external, supernatural origin brought about by a rebellion in heaven and the downfall of the rebel angels, and the internal, natural origin of evil traceable to an innate human inclination to sin. The first was fundamental for Enochic Judaism, while the second was the view adopted by the scribes, Pharisees and Rabbis of normative Judaism. In these visions in Revelation, the two views are brought together and shown to be two aspects of the same reality: the external evil that has been thrown out of heaven and is now chained in the abyss, and the internal evil that is due to human sin and corruption.

⁵⁷ This solves the problem encountered by St. Augustine about the precise ending of the 1,000 years: "On the other hand, it is a matter of some question whether during those last three years and six months, when the Devil is unloosed and will be raging with all his strength, anyone will join the faith who has not previously been of the faith" (*City of God*, 20:8). The interpretation presented here, that the devil is not released until the beast and false prophet are captured and sent to their eternal death (19,20), shows that St. Augustine's premise about the timing of the devil's unloosening is inaccurate, and that there is therefore no reason to worry about its consequences during the final 42-month period. The devil is not, in fact, liberated until after the second coming, when "The kingdom of the world has become our Lord's and his Christ's and he shall reign for ever and ever" (Rev 11,15). This means that precisely when the 1,000 year reign ends, with the unloosening of the devil (20,7), the eternal reign of God and his Christ has already begun, confirming the article of Christian faith that declares that the present reign of Christ will never end (Nicene Creed).

(Rev 12–22). This event is the vision of two opposing signs in heaven: one of a heavenly woman about to give birth and the other of the dragon, waiting to devour the baby as soon as it is born.⁵⁸ The baby is the Messiah (12,5; cf. Ps 2,9) which identifies his mother as the community called Zion by the Hebrew prophets.⁵⁹ Although there are many parallels with the birth narrative of Jesus in the Gospels, this birth report is certainly in a class of its own: firstly it starts with “a great sign was seen in heaven” (Rev 12,1), then there is the ‘heavenly birth’, and finally the male child is taken immediately up to the highest heaven, without setting foot on earth.⁶⁰

Although this sequence strongly evokes the historical birth and earthly mission of Jesus Christ, it actually describes a spiritual, or mystical, experience (ecstasy/rapture) in those who see the signs: the heavenly birth of Christ takes place from within their own soul, causing a spiritual identification with Zion, the woman giving birth.⁶¹ Like the woman in the vision, the souls transformed by this experience then make an ‘exodus’ to the desert refuge shown to them and stay there for 1,260 days (9,4; 12,6; 11,3), followed by a ‘time, two times and half a time’ (12,14; 11,2; 13,5-7; cf. Dan 7,23-25; 12,7).

Through their complete identification with Zion, the community formed by these people can also be called Zion. In fact, it is the name of Zion that links this community to the assembly of 144,000 virginal

⁵⁸ Only here (Rev 11,19; 12,1.3), when speaking about the signs in heaven, is the impersonal past passive (‘was seen’) of the verb ‘to see’ employed, contrasting with the use of the first person past indicative tense (‘I saw’) for the visions elsewhere described in the text. This raises questions not only about the meaning of the signs, but also about the meaning of the seeing of the signs: questions like “who else saw these signs?”, “when did they see them”, “what impact did this have on them?”, and “what happened after they saw them?”.

⁵⁹ A sign always represents something other than what it appears to be. As a sign, therefore, this woman does not represent a particular woman. Furthermore, she must be a community, and not an individual, because “the rest of her seed (are) those who keep the Commandments of God and have the Witness of Jesus” (Rev 12,17). She is Jesus’ mother Mary only in so far as Mary is emblematic of that community.

⁶⁰ For a thorough and original treatment of the uniquely unhistorical aspects of this ‘heavenly birth’, see Hermann Gunkel, *Creation and Chaos*, 115-127; summarized in ‘Towards the mystical interpretation of Revelation 12’, J. Ben-Daniel, *Revue Biblique*, Vol. 114-4 (2007), 597-599.

⁶¹ For a fuller treatment, see ‘Towards the mystical interpretation of Revelation 12’, J. Ben-Daniel, *Revue Biblique*, Vol. 114-4 (2007), 594-614.

males, seen later on Mount Zion (14,1-5), and reveals, through numerous other allusions in the text, that their vocation is followed attentively:⁶² after appearing on Mount Zion (14,1-5), they can be identified with 'the camp of the saints and the beloved city'(20,9), since Zion is also God's 'beloved city' (cf. Ps 78,68; 87,2); then, since Mount Zion is the 'great and high mountain'(cf. Ezek 40,2; Is 2,2-3; Mic 4,1-2), it is from this Mount that the author sees the New Jerusalem descending from heaven on to the earth, now transformed and renewed (Rev 21,10). Finally, since the 144,000 are those with the name of the Lamb and his Father written on their foreheads (14,1), this community are seen in the New Jerusalem itself, serving God and the Lamb, since "his name will be on their foreheads" (22,3-4). The desert refuge to which the woman made her 'exodus' in the opening vision (12,6.14), in terms that recall the exodus of the Israelites to Mount Sinai in the desert, turns out to be the great and high mountain from which the New Jerusalem can be seen as she materializes in the new creation, administered by the 144,000 servants of God and the Lamb.

Running throughout Rev 12–22, the golden connecting thread is the army of 144,000 celibate males who spiritually identify with Zion and whose divine vocation is the most exalted aspect of this end-time prophecy: they are the pivotal human agents, on earth, securing the fulfilment of the Church's mission at the end of days and their task is the physical establishment and maintenance of the New Jerusalem in the new, post-judgment, creation.⁶³ The text presents this community as a unique element of continuity between the dissolution of the first heaven and earth (20,11; 21,1) and the materialization of the new heaven and earth (21,2.10), confirming other hints (21,24.26; 22,2)

⁶² It should also be noted that the vision of the sealing of the 144,000 with the seal of the living God (7,1-8) shows how this group of Christ's followers had previously been chosen and prepared through another formative mystical experience.

⁶³ Since the 'exodus' of the 144,000 to a mountain in the desert represented the departure of Zion from historical Jerusalem, just before it was 'profaned' by the nations (11,2; see point 4 above), then the place where the New Jerusalem descends and takes shape is elsewhere. Also, the New Jerusalem is not to be confused geographically with historical Jerusalem, because "nothing profane will enter into her" (21,27).

that the new creation is not *ex nihilo*, but is renewed by the elimination of evil and the transforming presence of the Creator and Redeemer.⁶⁴

Summary

After clearing the way for an eschatological reading of the prophecy in Rev 12–22, it is fitting to summarize the findings so far with an outline of the narrative of this part of the text in everyday discursive language:

Beginning at chapter 12, this prophecy in the Book of Revelation can be summarized as follows: the final seven years of history begins when a preselected group of Christ's closest and most saintly male followers (7,1-8) mystically experience his spiritual birth from within their own souls and, as a result, identify themselves with Zion, the mother community of all the Christian faithful (12,1-5.17). They are taken out of their monasteries and occupations in the world and sheltered in a ready-prepared refuge on a mountain in the desert. The 'exodus' of this selected group continues for 1,260 days until the entire community have been assembled at this place (12,6), which is the new Mount Zion (14,1-5).⁶⁵ Meantime the two prophets, as witnesses of Christ, carry out their 1,260-day prophetic mission in Jerusalem (11,3-13) by announcing the prophecy contained in these chapters (Rev 12–22). This widely-publicized mission edifies the Christian faithful and prepares them for martyrdom, while also bringing about the apostasy and rejection of the uncommitted (11,1-2). The exodus of the chosen group of 144,000 males is accompanied by a judgment

⁶⁴ 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.

⁶⁵ Although the location of this mountain is not openly stated in the text, two points are clear: (a) it is not in the historical city of Jerusalem (see point 3 above); (b) it is a mountain in a desert that corresponds to the one through which God led the Israelites after their exodus from Egypt (Rev 12,6.14). Only two mountains are held to be 'holy' according to the Hebrew Scriptures: Mt. Zion, which is the place of the Sanctuary of God, and Mt. Sinai (Horeb), which is the place of the Revelation of God (de Vaux, *Ancient Israel*, 281). In the Book of Revelation, Mt. Zion is the mountain which integrates both these locations, since it is the site of the Revelation of the Sanctuary of God (11,19; 14,1-5; 15,1-8). The return of Mt. Zion to Mt Sinai would explain how, in days to come, Mt. Zion would be raised still higher (Is 2,2-3; Mic 4,1-2), and how both Ezekiel and John were taken to a very high mountain (Ezek 40,2; Rev 21,10) to see the Holy City being realized.

within the Church, represented by the expulsion of the forces of evil from the highest places (12,7-12). This rouses multitudes of unworthy people to follow the chosen army of 144,000 to its desert refuge, but they fail to dislodge it and meet their death in the desert (12,13-16). The evil spirit then turns against all the other faithful followers of Christ (12,17-18), by means of a one-world government headed by an authoritarian ruler. This ruler starts his brief but global reign by killing the two prophets and establishing his throne in Jerusalem, which is then defiled by the ungodly, so that it is no longer called the 'holy city' ('*Al Quds*'), but the 'great city'; no longer 'Zion', but 'Sodom and Egypt' (11,2.7-8). He rules over the entire world for 42 months, during which time his military and security forces are invincible (13,1-10). Promoted by a false prophet, the powerful ruler claims the messianic office and becomes the focus of an idolatrous personality cult at the rebuilt temple in Jerusalem. Only those people who show their loyalty to him by worshipping him and by receiving his mark on their bodies are allowed to participate in the economic life of the society. The rest are excluded or killed, causing a great tribulation in which countless Christian faithful are martyred (13,11-17; 7,9-17). While all this is going on in the centres of population, Christ's chosen army of 144,000 are being protected in their desert refuge for the entire duration (12,14;14,1-5). At the height of his power, the false-messianic ruler allies himself with several nations and performs God's will by totally and permanently destroying the historical centre of the Catholic Church in Rome (17,1-18), causing shock at the loss of treasures (18,9-24), but not for the loss of human life (18,4).⁶⁶ Towards the end of this tyrannical reign, the earth is struck by a series of severe environmental disasters, representing the righteous anger and wrathful judgments of God (15,5-16,21) and causing terrible suffering to those who are alive at this time. At the same time, preparations are set in motion for the gathering of armies from the East for the final battle against the alliance of ruling powers at Mount Carmel (Armageddon) in northern Israel (16,10-16; 17,14), and when Christ returns, the

⁶⁶ The lamentations for the fall of Babylon in Rev 18 are conspicuous for the lack of any mourning for loss of human life. It is implied, therefore, that just before her sudden destruction, all those inside Babylon obeyed the divine command to leave: "Come out of her my people..." (18,4). This confirms that those inside Babylon are all God's people.

armies destroy each other (19,11-21). Those who survive are inspired by the devil, now released from his millennial imprisonment, to regroup and cross the land of Israel in order to surround the camp of the 144,000 saints, and are destroyed there by divine fire (20,7-10). The general resurrection for the last judgment takes place and every evil and negative aspect of life is eradicated. All unrepentant sinners (21,8) and all whose names have been removed by Christ from his Scroll of Life⁶⁷ (3,5; 5,7; 13,8; 14,9-11; 17,8) will be eternally condemned (20,11-15). The rest are judged by their deeds and will receive their reward in the soon to be renewed and transformed creation. At a place within sight of the desert mountain camp of the 144,000 males, the New Jerusalem is established as a huge walled park (20,10–22,5); at its centre ‘God will dwell with mankind’ and there “will be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, nor pain will there be anymore, because the former things have passed away” (Rev 21,3-5).

Conclusions

What emerges from this examination of Rev 12–22 is the outline of a consistent and coherent description of the world and its terminal convulsions in the final seven year period of her history—the period leading up to the second coming, final judgment and renewal of creation. On a superficial level, this eschatological prophecy looks like a myth, creating an entire symbolical universe and employing profoundly mythological language, but on a deeper level it is packed with information relating to the final period of history, using terms and images that recall some very negative aspects of the ancient Roman Empire.

It is well known that the apocalypses employed mythological language and motifs, but this author can think of nothing before or after has prepared us for a work of such sustained ‘mythologization’. At first this mythical world seems impenetrable, but elucidation of the

⁶⁷ The Scroll of Life has a vital role at the final judgment: those whose names are inscribed in it will live eternally and the rest will be condemned to eternal perdition (Rev 20,12.15; 21,27). The act of final judgment therefore entails erasing names from this scroll, which the Lamb has authority to do (3,5). He can begin this process after he has received the scroll from God (5,7), broken all its seals and opened it (8,1).

narrative shows similarities with many other foundational myths in the ancient Middle-East. However, the mythological reading of this part of Revelation is only a partial and superficial reading, as it is based on the storyline alone and ignores important information given in the text itself.⁶⁸ Its specific purpose may be to respond, at a time of rising Jewish nationalism, to the expectation for an ideal messianic kingdom 'of this world', by indicating that this is fulfilled by the first and second comings of Christ.⁶⁹ More generally, it gives the narrative a timeless appeal and a pan-historical relevance. It has and does inspire the faithful of every century facing persecution and oppression. It gives the grand plan of Christian mission in its fullness, tracing its progress from the small beginnings (the birth of an infant), through victories and defeats, joys and sufferings, right up until 'mission accomplished' on a universal scale, in the new creation. That the new creation is the end and purpose of the mission of Christ and his followers is often lost from sight in the everyday of Christian life. The prophecy in this part of the Book of Revelation ensures the faithful are always reminded of the ultimate and universal purpose of the Christian mission and witness.

However, since the mythological reading of these chapters is not the whole story, but only a partial view, it would be mistaken to leave

⁶⁸ It ignores, in particular, the information provided at many points in the text by the interpreting angel, as this often gives the primary temporal or geographical meaning of the symbols in the narrative. In the same way, some interpreters evidently prefer to remain on the mythological level: Hans Urs von Balthazar, for example, rejects an important section of angelic interpretation (17,9-17) precisely because it gives a geographical interpretation of Babylon: "I versetti 17,9-17 non fanno parte del testo. Chi ha compilato questi versetti ha identificato la Babilonia con la città di Roma come potere mondano... Tutta l'interpretazione contingente di questa parte dell'Apocalisse contraddice la struttura portante del libro, che è atemporale e attiene alla storia universale, e questo viene ignorato, a grande danno della costante attualità del libro, da tutti coloro che, partendo da questi oscuri versetti, considerano tutta l'opera come un «libro di consolazione» scritto per i cristiani di allora nella persecuzione politica", *Il libro dell'Agnello: Sulla rivelazione di Giovanni*, a cura di Elio Guerriero, Milano: Jaca Book, 2016; 100-101.

⁶⁹ This not only suggests that the primary background of the Book of Revelation was the resurgence of Jewish messianic nationalism from 70-132 CE, which was drawing Christian Jews away from the Church and back to the Synagogue, but also indicates the Book's relevance for these days, with the revival of Jewish religious and national aspirations in the State of Israel; cf. chapter 4: 'The Historical Background to the Book of Revelation'.

it at that level. This Scripture is neither timeless myth, nor religious poetry,⁷⁰ as it is packed with temporal and geographical detail relating especially to the Middle East and to the final seven years of history. Despite the veneer of timelessness, chapters 12–22 are, in reality, anchored in an end-historical future, as yet unrealized, and are best described as an eschatological prophecy. At first this is not evident, and is somewhat hidden. Further readings are required to see the connections and identify the details. As a result, the process of understanding proceeds through familiarity and contemplation, rather than by textual exegesis and verbal analysis. To the trusting and patient reader, the significance of the text reveals itself little by little, as by a gradual ‘revelation’.⁷¹ The aim of the foregoing presentation is to clear away some of the main obstacles to a synchronic approach of this kind, by tackling some of the more important impediments.

It must be admitted that there are significant differences between the mythological and the prophetic levels of understanding, creating a space in which a variety of interpretations can flourish. Perhaps the most significant of these differences concerns the nature of Christ’s reign or kingdom.⁷² Precisely because it was established by his service and suffering, Christ’s reign has the same humble character as its founder, with the result that it is unobtrusive and unimpressive by worldly standards. It is therefore recognized principally by faith and, even though it grows continually throughout history, it is often

⁷⁰ E.g., Adela Yarbro Collins speaks for many scholars when she writes: “For the historically minded critical reader, the book of Revelation is not a cryptic summary of the history of the church or the world. It is not primarily a prediction of the timing of the end of the world. Rather it is a work of religious poetry, inspired by the prophets of Israel and by the cosmic and political myths of the author’s time”, from ‘The Book of Revelation’, ch. 11 in *Encyclopedia of Apocalypticism*, 412.

⁷¹ Interesting in this respect: “the peculiar idiom of apocalypses... is to thinly conceal what it purports to reveal so that the audience may themselves have the experience of decoding or deciphering the message” David E. Aune “The Apocalypse of John and the Problem of Genre”, *Semeia* 36 (1986) 89, quoted by Christopher R. Smith in his “The Structure of the Book of Revelation in Light of Apocalyptic Literary Conventions”, *Novum Testamentum*, XXXVI, 4(1994), 382.

⁷² Needless to say, this bears upon the character of his Messianic sovereignty and also the nature of the Redemption he brings; these three related aspects of Christ’s reign define the most fundamental difference between Christianity and Judaism, “the ‘quantum leap’ apparent in the Christian claim of a new Israel and, ultimately, a New Testament”, Jon D. Levenson, *Sinai and Zion: An Entry into the Jewish Bible*, New York: Harper Collins, 1985; 4.

obscured by evil and corruption. Its reality cannot therefore be confidently asserted until its future consummation, after the second coming of Christ and the defeat of evil. By alluding to Psalm 90, the text indicates that Christ's thousand-year reign will then be revealed as "a day, a yesterday that is past, a watch in the night" (Ps 90,4).

In conclusion, the mythological language of this part of the Book of Revelation (Rev 12–22) represents a complete 'mythologization' of the Christian history of Salvation, from the birth of the Redeemer to the fulfilment of the plan of God in the new creation. Such is the outward form. On a closer look, however, this text reveals an eschatological prophecy for the final seven years of history and beyond, which is replete with temporal and geographical detail that has not yet been fulfilled. The events of this final period of history 'recapitulate', and bring to a conclusion, the entire history of Salvation expressed in these chapters as a mythologized prophecy, or rather, in its own words, as a divine mystery—"the mystery of God as he announced to his servants the prophets" (Rev 10.7).