

A Catholic Approach to the Apocalypse of St. John, in light of the Synod on the Word of God (Rome, 2008)

Introduction

The Catholic approach to the interpretation of Scripture is guided by the following statement in the Catholic Catechism: “«*The Christian economy, therefore, since it is the new and definitive Covenant, will never pass away; and no new public revelation is to be expected before the glorious manifestation of our Lord Jesus Christ*» (DV 4; cf. 1 Tim 6:14; Titus 2:13). Yet even if Revelation is already complete, it has not been made completely explicit; it remains for Christian faith gradually to grasp its full significance over the course of the centuries”.¹

There is no other book of the Bible to which this statement is more applicable than the final book, which some call ‘The Apocalypse’ and others ‘The Book of Revelation’. Over the last nineteen centuries, Christ’s followers have had widely divergent views about its ‘full significance’.

However, over the last century, something of a consensus has emerged in the academic study of the Apocalypse, in the form of the ‘Contemporary Historical’, or ‘Preterist’, interpretation. Today, this is the view held by most modern biblical scholars of all denominations. It is the interpretation taught in most Catholic theological faculties and seminaries, and it is the one that appears in most of the commentaries, including those of the Jerusalem Bible, the New American Bible and the Latin-American Bible. The Catholic Catechism also seems to favour this interpretation.² Coinciding with the widespread use of the historical-critical method,³ the ‘Preterist’ interpretation has been leading the field since the beginning of the 20th century.

Very briefly, the ‘Preterist’ interpretation is the fruit of applying the historical-critical method to the entire text of the Apocalypse. As with that method, it starts from the restrictive assumption that the author is primarily addressing the church of his own times.⁴ Under this assumption, it is claimed that the main part of the text refers to the persecution of the Early Church under the Roman Empire: the ‘Beast from the Sea’ (Rev 13,1) is said to represent a particular Roman Emperor, although there is no agreement about which one, and ‘Babylon’ (Rev 17–18) is supposed to be his ancient imperial capital at Rome. This interpretation buries the literal sense of the Apocalypse in the distant past, though there is still some debate about whether its prophetic visions have all been fulfilled (the extreme Preterist view), or whether one or two remain to be fulfilled in the future (the moderate Preterist view).

At this point two general objections can be raised against all versions of the Preterist view. The first objection arises from the history of interpretation and textual reception of the Apocalypse. If this book were so important for the Early Church, it is curious that there is no mention of it in any surviving documents, until at least 60 years after it was written.⁵ The Church Fathers who then

¹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC)*, London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1994, paragraph 66, p.22. Catholic interpretation differs from that of the Protestants precisely because there are Magisterial guidelines to follow. Concerning the Apocalypse, the guidelines tend to reduce the range and variety of hermeneutical activity, in contrast to that of the Protestant denominations and secular academics. For these, I offer a more text-based approach in ‘Interpreting the Book of Revelation: The Textual Basis for a Single Approach’, at

www.academia.edu/98235579/Interpreting_the_Book_of_Revelation_The_Textual_Basis_for_a_Single_Approach .

² In CCC 2642 and 2113 the ‘great tribulation’ is mentioned as a past event, in line with the Preterist interpretation, and in CCC 675, where the Catechism speaks of “the final trial that will shake the faith of many believers” the Apocalypse is not even given as a reference.

³ A method which focuses on the study of the literary characteristics of the text as well as its historical context.

⁴ Influenced, no doubt, by the frequent textual references to the imminence of Christ’s Second Coming (Rev 1,7; 3,11; 22,7.12.20), and “the time is near” (1,3; 22,10), as well as the events that “must happen soon” (1,1; 22,6).

⁵ R.H. Charles “Unhappily no work survives giving us the view of the earliest readers of the Apocalypse. Quite sixty years pass before we find any references to it, and over a hundred before any writer deals at length with its expectations.” *Studies in the Apocalypse*, 2nd Edition, Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark (1915) 7-8.

referred to the Apocalypse in their writings (e.g., Justin Martyr, St. Irenæus, St. Hippolytus and Tertullian) saw it as a prophecy of the concluding period of history, and not as a book that was addressed primarily to the Church of their times.

From the writings of other Church Fathers, however, it is clear that the Apocalypse was received mainly with incredulity and incomprehension. For example, in the third century (c. 250 AD), St. Dionysius, the Bishop of Alexandria, wrote: “Some before us have set aside and rejected the book altogether, criticizing it chapter by chapter, and pronouncing it without sense or argument, and maintaining that the title is fraudulent. For they say that it is not the work of John, nor is it a revelation, because it is covered thickly and densely by a veil of obscurity”.⁶ Being careful not to reject the Apocalypse, Dionysius included himself among those who did not understand it. He wrote: “And I do not reject what I cannot comprehend, but rather wonder because I do not understand it”.⁷

He was joined a century later by one of the greatest biblical scholars of the Early Church, St. Jerome, who wrote: “The Apocalypse of John has as many mysteries as words. In saying this I have said less than the book deserves. All praise of it is inadequate; manifold meanings lie hidden in its every word”.⁸

So, the writings of the Fathers and scholars of the first few centuries certainly do not support the assumption that the message of the Apocalypse was primarily addressed to the Early Church. This conclusion is confirmed by the fact that the Apocalypse was not as quickly or widely received as one would expect, if it had been understood to refer to the contemporary situation. In the early fourth century, Eusebius lists it as one of the texts whose inclusion into the New Testament canon was disputed and opposed, even by himself.⁹ In fact, the text was not accepted into the canon of the Eastern Churches until at least the seventh century AD. Although it was accepted much earlier into the canon of the Western Church, its inclusion also met substantial opposition.¹⁰ About a hundred years ago, a distinguished Cambridge scholar by the name of Henry Swete concluded that “no book in the New Testament with so good a record was so long in gaining general acceptance”.¹¹

Far from supporting the ‘Preterist’ view, the early history of interpretation and text reception shows that, except for the few who saw it as a prophecy for the eschatological future, the Apocalypse was a profound enigma for the Early Church. With the probable exception of the first three chapters and their messages for the seven local churches in Asia, the Early Church did not appear to understand St. John’s visions to refer to her contemporary situation.

The second objection to the Preterist interpretation is related to the first: it simply does not match the text. If we compare the persecution of the Christians in the first few centuries, with the visions of the Apocalypse which are said to represent it, we do not find a convincing correspondence.

⁶ As reported by Eusebius, Bishop of Caesaria, in his *Historia Ecclesiastica*, VII, 25.

⁷ Eusebius quotes the following revealing admission from a lost work of Dionysius, Bishop of Alexandria: “But I could not venture to reject the book, as many brethren hold it in high esteem. But I suppose that it is beyond my comprehension, and that there is a certain concealed and more wonderful meaning in every part. For if I do not understand I suspect that a deeper sense lies beneath the words. I do not measure and judge them by my own reason, but leaving the more to faith I regard them as too high for me to grasp. And I do not reject what I cannot comprehend, but rather wonder because I do not understand it” *Historia Ecclesiastica*, VII, 25.

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

⁹ *Historia Ecclesiastica* III, 25, 3-5.

¹⁰ The main opponents were Marcion, the Alogoi and Gaius, a Roman Priest, cf. Henry Barclay Swete, *The Apocalypse of St. John: The Greek Text with Introduction Notes and Indices*, London: Macmillan and Co, 1906, cvi – cix.

¹¹ H.B. Swete, *Apocalypse*, cxiii. He goes on to add: “The key to the interpretation disappeared with the generation to which the book was addressed, perhaps even with the relief which the Asian Churches experienced upon the death of Domitian, and apart from any clue to its immediate reference, it was little else but a maze of inexplicable mysteries” (op. cit. cxiv). From the total lack of documentary evidence from the time, it is doubtful that even the generation to which the book was addressed possessed the key to its interpretation.

For example, a persecution as severe and widespread as the one described in the Apocalypse (Rev 7,9-17; 13,5-17; 15,2-4) never took place in the history of the Early Church. The persecutors never performed miracles in order to induce the people to worship an image of the emperor, nor did they ever try to control them by giving them a mark, without which they could not buy or sell (13,11-17). Never did a Roman emperor destroy his imperial city in the definitive way the beast and his allies destroy the city called 'Babylon' (17,15-18,24), which most scholars identify with imperial Rome. There has never been environmental damage on the scale described after the blowing of the first four trumpets (ch. 8), nor has there ever been a ministry of two prophets like the one described between the blowing of the sixth and seventh trumpets (11,3-13).

Furthermore, the Final Judgment has evidently not yet occurred, since its main result is the removal of all evil, sin and suffering, in order to make way for the fulfilment of eternal salvation (Rev 21-22). No one can seriously argue that evil and suffering have been eradicated from the world or that creation has yet reached this state of eternal perfection.¹²

It should also be noticed that the only part of the Apocalypse that is explicitly concerned with the situation at the time it was written (i.e. Rev 2-3) hardly mentions the problem of persecution: in the messages to the churches only one persecution is predicted, of brief duration and limited to a few people (2,10), and there is only one passing reference to a martyr (2,13). Only a small part of these messages is found to be encouragement for those already being persecuted; the greater part is preoccupied with the very opposite trend: a prevailing tendency to avoid persecution through compromise with pagan society.

In summary, the 'Preterist' interpretation attributes to the text a meaning which it did not have at the time of its composition, but was the product of a later method of interpretation. The name for this kind of manipulation is *eisegesis*, or 'accommodation'. It is the result of projecting on to the main part of the text a meaning that is foreign to it, in this case the history of the Early Church in the Roman Period.

Theological interpretation

It is therefore significant that the Synod on the Word of God, held in Rome in October 2008, has reminded us of the limitations of the historical-critical method, on which the Preterist interpretation is based. Both Pope Benedict XVI and the Synod Bishops emphasized these limitations, saying they leave the interpretation of Scripture in the past and cannot lead us to the full significance of the text.¹³ It should be considered as a partial and preliminary stage of the interpretive endeavour. These limitations were already clearly stated in 1993, when the Pontifical Biblical Commission affirmed that the historical-critical method: "*restricts itself to a search for the meaning of a biblical text within the historical circumstances that gave rise to it and is not concerned with other possibilities of meaning which have been revealed at later stages of the biblical revelation and history of the Church*".¹⁴ Since the Apocalypse embraces such a vast horizon—nothing less than the complete fulfilment of the entire plan of God at the end of history (cf. Rev 10,7)—it is not surprising that the historical-critical method is too limited to be used in the interpretation of this book. Because of these

¹² Perhaps the most compelling indication that we have not yet reached this state of perfection is the presence of suffering, mourning and pain in the world, for all these will be absent in the Holy City after the consummation and renewal of the creation (cf. Rev 21,3-4). It is interesting, in this light, to examine the self-description of the city called Babylon as a woman who claims royalty and denies suffering (18,7). She appears to think that she is the Holy City, in which there will be no more suffering. This gives rise to the term "Babylonian Theology" for those habits of thought that deny the reality of a future and Final Judgment by claiming that the consummation has already arrived.

¹³ Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Verbum Domini*, Pope Benedict XVI, Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2010; paragraph 35.

¹⁴ *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, Vatican City, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1993, I, A, 4, 40. And again: "Historical-critical exegesis has too often tended to limit the meaning of text by tying it too rigidly to precise historical circumstances" op. cit. II, B, 1, 80.

limits, we cannot, and should not, expect the ‘Preterist’ interpretation to give us full significance of the Apocalypse.

So where do we go from here? The Synod invites us to take the ‘positive fruit’ of the historical-critical method and then move on to study the ‘theological’ dimension of the text ‘in an adequate manner’: “*Only where the two methodological levels are observed, the historical-critical and the theological, can one speak of a theological exegesis, an exegesis adequate to this book*”.¹⁵ For what constitutes the study of ‘the theological dimension of the text in an adequate manner’, the Synod invokes paragraph 12 of the conciliar document ‘*Dei Verbum*’, in which three criteria are identified for this purpose: 1) attention to the content and unity of the whole Scripture, 2) attention to the living tradition of the whole Church, 3) attention to the analogy of faith.¹⁶ The Catholic Catechism then emphasizes the first of these: “*Be especially attentive ‘to the content and unity of the whole Scripture’. Different as the books which compose it may be, Scripture is a unity by reason of the unity of God’s plan, of which Christ is the center and heart, open since his Passover*”.¹⁷

Further clarification can be found in the section of the Catechism dealing with ‘the unity of the Old and New Testaments’.¹⁸ Here we are reminded that the traditional, apostolic way of demonstrating the unity of the divine plan in the two Testaments is through typology, which starts from the premise that Christ, through his New Covenant, brings about the fulfillment of God’s promises of salvation under the Old Covenant. The fundamental relationship between the two Testaments is therefore one of fulfillment, and their unity is best demonstrated by showing how OT ‘types’ and promises are fulfilled in the NT.¹⁹

We can therefore be guided by ‘typology’ when interpreting the Apocalypse ‘theologically’, in accordance with the Spirit who inspired it. What we understand by this is that if our interpretation of this NT text shows the fulfillment of an OT ‘type’ or promise, then we can be reasonably sure that we have a correct ‘theological’ interpretation. Taking this argument one step further: if our interpretation of the whole text shows Christ fulfilling God’s entire plan of salvation, as in fact it does, then we can be certain that we have arrived at the divine significance of the text. We will return to this point after proposing our new approach.

Temple-liturgical imagery

The most striking aspect of the Apocalypse is its imagery. This is because the book is largely composed of visions granted to the author, whose main task was to put them into words. So, the images are not a secondary feature of the text, but are its core material. Furthermore, almost all the images of the Apocalypse evoke corresponding images in the Old Testament. It is in the images of the Apocalypse that we perceive its profound relationship with the OT—a relationship that is based not so much on quotations or verbal references, as in other parts of the NT, but on this common stock of imagery. Rather than a ‘re-reading’, the Apocalypse is a “re-visioning” of the OT in the light of the Jesus Christ’s coming.

¹⁵ Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Verbum Domini*, para. 34.

¹⁶ Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Verbum Domini*, para. 34: “‘*Dei Verbum*’ identifies and presents the three decisive references to arrive at the divine dimension and therefore, to the theological meaning of the Sacred Scriptures. It is a question of the content and the unity of the whole of Scripture, of the living tradition of the whole Church and, finally, of attention to the analogy of faith”.

¹⁷ Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC)*, London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1994, paragraph 112.

¹⁸ CCC 128-130.

¹⁹ The New Testament has to be read in the light of the Old, because, as St Augustine put it: ‘the New Testament lies hidden in the Old and the Old becomes clear in the New’ (*Quaest. in Hept.*, 2,73; quoted in *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, Rome: Vatican Press, 1993, 103; and in CCC 129).

Arguably the most prominent and ubiquitous feature of this imagery is its temple and liturgical aspect.²⁰ A quick glance at the text reveals highly developed temple and liturgical imagery.²¹ Hebrew cultic practice is reflected not only by the figure of the slain Lamb (Rev 5,6), but also by many features of its heavenly surroundings. In many passages of the Apocalypse, this heavenly setting is explicitly called God's Sanctuary (ναός: 3,12; 7,15; 11,1.2.19; 14,15.17; 15,5.6.8; 16,1.17) or dwelling (σκηνή: 13,6). It contains many of the liturgical objects and furnishings that characterized the ancient Temple cult: for example, the lampstands (1,12.13.20; 2,1.5; 11,4), the altar of incense (6,9; 8,3.5; 9,13; 14,18; 16,7), the altar (11,1), the Ark of the Covenant (11,19), as well as harps (5,8; 14,2; 15,2), trumpets (8,2) and libation bowls (15,7; 16,1).

At the same time, words and actions described in these passages clearly represent liturgical activities resembling those performed in the former Temple at Jerusalem: the opening of a scroll (Rev 6 and 8:1), the offering of incense (8,3-4), blowing of trumpets (chaps. 8-11), pouring of libations (chaps. 15-16), divine worship (4,8-11; 5,12-14; 7,10-12; 12,10-12; 16,5-7), thanksgiving (11,15-18; 19,1-8) and singing of hymns of praise (5,9-10; 15,3-4).

It has long been recognized that parts of the Letter to the Hebrews (Heb 10,19-20; 12,22-23) and the Apocalypse (especially chaps. 4-5; 7; 14-15; 19) describe a heavenly liturgy, in which the faithful on earth participate along with the heavenly assemblies.²² This liturgical dimension of the Apocalypse has also been acknowledged and studied by modern scholarship.²³ What, perhaps, has not been grasped sufficiently is the degree to which it is combined with temple imagery and corresponds to specific liturgical activities in the former Temple at Jerusalem.

This should not surprise us at all, since the heavenly Sanctuary that was revealed to the author of the Apocalypse is the same as the one that was revealed to Moses, as a plan for the tabernacle that he was asked to construct (Exod 25,8-9.40; 26,30; 27,8). There is, therefore, a true typological correspondence between the heavenly Sanctuary described in the Apocalypse, the tabernacle built by Moses, and the former Temple in Jerusalem that was modeled on this.²⁴ This correspondence

²⁰ In John and Gloria Ben-Daniel, *Saint John and the Book of Revelation: From Essenes to End-Times* (Jerusalem: Beit Yochanan, 2019; 206-254), we show how the liturgical and temple imagery unites, dominates and organizes all the various parts of the text, i.e., it is the organizing principle. This chapter is also accessible at: www.academia.edu/44968014/ch_6_Imagery_in_the_Book_of_Revelation_and_its_Dominant_Theme.

²¹ The subject of the heavenly Temple also became a prominent feature in the apocalyptic tradition. In all the following non-canonical writings the author ascends to heaven and proceeds to give a description of the Temple there: the Book of Watchers (*1 Enoch* chs. 1-36), the Testament of Levi, 2 Enoch, the Similitudes of Enoch (*1 Enoch* chs. 37-71), the Apocalypse of Zephaniah, the Apocalypse of Abraham, the Ascension of Isaiah and 3 Baruch (see Martha Himmelfarb, *Ascent to Heaven in Jewish and Christian Apocalypses*, New York and Oxford: OUP, 1993).

²² This tradition is reflected, for example, in CCC 1137-39.

²³ "L'Apocalisse ha una sua dimensione liturgica. È questo, un fatto che l'esegesi e la teologia biblica dell'Apocalisse possono considerare acquisito, specialmente dopo gli studi che si sono susseguiti sull'argomento in questi ultimi anni", Ugo Vanni, *L'Apocalisse: Ermeneutica, Esegese, Teologia*, Bologna: Centro Editoriale Dehoniane, 1988; 101 (the relevant bibliography is given in the footnote to this passage). Useful summaries of this research are to be found in H. Ulfgard, *Feast and Future: Revelation 7:9-17 and the Feast of Tabernacles*, Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell, 1989; 21-27, and R. Nusca, 'Liturgia e Apocalisse' in *Apokalypsis* in onore di Ugo Vanni, eds. E. Bosetti and A. Colacrai, Assisi: Citadella Editrice, 2005; 459-72. Also Robert Briggs, *Jewish Temple Imagery in the Book of Revelation*, New York: Peter Lang, 1999; Andrea Spatafora, *From the Temple of God to the God of the Temple*, Rome: PUG, 1997; J.-P. Ruiz, *Ezekiel in the Apocalypse: The Transformation of Prophetic Language in Revelation 16,17-19,10*, Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1989; 84-89; Jon Paulien, 'The Role of the Hebrew Cultus, Sanctuary and Temple in the Plot and Structure of the Book of Revelation', *Andrews University Seminary Studies*, vol. 33, no. 2 [1995] 245-261 (see bibliography on p.247); Simon J. Kistemaker, 'The Temple in the Apocalypse', *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society (JETS)*, 43 (2000), 433-41.

²⁴ Yves M-J Congar expresses it thus: "If John thus sees the heavenly temple in the shape of the Temple of Jerusalem, it is not so much because he imagines the sanctuary on the model of the sanctuary he had seen on earth at Jerusalem, it is principally because the latter, as the successor of the Mosaic tabernacle, had been constructed according to the heavenly prototype shown to Moses on the mountain" (*The Mystery of the Temple*, London: Burns and Oates, 1962; 209). Although it is unlikely that the Exodus passages (Exod 25,8-9.40; 26,30; 27,8) originally meant that the plan shown to Moses involved a vision of the heavenly sanctuary, this is certainly how they were re-interpreted later in the post-exilic period. Through this process of re-interpretation, these and certain other passages (Ezek 43,10-11; 1Chron 28,11-20) lie

undergirds the comparison of the temple-liturgical imagery in the Apocalypse with descriptions of the divine cult in the OT, and in the Jewish oral tradition recorded in the *Mishnah*, and helps determine its precise significance.

The Apocalypse in the Light of the Temple

So, owing to the ‘typological’ correspondence between the heavenly Temple revealed to John and the former Temples in Jerusalem, the basic features and theological significance of the temple-liturgical imagery in the Apocalypse can be clarified by comparing it with references to the divine cult in the Old Testament (e.g., Lev 16; Sir 50,5-21), and also in the tractates *Tamid* and *Yoma* of the *Mishnah*. Since the comparison is based on typology, it follows that we should not expect to find a simple identity between the liturgical forms or ‘types’ on earth, as described in the *Mishnah* tractates, and their original antitypes, or archetypes, in heaven, as described in the Apocalypse, but rather a resemblance that takes into account the coming of the Messiah and the differences between the earthly and heavenly settings. This analogy, or correspondence, between earthly type (in the *Mishnah* tractates) and the heavenly archetype (in the Apocalypse) therefore exhibits similarities and differences, both of which are important in elucidating and interpreting the basic features and theological significance of the heavenly liturgy in the Book of Revelation.²⁵

In the context of exploring and interpreting these similarities and differences, the historical veracity, or ‘historicity’, of the accounts of Second Temple liturgy in the Mishnaic tractates, *Tamid* and *Yoma*, is important in a general way, but minute procedural details are not. The purpose of the comparison is certainly not to prove the historical accuracy of the liturgy represented in the Apocalypse, but rather to establish the essential liturgical features and their significance. For these purposes, the detail presented in the tractates *Tamid* and *Yoma* is more than sufficient, and the rabbinical and scholarly consensus over their historical reliability is more than satisfactory.²⁶

The results of the comparison between the heavenly liturgy described in the Apocalypse and the liturgical activities described in the Mishnaic tractates *Tamid* and *Yoma* can be summarized as follows:²⁷

1. The opening vision of the ‘one like a Son of Man’ among seven golden lampstands and the subsequent messages to the churches (Rev 1,10-20; Rev 2–3) represent the priest as he trimmed and refueled the seven-branched lampstand, the menorah, inside the Sanctuary at the start of the morning service in the ancient Temple (*m. Tamid* 3:6,9). The high status of this figure indicates he represents

at the origin of the numerous apocalyptic temple visions (cf. R.H. Charles, *Studies in the Apocalypse*, Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1913; 166-67; G. Buchanan Gray, *Sacrifice in the Old Testament: Its Theory in Practice*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1925; 54-57).

²⁵ It should be noted that this correspondence is not an example of “intertextuality”, or any of its literary correlates, as it does not appear to be based on any text. Although a few Old Testament texts are echoed in various aspects of the temple-liturgical imagery of the Apocalypse, this imagery goes well beyond anything found in Scripture. It may indeed be influenced by the author’s personal experience of the Second Temple and its sacrificial ritual. This is an unusual situation for interpreters, for even though the typology concerns the Temple, a very biblical institution, there is no satisfactory parallel text in the Bible to explain it. The accounts in the tractates *Yoma* and *Tamid* of the *Mishnah* fulfil this role, since they deal at length with the same subject, Second Temple liturgy, despite having no literary connection with the Apocalypse, as they were not published until a century later. Nevertheless, due to the typological relationship explained above, the comparison between the Second Temple liturgy described in the *Mishnah* and the liturgy in the Apocalypse is informative, and even decisive.

²⁶ For those who are interested, the historicity of these tractates is discussed in our article ‘Historicity of the Mishnaic Tractates *Tamid* and *Yoma*’, at

www.newtorah.org/pdf/Historicity%20of%20the%20Mishnaic%20Tractates%20Tamid%20and%20Yoma.pdf .

²⁷ Those who wish to consider this comparison in detail are invited to refer to our study *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. For a shorter presentation, see “Sacrificial Symbolism of the Lamb” online at:

www.academia.edu/81323603/The_Sacrificial_Symbolism_of_the_Lamb_in_the_Book_of_Revelation .

the high priest and his attire of ordinary linen (cf. Rev 15,6) suggests he is performing this function on the Day of Atonement (*m.Yoma* 1:2; 3:1-7; cf. Lev 16,4).

2. The slain Lamb that appears to the author after entering the open door in heaven (Rev 4,1; 5,6), corresponds to the lamb slain as the continual whole offering, called the *Tamid* sacrifice, at the start of the morning service in the Temple (*m.Tamid* 3:1-5,7; 4:1).²⁸ His appearance before the throne of God in heaven (Rev chs 4–5) corresponds to the entrance of the high priest into the most sacred part of the Sanctuary on the annual Day of Atonement, with the blood of the sacrifices, in order to perform expiation for the Sanctuary (*m.Yoma* 4:2-3; 5:3-6; cf. Lev 16,1-19). In the Apocalypse, the expiation of the heavenly Sanctuary appears to be represented by the defeat of Satan and his angels, and by their expulsion from heaven, in such a way that “*there was no longer a place for them in heaven*” (Rev 12,7-12). The Lamb’s reception of the Scroll of Life (5,7-14) evokes the giving of the Torah Scroll to the high priest after the completion of the rite of expiation for the people, at the end of the annual Day of Atonement in the Second Temple (*m.Yoma* 7:1-2).

3. Evoking the blessings and curses of the Torah (Lev 26; Deut 28), the opening of the first four seals of the Scroll and the missions of the first four horsemen (Rev 6,1-8) represent the part of the early morning service reserved for reciting the Ten Commandments, other parts of the Torah scroll and various blessings (*m.Tamid* 5:1; cf. Targums Neofiti and Pseudo-Jonathan to Exodus 20²⁹).

4. The souls of the martyrs who appear under the altar in heaven (Rev 6,9-11) correspond to the members of the continual whole offering, after being transferred to the base of the outer altar in the former Temple (*m.Tamid* 4:2-3).

5. The sealing of the 144,000 men (Rev 7,1-8) with the name of God and the Lamb (14,1) corresponds to the pronouncement of the priestly blessing, which causes the placing of God’s name on the people of Israel (*m.Tamid* 7:2; cf. Num 6,24-27).³⁰

6. The offering of a great quantity of incense with the prayers of the saints on the golden altar in heaven (Rev 8,3-4) recalls the same action in the morning service of the former Temple (*m.Tamid* 6:1-3), which was also considered as a time of prayer for all the community (cf. Ps 141,1-2; Jdt 9,1; Lk 1,10). Only on the Day of Atonement was a ‘great’ quantity of incense offered (*m.Yoma* 4:4, cf. Lev 16,12-13).

7. The angel who throws fire on to the earth from the altar in heaven (Rev 8,5) evokes the act of throwing the members of the whole offering on to the fire that was always kept alight on the outer altar (*m.Tamid* 7:3).

8. The sounding of the seven trumpets (Rev 8–11), the harvest, threshing and ingathering of the grain (7,9-17; 14,14-16; 15,2) and the outpouring of the bowls (Rev 15–16), together with the singing of the celestial choirs described in the Apocalypse (7,9-17; 14,2-3; 15,3-4; 19,1-8), are analogous to the

²⁸ According to the Law, the blood of a whole offering did indeed have expiatory properties (Lev 1,4; 16,24; in combination with other sacrifices: Lev 9,7; 14,20; cf. Job 1,5; 42,8) and in Jubilees the expiatory effect of the *Tamid* sacrifice is described twice as a continual means of atonement for the Israelites (*Jub* 6:13-14; 50:11).

²⁹ The link between the 10 commandments and the judgment plagues of the last 3 horsemen is made explicit in the targumic expansions to the 6th, 7th, 8th, 9th and 10th commandments in Exodus 20 (except in Targum Onkelos). Concerning the prevalence of allusions to the targums in the Apocalypse, Martin McNamara writes: “after consideration of the evidence for the relation of the targums... to the New Testament, the present writer has been led to express the view that the Apocalypse of John is the “New Testament book which shows the greatest number of contacts with the Palestinian Targum””, *Targum and Testament Revisited*, 2nd Ed., Grand Rapids MI /Cambridge UK: Eerdmans, 2010; 213.

³⁰ Whilst the smoke of the incense was rising from the altar, the priests gathered on the steps in front of the sanctuary in order to recite the priestly blessing (Num 6,24-26). During the recital, the Name of the Lord was pronounced as it is written (*m.Tamid* 7:2), thus fulfilling the divine purpose of the blessing: “...in this way they will place my Name on the Israelites and I will bless them” (Num 6,27). In Revelation the act of placing the Name of God on the Israelites is represented, in a particular way, by the impression of the seal of the Living God upon the 144,000 men chosen from the twelve tribes of Israel (Rev 7,1-8), leaving the Name of God and of the Lamb imprinted on their foreheads (Rev 14,1).

sounding of the trumpets, the placing of the cereal offering on the altar, and the pouring of the libation at the culmination of the morning service, the time when the Levitical musicians used to sing psalms and praise to God (*m. Tamid* 7:3-4). This liturgical climax was called “the presentation of the offerings before God.”

9. At the end of the heavenly liturgy, the Scroll of Life, which had been given to the Lamb a long time previously (Rev 5,7-14, see above at 2), is read out at the Final Judgment (20,11-12), just as the High Priest used to read from the Torah scroll at the end of the special rite of expiation on the Day of Atonement (*m. Yoma* 7:1).

10. In the Apocalypse all the agents of iniquity, including Satan himself, are thrown alive into the lake of fire (Rev 19,20; 20,10), to bring an end to sin forever. The function of the false prophet can be compared to that of the scapegoat in the rite of Atonement. He is described as a beast “having two horns like a lamb and speaking like a dragon” (Rev 13,11)—a description that indicates the false prophet performs a diabolical counterpart to the expiatory role of Christ the seven-horned Lamb. Compelling people to worship the beast (13,12-17) to whom Satan had given his power, throne and great authority (13,1-2), the false prophet does indeed cause the removal of sin, not in the way brought about by Christ the Lamb—through the sinner’s repentance and reconciliation with God—but by means of the tragic and eternal condemnation of the unrepentant sinner (Rev 14,9-11; cf. 2 Thess 2,11-12).³¹ In the annual rite of Atonement, the scapegoat was thrown alive from a cliff, only temporarily removing sins from the community (*m. Yoma* 6:3-6:8; cf. Lev 16,10.20-22; *1 Enoch* 10:4-6,8).

11. Following judgment and condemnation, a banquet is held to celebrate the return of the Redeemer and his marriage (Rev 19,7-9; 21,2.9; 22,17), which had been anticipated by the “opening of the Sanctuary in heaven”—an action marking the start of the great pilgrimage feasts (11,19; 15,4; *BT Yoma* 54b; Josephus *Antiquities* III,127-129). Similarly, at the end of the Day of Atonement in the Second Temple, the high priest gave a banquet to celebrate his safe return from the ‘Holy of holies’ (*m. Yoma* 7:3-4).

12. Although in the Apocalypse there are many visions of joyful celebration in heaven (Rev 7,9-17; 11,15-18; 19,1-9), only one short scene depicts the consumption of food (19,18-21). This scene evokes, and recasts, the ancient legend telling how the flesh of the two primeval beasts, Leviathan and Behemoth, will provide food for the eschatological banquet (*1 Enoch* 60:7-11,24; *4 Ezra* 6:49-53; *2 Bar* 29:4; *BT Baba Batra* 74b,75a; *Lev Rab* 13:3; *Est Rab* 2:4).

In comparing the characteristics of the heavenly liturgy with liturgical practice in the former Temple, we find that it corresponds to the daily morning service in order and content, but also includes features analogous to specific rites that were performed on the annual Day of Atonement.³² This combination can be seen as a simplification of the liturgy that used to take place annually, on the Day of Atonement, in the ancient Temple.³³ As the fulfillment of every kind of sacrifice, the slain Lamb

³¹ For confirmation that “ancient Jewish traditions appear to be in agreement with the interpretation which finds in the expulsion of the scapegoat a type or model of the eschatological defeat of demonic power”, see Robert Helm, ‘Azazel in Early Jewish Tradition’, *Andrews University Seminary Studies*, vol. 32, no. 3, 1994; 217-26, quote from 226; cf. also Lester L. Grabbe, ‘The Scapegoat Tradition: A Study in Early Jewish Interpretation’, *Journal for the Study of Judaism*, Vol. XVIII (1987); 152-67.

³² The heavenly liturgy thus defined includes the majority of the liturgical elements mentioned in the text of the Apocalypse, but not all. For example, the filling of the heavenly sanctuary with the smoke of the glory and power of God (Rev 15,8) is not included, and neither are the allusions in the text to the Jewish Feasts of Tabernacles (7,9-17) and Weeks (14,1-5). These and other liturgical themes are identified in Ben-Daniel, *The Apocalypse in the Light of the Temple*, 127-211.

³³ This finding underlies the striking doctrinal agreement between the Apocalypse and the Letter to the Hebrews (cf. Albert Vanhoye, “L’Apocalisse e la Lettera agli Ebrei”, in *Apokalypsis* 275). In the absence of any literary dependence, both works present Christ as the high-priestly redeemer and sacrificial victim in a Day of Atonement liturgy “that sees the current period of afflictions as a *Mo’ed Kippur*, a period of atonement, which began with Jesus’ death and will end

substitutes all the sacrifices that used to be offered on the Day of Atonement, except for the live sin-offering to Azazel whose role is fulfilled, in a modified way, by the false prophet. The Lamb therefore corresponds to the first sacrifice on that day: the lamb chosen to be the ‘continual holocaust’ for the morning service—in Hebrew it was called the *Tamid*. As a result, the heavenly liturgy described in the Apocalypse closely corresponds to the daily morning service on the Day of Atonement and includes liturgical elements that recall the specific rite of expiation that was performed on that day.

More than any other type of sacrifice, the ‘continual holocaust’ formed the basis of the ancient sacrificial cult of the Jews. A biblical scholar has described it like this: “*It was the true heart and centre of the entire sacrificial worship. In no circumstances could it be dispensed with. In AD 70, when Jerusalem had for long been besieged by the Romans and famine was at its peak, the daily sacrifice was nevertheless regularly offered, and it counted as one of the heaviest of blows when, on the 17th of Tammuz, it had at last to be discontinued*”.³⁴ Under the form of the ‘continual holocaust’ at the center of a liturgy that corresponds to that of the Day of Atonement—the most important day of the Hebrew calendar—Jesus Christ reveals himself in the most emphatic way as the fulfillment of the ancient sacrificial cult of the Jews (cf. Matt 5,17-19).³⁵

To sum up, then, the Passion and Resurrection of Jesus Christ constitute the starting point of a liturgy that is currently being celebrated in heaven; this liturgy continues up until the end of history and represents a synthesis of the liturgy that was performed on the Day of Atonement at the ancient Temple of the Jews in Jerusalem. Being the main activity in the heavenly Sanctuary, the liturgy provides a framework that not only embraces the entire sequence of visions in the Apocalypse, but also determines the course of events on earth—mostly of a judgmental nature. The Apocalypse, therefore, can be understood primarily as the revelation of the course of this liturgy for reconciliation taking place in heaven, and of its consequences for the lives of the peoples, believers and non-believers, on earth.³⁶

Let us return for a moment to the Church’s rules for correct interpretation. Here, in this liturgy for reconciliation taking place at the heart of the Apocalypse, we have a framework for interpreting the entire text as the fulfillment of the OT temple and liturgical tradition, which in turn represents the course of God’s plan of salvation through Christ, the slain Lamb. We could not hope for a more reliable and secure confirmation for our ‘theological’ interpretation.

These ‘theological’ results correspond surprisingly well with the literary identification of St. John’s Apocalypse as a typical member of the literary genre of “apocalypse”. The definition of this genre, which was proposed by John J. Collins in 1979, and has withstood the test of time, is stated as follows: “*a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial insofar as it involves*

with his Parousia” (Daniel Stökl Ben Ezra, *The Impact of Yom Kippur on Early Christianity: The Day of Atonement from Second Temple Judaism to the Fifth Century*, WUNT 163, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003; 193).

³⁴ Emil Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ*, Revised in 3 vols, eds. G. Vermes, F. Millar, M. Black, Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1973, vol II, 300.

³⁵ As one of the basic messages of the Apocalypse, Christ’s fulfillment of the ancient sacrificial cult should make us consider whether the real background to the book is not the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 A.D. and the subsequent reformation of Judaism at Jamnia, rather than the Roman persecution of the Early Christian Church, as assumed in the Preterist interpretation. The Apocalypse should then be understood as the divine response to the loss of the Temple, and in its preoccupation with the Temple, it is indeed representative of the entire apocalyptic tradition (see John J. Collins, ‘Jerusalem and the Temple in Jewish Apocalyptic Literature of the Second Temple Period’, *Apocalypse, Prophecy and Pseudepigraphy: On Jewish Apocalyptic Literature*, Grand Rapids MI/Cambridge UK: Eerdmans, 2015; 159-177).

³⁶ The dominant theme of atonement in the Apocalypse, expressed through its liturgical symbolism, merely subordinates, but does not invalidate, the exodus imagery in the text. In this way the full significance of the final messianic redemption is conveyed—a redemption (exodus typology) from sin through divine reconciliation (atonement).

another supernatural world".³⁷ With unexpected precision, the historico-critical identification of the Apocalypse and of its literary genre matches its theological significance, as determined by applying a traditional theological method. Stated more economically, the literary form of the Apocalypse perfectly matches its theological content. The author knew very well that what he was writing referred to the consummation of all things.

Implications

From this 'theological' approach to the Apocalypse, three implications arise that specifically concern the interpretation of the text.

The first implication is that, on the analogy of the liturgy of the former Temple, the liturgy revealed in the Apocalypse follows a very precise chronological order, beginning with the sacrifice of Christ and ending with the Final Judgment at the end of history. Since the events described in the visions of Revelation are determined by the order of this heavenly liturgy, it follows that the events also succeed one another in a definite temporal order or sequence.³⁸ There is therefore no place for the circular theories of 'recapitulation', which assume the opening of the seals, sounding of trumpets and pouring of bowls are parallel versions of each other.³⁹ The precise sequence of the visions and their relation to each other can now be clarified by careful examination of the structure and composition of the text.⁴⁰

The second implication derives from the fact that the conclusion of the liturgy in the former Temple coincided with its culmination, a composite and inseparable series of actions including the blowing of trumpets, the presentation of the offerings on the outer altar, the outpouring of the libation and the singing of praises by the Levites. All these actions are represented in the Apocalypse: the sounding of trumpets, the presentation of the offerings, the outpouring of libation bowls and the singing of praises dominate the liturgical activity described in the main part of the text, from chapter 8 until the end. In an analogous way, this part corresponds to the conclusion and culmination of the heavenly liturgy, which takes place at the end of history. The fact that the greater part of the text of Revelation is concerned with this conclusive part of the heavenly liturgy indicates that the greater part of the text is a prophecy of what will happen at the end of history. This part of the prophecy, at least, should be interpreted as an eschatological prophecy, which is to say, as a prophecy of the events which lead up to the Final Judgment at the end of history.

The third implication concerns the problematic millennial reign of Christ described in Rev 20,4-6 (called 'the millennium'), which many interpreters are expecting in the future. In addition to the arguments of various scholars against this futuristic position,⁴¹ we can add the finding that, from beginning to end, the heavenly liturgy described in the Apocalypse represents a synthesis of the liturgy that was performed in the ancient Temple on the Day of Atonement. It therefore represents a day in heaven and, since "one day with the Lord is like a thousand years" (2Pet 3,8; cf. Ps 90,4), the

³⁷ John J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to Jewish Apocalyptic Literature*, 3rd Edition, Grand Rapids MI/Cambridge UK: Eerdmans, 2016; 5.

³⁸ As noted by Jon Paulien, the liturgical development in Revelation suggests a "linear plot to the Apocalypse" ('The Role of the Hebrew Cultus', *AUSS*, vol. 33, no. 2, 1995; 261).

³⁹ Following the commentary of Victorinus of Pettau in the 3rd century. For a clear presentation of the issues and other arguments in favour of progression, see the excellent article by Marko Jauhiainen 'Recapitulation and Chronological Progression in John's Apocalypse: Towards a New Perspective', *New Testament Studies*, 49 (2003); 543-59.

⁴⁰ For our proposal, please see the final part of this paper: 'Applying the new approach to the text'.

⁴¹ E.g., R.F. White, 'Reexamining the Evidence for Recapitulation in Rev 20:1-10', *Westminster Theological Journal* 51 (1989); 319-44; idem, 'Making sense of Rev 20:1-10? Harold Hoehner Versus Recapitulation', *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society (JETS)*, 37 (1994); 539-51; idem, 'On the Hermeneutics and Interpretation of Revelation 20:1-3 A Preconsummationist Perspective', *JETS*, 42 (1999); 53-66; G.K. Beale's commentary on Rev 20 in *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1999; 972-1038; Kim Riddlebarger, *A Case for Amillennialism: Understanding the End Times*, Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003; and Charles E. Hill, *Regnum Coelorum: Patterns of Millennial Thought in Early Christianity*, 2nd Edition, Grand Rapids/Cambridge UK: Eerdmans, 2001.

thousand years of Christ's reign presents itself as the period of time on earth that corresponds to the duration of the liturgy in heaven, which is the present time.⁴² The author's vision of this 'millennium' should therefore be interpreted as a retrospective vision of the current era of salvation.⁴³

These general implications flow directly from the understanding of the liturgical dimension of the Apocalypse, which forms the temporal framework for the entire text. They are particularly significant because they define a general approach which is based on the fine detail of the text itself, and not on assumptions. More significantly, acceptance of these principles would promote a far greater consensus over the interpretation of the text and eliminate many of the unfruitful lines of interpretation currently proposed. More precisely, if these principles were followed by interpreters, all millennialist interpretations of the text, including the notorious dispensationalist interpretation of the fundamentalist school, would be excluded by the third implication mentioned above, and the *Preterist* approach, beloved by many biblical scholars and commentators, would be excluded on the basis of the first and the second. Finally, the application of this 'theological' approach to the compositional structure of the text yields further important insights, as outlined in the next section.

Applying the New Approach to the Text

The lack of clarity and scholarly consensus regarding the interpretation of the Apocalypse is nowhere more apparent than in attempts to understand how the main part of the text is composed and structured. The famous observation of Adela Yarbro Collins is as pertinent today as it was when it was written in the 1970's: "In current research on the book of Revelation, there is very little consensus on the overall structure of the work and how that structure should be interpreted. There are as many outlines of the book as there are interpreters".⁴⁴ Except for wide agreement on the presence of a Prologue (Rev 1,1-8), an Epilogue (22,6-21) and a preliminary part consisting of the inaugural vision (Rev 1,9-20) and the messages to the seven churches (chs 2-3), there is a total lack of agreement on the basic structure of the main part of the book (4,1-22,5). This is evidently an area where subjectivity and arbitrariness are common.⁴⁵

However, as with the clarification of the temporo-spatial framework of the text above, the liturgical imagery of the heavenly Sanctuary also imparts some degree of clarity and objectivity to the determination of literary structure, due to its precise chronological order. So, when we move from the image to the word, which is to say from temple-liturgical imagery to the literary composition and structure of the text itself, we can start by defining this orderly sequence of liturgical actions and events.

1. *The 'Baseline Prophetic Narrative'*

The first thing to note is that the visions of the main part of the text (Rev 4,1-22,5) are structured in three successive series of judgments; the breaking of the 7 seals leads to the blowing of the 7 trumpets which ends in the outpouring of the 7 bowls of libation, all of which are determined by the progress of the liturgy in heaven. The text is indeed written as a narrative of successive events, which departs from the Ascension of Christ and extends up to, and just beyond, the end of history. Although punctuated with a few interruptions, which we will deal with later, the orderly structure of

⁴² The application of this formula, derived from Ps 90,4, conforms exactly with its use in 2Pet 3,8, as a way of explaining the delay in Christ's Second Coming, in this case softened by the vision of his messianic interregnum (cf. Richard Bauckham, 'The Delay of the Parousia', *The Tyndale Bulletin*, 31, 1980; 19-36).

⁴³ For a full treatment of this important subject, please see www.academia.edu/78868602/The_Millennium_and_the_Mystery_of_Iniquity.

⁴⁴ *The Combat Myth in the Book of Revelation*, Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2001; 8.

⁴⁵ Here, following Pierre Prigent, we enter "this overly plowed field with the hope of gleaning some fruits" (*Commentary on the Apocalypse of St. John*, 93), hoping to avoid "the troubling sphere of subjectivity" by adhering to his caution: "A structure, an outline (and therefore an intention) should only be identified if it appears clearly" (op. cit. 96).

this narrative, which we will call the ‘baseline prophetic narrative’, can be clarified in the following way:

4,1-11	Initial vision of the Throne of God in heaven	
5,1-14	Preparations for the breaking of the 7 Seals of the Scroll	
6,1-2	Breaking of the 1st Seal	
6,3-4	Breaking of the 2nd Seal	
6,5-6	Breaking of the 3rd Seal	
6,7-8	Breaking of the 4th Seal	
6,9-11	Breaking of the 5th Seal	
6,12 – 7,1	Breaking of the 6th Seal	
7,2-17		INTERRUPTION
8,1	Breaking of the 7 th Seal	
8,2-6	Preparations for the Blowing of the 7 Trumpets	
8,7	Blowing of the 1st Trumpet	
8,8-9	Blowing of the 2nd Trumpet	
8,10-11	Blowing of the 3rd Trumpet	
8,12-13	Blowing of the 4th Trumpet	
9,1-12	Blowing of the 5th Trumpet	
9,13-21	Blowing of the 6th Trumpet	
10,1 – 11,14		INTERRUPTION
11,15-19	Blowing of the 7th Trumpet	
12,1 – 15,5		INTERRUPTION
15,6-8	Preparations for the Outpouring of the 7 Bowls	
16,1-2	Outpouring of the 1st Bowl	
16,3	Outpouring of the 2nd Bowl	
16,4-7	Outpouring of the 3rd Bowl	
16,8-9	Outpouring of the 4th Bowl	
16,10-11	Outpouring of the 5th Bowl	
16,12-16	Outpouring of the 6th Bowl	
16,17-21	Outpouring of the 7th Bowl	
17,1 – 19,5		INTERRUPTION
19,6 – 22,5	The fulfilment of the Plan of God:	
19,6-10	The announcement of the wedding of the Lamb	
19,11-16	The manifestation of the ‘Lord of lords and King of kings’	
19,17-21	The Battle of the Great Day (at Harmagedon, cf. 16,16)	
20,1-10	The history and condemnation of Satan	
20,11-15	The Final Judgment	
21,1-8	The new Creation	
21,9 – 22,5	The new Jerusalem – the Wife of the Lamb.	

There is no question here of the repetition or ‘recapitulation’ of the series of seven seals, trumpets or bowls. Instead, reflecting the temporal progression of the heavenly liturgy, the ‘baseline prophetic narrative’ progresses in a linear fashion, like a telescope extending and giving greater attention and detail to the final elements. The seventh and last member of each series of seven judgments not only brings us up to the verge of the eschatological climax, but also gives rise to the next series. As we approach the final consummation, the pace and severity of these judgments increases and their terrestrial effects overlap and merge. This explains the similarity of some of the judgments in the different series (especially between Rev 8,8-9 and 16,3), without resorting to theories of repetition or recapitulation.

Before going on to examine the interruptions, a few words are needed on the end-point of the ‘baseline prophetic narrative’, which we have called the ‘fulfillment of the Plan of God’. This final section describes traditional eschatological events such as the Second Coming of Christ,

within this narrative. This surprising conclusion brings us to our final task, which is to identify the main purpose and content of this self-contained ‘prophecy within the prophecy’.

3. *The prophecy of the overlapping section (11,1–15,5)*

The main characteristics of this part of the text are as follows:

- a. The first point to make is that the overlapping section clearly refers to events that immediately precede the sound of the 7th trumpet (the last) at the end of history (11,15-19).
- b. Secondly, it occupies the central part of the text (11,1–15,5), and in ancient documents this central part was reserved for the most important information. For example, the central part of the Pentateuch, Lev ch.16, contains the description of the most significant event in the ancient Hebrew calendar—the Day of Atonement.
- c. Thirdly, the overlapping of the two parts of this section allow the transmission of a greater amount of information than in one part alone, although in a less obvious way.⁴⁶

We can summarize these three points by saying that the overlapping section contains an eschatological prophecy that is presented as the central message of the whole book. To discern the significance of this prophecy, we must examine its opening verses, which scholars consider to be among the most puzzling parts of the text. After his rapture into the heavenly Sanctuary in Rev 4, the author finds himself on earth again, in front of a mighty angel telling him to take a little scroll from his hand and eat it:

“And I took the little scroll from the hand of the angel and ate it, and in my mouth it was as sweet as honey, and when I swallowed it my stomach was made bitter. And they say to me: You must prophesy again about many races and nations and tongues and rulers. And a cane similar to a rod was given to me while saying: Get up and measure the Sanctuary of God and the altar and those who are worshipping in it. And reject the court which is outside the Sanctuary and do not measure it, because it was given to the nations, and they will trample the Holy City for forty-two months. And I will give to my two witnesses and they will prophesy for one thousand two hundred and sixty days dressed in sackcloth.” (Rev 10,10–11,3).

Here the author, John, describes the renewal of his prophetic mission in a way that recalls the vocation of the prophet Ezekiel (Ezek 2,8–3,3): he is asked to swallow a scroll and is then told he will have to prophecy again. Curiously, though, instead of being commanded to write the prophecy, he was given a measuring rod and was commanded to measure the inner part of the Temple,⁴⁷ and to reject the outer part. Immediately after this command, the theme of prophecy returns with the prophetic mission of the two witnesses.

To remain coherent with its prophetic context, the most appropriate way to interpret the divine command to ‘measure the Temple’ is as a metaphor for the command to ‘prophesy again’. This is certainly not the only instance of a metaphorical command in the NT: another example is when Jesus asked Peter three times whether he loved him, and then commanded him “*Feed my sheep*” (Jn 21,17). Just as neither Jesus nor Peter were sheep farmers, we must not assume that John was a construction worker. We can only start to make sense of these commands when we realize they are metaphorical expressions, and as such they convey a deeper, more spiritual meaning than would be possible with ordinary speech. As Peter received his pastoral role in a metaphorical way, so here John is being given a prophetic role in metaphorical terms that convey its spiritual purpose and significance.

⁴⁶ One is reminded here of a feature that is typical of apocalypses, and which David Aune has summarized as follows: “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” (The Apocalypse of John and the Problem of Genre, *Semeia* 36, 1986; 89).

⁴⁷ The Sanctuary God, the altar and those worshipping there correspond to the three main elements of the inner court of the ancient Temple at Jerusalem (cf. Ezek 40,47).

As an aside, please note that immediately following the above passage in John's Gospel, where Peter receives his pastoral commission from the risen Lord, he turns to the beloved disciple and asks "what about him?" The Lord's answer has puzzled generations of Christians: "If I want him to remain until I come, what is it to do with you?" (Jn 21,22). It is of great significance that the metaphorical command given to John in this part of the Apocalypse explains exactly how and, in what sense, 'he remains until Jesus comes': John will be engaged in the task of measuring the new Temple until Christ comes at the end of history. This link also confirms the identification of the 'beloved disciple' in John's Gospel with John, the author of the Apocalypse.

Returning to the command given to John, we note that it refers metaphorically to his participation in the construction of the new Temple. Its precise meaning becomes apparent when we break down its various elements: the measuring rod that John was given is a metaphor for the prophecy that follows in the text; the act of measuring represents the act of witnessing the prophecy and, as in other parts of the NT (cf. Eph 2,19-22; 1 Pet 2,4-10; Heb 12,22-24; Rev 3,12), the new Temple is a metaphor for the People of God, the Church. By witnessing the prophecy given to him, John is helping to build up—to edify—the more holy, inner part of the Church. The secularized 'outer part' of the Church, by rejecting the prophecy, will end up being rejected from the Church altogether. In this way, the prophecy acts as a 'canon' within the canon of the NT.

There is more to follow: clearly John witnessed this prophecy by writing it down, but the first event he recorded describes how it will be publicly announced by two witnesses, or prophets. As the first event recorded in John's prophecy, the mission of these two prophets will therefore have the effect of 'realizing' the prophecy and with the 'realization' of the prophecy, there will be no further need to witness it. So, the mission of the two witnesses, and their public announcement of the prophecy, will complete precisely what John was commanded to do: to measure the inner part of the Temple, and to reject the outer part. In other words, this mission helps to complete the edification, purification and preparation of the Church, prior to the events of the last days.⁴⁸

The part of the prophecy with this function terminates with the completion of the new Temple, which is signified in the text, as in the Old Testament (Exod 40,34-35; 1 Kgs 8,10-13), by the filling of the Sanctuary with the smoke of the Power and Glory of God (Rev 15,8). This event coincides with the opening of the heavenly Sanctuary, which is described at the conclusion of the overlapping section (11,19 and 15,5).

So, without going into the more complex issues of exegesis at this stage, let us sum up by saying that this central section of text brings together all the various interruptions in the 'baseline prophetic narrative' and defines them as a self-contained 'prophecy within a prophecy'. The prophecy relates to events in a final but brief period of history, immediately preceding the seventh and last trumpet. It has a specific role in the edification and perfecting of the Church, and will be publicly announced at a certain time by two witnesses of Christ. The content of the prophecy is given in the part we have called the overlapping section (11,1–15,4) and in the two other interruptions linked to this (Rev 7 and 17–18). The prophecy deals with the brief and imminent reign of the 'beast from the sea' (11,7; 13,1-8; ch 17), aided by a false prophet (13,11-17), their persecution of the faithful (7,9-17; 15,2-4), their consecration of the third Temple in Jerusalem (13,13) and their destruction of the historical centre of Christianity in Rome (17,15-18). This prophecy constitutes the central message of the Apocalypse and is followed in the text by the Second Coming of Christ and the Final Judgment.

Summary

The Apocalypse is one of the most difficult books in the Biblical canon. Though accepted immediately by the Roman Catholic Church, many centuries passed before it was fully accepted into

⁴⁸ For a full treatment of the two witnesses, please see www.academia.edu/84648587/The_Two_Witnesses_in_the_Book_of_Revelation

the canon of the Eastern Churches. A majority of modern Catholic scholars favour the Preterist interpretation, even though it cannot explain why the text was initially rejected by the Eastern Churches, or how the visions in the text relate to the events of history.

The way out of this interpretive impasse is to identify within the text a temporal framework which can indicate the way the visions relate to each other and to the events they portray. With the help of the tractates *Tamid* and *Yoma* in the *Mishnah*, this temporal framework can be identified as the progress of a liturgy that takes place in the Sanctuary surrounding the throne of God in heaven: a liturgy that corresponds to the service on the Day of Atonement in the Second Temple. Among the general implications of this ‘theological’ approach are three principles which can help to guide further interpretation of the text: 1) the basically linear progression of the vision narrative; 2) the yet-to-be-fulfilled, eschatological prophecy of the main part of the book, from chapter 8 to the end; 3) the ‘inaugurated millennial’ (often called the ‘amillennial’) interpretation of the thousand year reign of Christ described in Rev 20,4-6.⁴⁹ Adoption of these three principles would help to bring about greater consensus among scholars involved in interpreting this challenging text and, when applied to the main part of the text, this ‘theological’ approach yields further insights into its central message, as outlined in the final part of this paper.

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Jerusalem,
updated for Advent 2025

⁴⁹ The term ‘amillennial’ is slightly misleading in that it implies that advocates of this approach do not believe in the millennium. They do indeed believe in the millennium, but not as a specific period of time in the future, as pre-millennialists do. As a more accurate term for ‘amillennialism’, G.K. Beale has proposed ‘inaugurated millennialism’ (G.K. Beale, *John’s Use of the Old Testament in Revelation*, *JSNTSup* 166, Sheffield: Academic, 1998; 356-57).