

THE FATHERS ON THE FUTURE

A 2nd-Century Eschatology for the
21st-Century Church

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Go Deeper Excursus 16

Who, What, When, and How of Revelation: Pre-interpretive Issues

Just as we set forth interpretive questions regarding prophetic and apocalyptic materials in the Old Testament prior to surveying the prophets' picture of the coming kingdom (see Go Deeper Excursus 10), we must do the same for the Book of Revelation. While I will briefly indicate my own view regarding date and authorship, of concern is the nature of the book of Revelation itself as a faithful report of revelatory visions and prophecies.

While most New Testament scholars date Revelation in the 90s, some offer an earlier date before the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70.¹ The evidence from the book itself seems to bifurcate, leading some to attribute the problem to later revisions of older material composed throughout the first century.² At present, I do not see any reason to challenge the most ancient testimony of the earliest Christians of the second century or the consensus of modern scholarship regarding the later date of Revelation. The first testimony concerning the book of Revelation asserted that John, the son of Zebedee, was its author. Irenaeus of Lyons, a disciple of Polycarp, disciple of John, affirms that "John, in the Apocalypse, indicated to the Lord's disciples what shall happen in the last times" (*Haer.* 5.26.1; cf. 4.14.2; 4.17.6).³ However, throughout the history of biblical studies, this has not gone without challenge.⁴

¹ A comprehensive and accessible work arguing for the early date of Revelation is Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., *Before Jerusalem Fell: Dating the Book of Revelation* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1989). His conclusion dating Revelation prior to AD 70 is part of a larger debate regarding the preterist and non-preterist interpretations of Revelation.

² David Aune, *Revelation 1–5*, Word Biblical Commentary, ed. David A. Hubbard, Glenn W. Barker, John D. W. Watts, and Ralph P. Martin, vol. 52A (Dallas: Word, 1997), cxxi.

³ This John was "the Lord's disciple," the one who leaned upon Jesus at the last supper (Irenaeus, *Haer.* 4.20.11). Irenaeus elsewhere implies he even had personal contact with people who had known the author. On a disagreement over an alternate reading of the number 666, he writes, "this number [666] being found in all the most approved and ancient copies [of the Apocalypse], and those men who saw John face to face bearing their testimony [to it]" (*Haer.* 5.30.1).

⁴ The three most commonly-held views regarding authorship for the Book of Revelation are 1) The Apostle John, the disciple of Jesus; 2) another John (John the elder, John the prophet, or John Mark); or 3) a pseudonym for John

Unless one uses the date and authorship question to challenge the book's canonicity and status as inspired Scripture, certainty on these matters is not necessary for exegeting Revelation 19–21. Nevertheless, it is my own view that the Fourth Gospel, the three Johannine epistles, and Revelation were all written by John, a disciple of Jesus. Although there is a noticeable divergence in grammar and syntax between the Gospels and Revelation, the difference does not necessarily indicate a difference in authorship if one defines “authorship” in a loose sense.⁵ The Apocalypse itself addresses the book to the “seven churches of Asia.”⁶ However, the book also indicates that a broader audience was always intended (Rev 1:1; 2:7; 22:7). And the fragment of the late-first-century canon discovered and published by Muratori in the eighteenth-century states, “For John too in the Apocalypse, though he writes to seven churches, yet speaks to all.”⁷

Having set forth my presuppositions regarding the date and authorship, I must acknowledge my belief in the book's nature as supernatural revelation of things to come. Scholars who do not share this view of the inspiration and authority of Revelation—and the resulting position that its teachings can be expected to harmonize with those of other inspired texts—are forced to seek the meaning of the Apocalypse only in human sources attainable by human means. They must also assume the author had a specific intended meaning that he communicated to his audience, that is, the theology of the book is limited to the theology of the author(s). He cannot, in that view, speak better than he knew. However, if one holds to a divine origin of the content of Revelation, the possibility exists of a meaning that transcends the author and his available sources. Such a view would allow for the prospect that not even the author fully understood the message he received and transmitted to his audience.

I maintain that a discussion of the nature of the visionary experience of the author of Revelation is both important for and preliminary to answering the question of the meaning of Revelation 3:14d. Therefore, I will attempt to sort through some of the issues regarding the nature of Revelation and will defend the perspective of this thesis.

Views on the Nature of the Book of Revelation

Depending on a person's presuppositions regarding supernaturalism and the Bible, one's position on the nature of John's visions falls along a spectrum. Among approaches to Revelation, I describe

the Apostle by an anonymous author (see Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, rev. ed. [Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1990], 932–47).

⁵ Scholars acknowledge the use of amanuenses as a common practice in the ancient Greco-Roman world (E. Randolph Richards, *The Secretary in the Letters of Paul*, WUNT, ed. Martin Hengel and Otfried Hofius, 2 Reihe, vol. 42 [Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1991], 14–67).

⁶ Guthrie notes, “The messages [of Revelation 2–3] are so definitely linked to the historical circumstances that it is impossible to suppose that John did not intend each church to take special note of its own message” (Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, 965).

⁷ Translation from Henry Melvill Gwatkin, *Selections from Early Writers Illustrative of Church History to the Time of Constantine* (London: Macmillan, 1897), 83–89.

four basic options involving three elements: form, content, and doctrine.⁸ Each of these three elements has been attributed by commentators to sources either human or divine. The following chart is a summary of these four views.⁹

	HUMAN Work	HUMAN-Divine Work	DIVINE-Human Work	DIVINE Work
FORM	Human	Human	Human	Divine
CONTENT	Human	Human	Divine	Divine
DOCTRINE	Human	Divine	Divine	Divine

Revelation as a Human Work. This view sees Revelation as strictly human with natural sources for its form, content, and doctrine.¹⁰ As such, where Revelation purports to be prophecy, it is actually history or wild speculation; where it “records” visions, the author actually composes or incorporates sources in an altered guise. The theology may be significant to the author, but it need not be true.

Revelation as a Human-Divine Work. The second view recognizes that God “inspired” the underlying theology and message of the book and perhaps even delivered some kind of supernatural vision(s) or dream(s). However, the author presented the revelations in their written form only after running them through a process of interpretation, reflection, and formatting that he felt best communicated this theology to his readers.¹¹ Farrer writes, “Spiritual experiences . . .

⁸ *Form* includes the structure and organization of the material; *content*, the selection, sources, and allusions of the material; and *doctrine*, the theological assertions underlying the Apocalypse.

⁹ Mulholland gives two opposing approaches to Revelation: “On the one hand are those who believe that the author really did receive a visionary revelation from God, which was recorded in exact detail. On the other hand are those who believe that Revelation is a human product only” (M. Robert Mulholland, Jr., *Revelation: Holy Living in an Unholy World*, Francis Asbury Press Commentary, ed. M. Robert Mulholland, Jr. [Grand Rapids: Francis Asbury, 1990], 13). Although this is true when one approaches the Apocalypse from the perspective of worldview (supernaturalist vs. non-supernaturalist), there is a variety of approaches within the supernaturalist position itself which Mulholland overlooks.

¹⁰ All non-supernaturalist scholars would hold this view, as the others require *some* element of divine inspiration. Although his own views on supernaturalism are unclear, Northrop Frye approaches an understanding that is somewhat typical of such scholars. He writes, “What the seer in Patmos had a vision of was primarily, as he conceived it, the true meaning of the Scriptures, and his dragons and horsemen and dissolving cosmos were what he saw in Ezekiel and Zechariah, whatever or however he saw on Patmos” (Northrop Frye, “Typology: Apocalypse,” in *The Revelation of St. John the Divine*, Modern Critical Interpretations, ed. Harold Bloom [New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1988], 69). One can, of course, hold to supernaturalism and divine inspiration of Scripture, yet still deny that Revelation itself is to be counted among the supernatural or inspired.

¹¹ Some advocates of this view are R. H. Charles, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Revelation of St. John*, vol. 1, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: Clark, 1920), cvi-cvii, and John Sweet, who writes, “The ancient notion of a prophet as a mouthpiece for revelations from outside himself, a pen moved by the Holy Spirit, has given way for us to less mechanical, more personal, ideas of inspiration” (John Sweet, *Revelation*, TPI New Testament Commentaries [Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990], 42). Also see Jürgen Roloff, *Die Offenbarung des*

are very real to those who receive them, but private in their nature and, in their pristine form, incommunicable. If a man is not only touched by divine realities . . . he will be obliged to translate them into symbols of common currency. So let the imaginative and intellectual complexity be the work of St. John's mind; the 'seeings' and 'hearings' which they are employed to interpret may be none the less genuine."¹²

Revelation as a Divine-Human Work. Emphasizing the divine elements while allowing for freedom in the author's organization and presentation of the material, this view allows not only for linguistic and literary liberty but also for freedom in the form of the material. However, the content of the visions is divine, and the theology is therefore infallible.¹³ By way of parallel, just as the canonical Gospels are editorialized versions of actual historical events, the author of the book of Revelation determined to a significant degree the form while faithfully relaying the content and theology of the visions.

Revelation as a Divine Work. This final position regards Revelation as a strictly divine work, understanding form, content, and doctrine as all sourced in God and communicated to John by supernatural revelation in visions that the prophet saw and heard.¹⁴ These visions were written in the order he received them. Creative liberty of the author extends only to the prologue and epilogue and perhaps to various explanatory comments throughout the work. The author also had some freedom of vocabulary and grammar, although he attempted to portray accurately what he experienced.¹⁵ Mounce thus writes that "the descriptions themselves are not John's creative attempt to portray eschatological truth in apocalyptic terminology but the faithful transmission of what he actually saw in authentic vision (1:11). If what he wrote was a product of his own literary genius, we would have to ask in what form the visions themselves were communicated to him."¹⁶

Although the last three views fall within the broader camp of evangelicalism, the last two positions are perhaps the most common among conservative evangelicals. The human-divine view is held mostly by scholars who see inspiration as the production of a document infallible only in areas of faith and practice. For those who assume an anti-supernatural worldview, the first view remains the only alternative. A Christian supernaturalist who holds to the canonicity of Revelation

Johannes, Zürcher Bibelkommentare NT, ed. Hans Heinrich Schmid and Siegfried Schulz, vol. 18 (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1984).

¹² Austin Farrer, *The Revelation of St. John the Divine* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1964), 24.

¹³ G. K. Beale would be a representative of this view (*The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary, ed. I. Howard Marshall and Donald A. Hagner [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999], 80–81).

¹⁴ Examples of this position would be George Eldon Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972); Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, rev. ed., The New International Commentary on the New Testament, ed. Gordon D. Fee (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997); Robert Thomas, *Revelation 1–7, An Exegetical Commentary* (Chicago: Moody, 1992), 19; John F. Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Chicago: Moody, 1966).

¹⁵ A fifth combination of the elements is theoretically possible: divine form, human content, and divine teaching. But while it is possible for God to communicate to the prophet the content of the vision and allow for the author to organize and present it with literary freedom, it seems far-fetched that the structure would be revealed without the content.

¹⁶ Mounce, *Revelation*, 30.

must hold to some divine element in the nature of the book.

For my part, I have long accepted as an article of the classic Christian faith the supernatural origin of the doctrine and content of Revelation. John actually saw and heard what he claims to have saw and heard. This is the view held by the earliest Christian recipients of Revelation. Around the middle of the second century, Justin Martyr, one of the teachers of Irenaeus of Lyons, wrote, “There was a certain man with us, whose name was John, one of the apostles of Christ, who prophesied, by a revelation that was made to him” (*Dial.* 81).

Arguments for the Apocalypse as a Record of Prophetic Visions

As already stated in chapter 1 of *The Fathers on the Future*, I am writing from a classic Irenaean position that the book of Revelation is inspired by God and authoritative, reflecting the classic Christian view of inspiration.¹⁷ Thus, I believe various sections of the Apocalypse fall among the three supernaturalist views of human and divine contribution. For example, the epilogue and prologue are primarily human-divine works, much like the New Testament epistolary genre they emulate. Other sections reflect divine-human work in that John apparently selects which elements of the visions to present and interpret. However, it seems evident that some parts of Revelation, including the seven messages of chapters 2–3, are best viewed as somewhere between divine-human work and divine work—straightforward reports of what the author actual heard and then wrote down.¹⁸

Thus, John received visions while on the Isle of Patmos (Rev 1:9). During the course of the visions, he likely took some written notes of what he saw and heard (Rev 1:11, 19; 2:1; 10:4; 14:13; 19:9; 21:5). Then, when the visions were complete, John would have recorded them more fully. In the process of writing down the visions, John would have then added an introductory prologue (1:1–8) and an epilogue (22:18–21), which function somewhat like a “transmittal letter.” Revelation

¹⁷ See 2 Tim 3:16 and 2 Pet 1:20–21. As demonstrated from the chart of the four positions regarding the Revelation, a supernaturalist Christian perspective actually affords the scholar with a wider range of options in approaching the text, whereas a purely critical and non-supernaturalist scholar is limited to only one explanation for the material. In reality, even the supernaturalist can hold to any of the options if he or she rejects the inspiration and canonicity of Revelation.

¹⁸ Thus, I concur with Mounce, who writes, “The position of this commentary is that the descriptions themselves are not John’s creative attempt to portray eschatological truth in apocalyptic terminology but the faithful transmission of what he actually saw in authentic vision” (*Revelation*, 30). It must be stated that while my own position is held in stark opposition to a view that holds Revelation to be a purely human work, it is only in opposition to the view that Revelation *as a whole* is a human-divine work. It is readily acknowledged that the John of the Gospels seems to be rather loose in his report of dominical sayings and that such a style would be expected to appear in the Apocalypse if the two share a common author. However, nowhere in the Gospel does John purport to record dictated letters as we find in Revelation 2–3. In the case of the Apocalypse, John is clearly instructed by the risen Lord to “Write in a book what you see, and send it to the seven churches” (1:11). For a discussion on divine dictation of prophecy as it relates to inspiration, see Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, unabridged one-volume ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), 219.

1:9–22:17 would then present the visions in John’s own descriptive words more or less in the order he received them. If John made at least one organizing revision of the material, it would have been at this time that he inserted interpretive or reflective comments to better orient his recipients. There are several reasons why this reconstruction of the composition of the Apocalypse is adopted here. The rest of this section will briefly examine these in turn.

John Claims the Revelation is from God. The opening verse of the book makes this clear: “The revelation (ἀποκάλυψις) of Jesus Christ, which God gave him (ἦν ἔδωκεν αὐτῷ ὁ θεὸς) to show his servants what must soon take place, and he made it known (ἔσήμανεν) by sending his angel to his servant John” (Rev 1:1). G. K. Beale points out that the term ἀποκάλυψις is a “direct allusion to Daniel 2, where the word is used of the prophetic revelation communicated from God to the prophet Daniel.”¹⁹ It can hardly be contested that John intended that his book be received as a revelation from God in visionary form. The language of Revelation 1:1 and 22:6, 8 argues against the notion that John wove revealed spiritual truths in the language of apocalyptic visions, as though God revealed the kernel and John wrapped it in its hull. The term σημαίνω in Revelation 1:1 is also relevant here. Beale suggests the “symbolic use of σημαίνω in Daniel 2 defines the use in Rev. 1:1 as referring to symbolic communication and not mere general conveyance of information.... The allusion to Dan. 2:28–30, 45 indicates that a symbolic vision and its interpretation is going to be part of the warp and woof of the means of communication throughout Revelation.”²⁰

Next, in Revelation 1:2 the author writes that he “testified to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw (εἶδεν),” intimating a personal experience he intended to faithfully report. The author uses the word εἶδον (“I see”) in the first person aorist forty-five times throughout Revelation. Likewise, he uses the first person of ἤκουσα (“I heard”) twenty-seven times. Thus, John consistently and repeatedly claims that he actually “saw” and “heard” the things described in Revelation. John asserts unequivocally that after Jesus gave the vision to John he “testified (ἐμαρτύρησεν) to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ.” John’s use of μαρτυρέω should not be taken lightly. This statement is *prima facie* evidence that John intended his message to be accepted as a trustworthy record of things he actually saw rather than the creative packaging of spiritual truths. He reckons himself a witness of “all that he saw (ὅσα εἶδεν).” If, in fact, he saw nothing, or if he mixed experience with creative repackaging, he condemns himself as a false witness.²¹

Thus, Revelation 1:1–3 seems a rather clear assertion of the author’s receipt of symbolic visions

¹⁹ Beale, *Revelation*, 37.

²⁰ Beale, *Revelation*, 51.

²¹ A possible difference between the use of these terms in the Gospel of John and the Revelation must be acknowledged. I am not alleging *ipsissima verba* in either work, but *ipsissima vox* in varying degrees. However, in both cases the accounts are based on actual historical events. On the one hand, the Gospel is based on events from the life and teachings of Christ; on the other, the Revelation is based on actual visionary experiences of the author. Yet the latter is unique in that the visions and messages were given to the author with explicit instructions to “write” what he saw and heard, and the writing was presumably much closer to—and in some instances in the course of—the events (Rev 10:4). Thus, allowing for its historicity, a narrower *ipsissima vox* would be expected in the Apocalypse than the Gospel of John.

from heaven. The complexity of the process of Revelation 1:1–3 is similar to the process of visionary revelation described by Daniel and other Old Testament reporters of apocalyptic visions. Given the author’s insistence on truth, there is good reason for a supernaturalist to accept John’s introductory claim. The visions in Revelation were not composed *ad hoc*, compiled from previous sources, or reported in a loose and paraphrastic manner. Rather, they were actual experiences of the author reported faithfully.

Distinct Styles in Revelation. Vern Poythress has shown by the distinctive uses of intersentence conjunctions that Revelation 1:1–8 and 22:18–21 use these conjunctions in a similar way as other sections of expository discourse in the Gospel and Epistles of John. In sections that Poythress calls “visionary narrative,” the use of these conjunctions differ from John’s normal style, but it is consistent within the “visionary narrative” unit from 1:9 to 22:17. Poythress writes, “To a degree, it is reminiscent of Hebrew narrative. And it tends to reinforce the impression that the scenes were simply imposed on John, one after the other, with no control on his part.... It is likely, then, that the author wanted to create a unique discourse style in this visionary material. To do so, he followed or invented a different sort of pattern than was customary for him in writing narrative.”²² Based on Poythress’s study, Robert Thomas suggests John “became more a product of his prophetic state than while writing his other NT books.”²³

Besides these stylistic considerations, linguistic features also differ greatly between certain sections of the Apocalypse, differences that seem to move beyond merely those affected by content. In her unique commentary on Revelation, J. Massyngberde Ford has demonstrated “a significant linguistic difference between Rev 1–3 and the three Christian verses of ch. 22, and chs. 4–22.”²⁴ While these linguistic differences could be attributed to different authorship or content (as Ford alleges), this type of inconsistency could also be expected if a single author experienced visions that he then attempted to report as accurately as possible. The introduction in chapter 1 would reflect a style and vocabulary closer to the author’s own than the dictated messages of 2–3. While not conclusive, this evidence is at least corroborative to the position John actually experienced visions for which the doctrine and content were of a heavenly origin while he exercised some freedom in the form and expression of the material.

Continuity with Old Testament and Discontinuity with Apocryphal Apocalyptic. If the Apocalypse is a strictly human composition relying on human sources, then we would expect the work to be in close continuity with its contemporary works of the same genre. However, if it is a

²² Vern S. Poythress, “Johannine Authorship and the Use of Intersentence Conjunctions in the Book of Revelation,” *WTJ* 47 (1985): 332.

²³ Thomas, *Revelation 1–7*, 19.

²⁴ Josephine Massyngberde Ford, *Revelation: Introduction, Translation and Commentary*, Anchor Bible, ed. William Foxwell Albright and David Noel Freedman, vol. 38 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1975), 43–46. The “Christian verses” to which she refers are 22:16a, 20b and 21 (Ford, *Revelation*, 39). At the time of the writing of her commentary, Ford believed that part of the Book of Revelation was a composition by John the Baptist (chapters 4–11), another was written later by a disciple of John the Baptist (12–22), and then the introduction, letters to the churches, and a few verses were added later by a disciple of John the Baptist who converted to Christianity (1–3; 22:16b, 20b, 21).

supernatural revelation of symbolic visions which the author experienced and reported faithfully, as his testimony indicates, we would expect some discontinuity with apocryphal apocalypses and continuity with canonical apocalypse.

Regarding the similarities between apocryphal apocalyptic writings and our own Apocalypse, Swete writes:

Here it is enough to say that while they [parallels with contemporary apocalyptic writings] shew [*sic*] the writer of the Christian Apocalypse to have been familiar with the apocalyptic ideas of his age, they afford little or no clear evidence of his dependence on Jewish sources other than the books of the Old Testament. Certainly he does not use these sources with anything like the distinctness with which he refers to Isaiah, Ezekiel, or Daniel.... The most that can be safely affirmed is that he shared with the Jewish apocalyptists the stock of apocalyptic imagery and mystical and eschatological thought which was the common property of an age nurtured in the Old Testament and hard pressed by the troubles and dangers of the times.²⁵

Robert Thomas notes that as an apocalypse Revelation “differs distinctly from everything else in this class.”²⁶ The nineteenth century German New Testament scholar, Theodor Zahn, has noted that the Book of Revelation is “a continuation of the writings of the O.T. prophets.”²⁷ At the same time he remarks that “common sense and an uncorrupted taste rebel at placing in the same literary group [apocalyptic] the Revelation of John, although it be the one from which the group has been named.”²⁸

Is John’s Apocalypse more akin to Old Testament canonical, intertestamental, or Christian apocalypses? There are a variety of approaches to this subject.²⁹ In my study of the major non-canonical Jewish and Christian apocalypses, I have discovered a number of features that appear to set Revelation apart from the others within that “genre.”³⁰ The non-canonical apocalyptic and prophetic writings of early Christianity are unlike the New Testament Apocalypse of John in many important respects.

²⁵ Henry Barclay Swete, *The Apocalypse of John: The Greek Text with Introduction, Notes, and Indexes*, 3d ed. (London: Macmillan, 1911), clvii.

²⁶ Thomas, *Revelation 1–7*, 25.

²⁷ Theodor Zahn, *Introduction to the New Testament*, vol 3, trans. John Moore Trout, et al. (Edinburgh: Clark, 1909), 385.

²⁸ Zahn, *Introduction to the New Testament*, 3:387.

²⁹ See Donald Guthrie, *The Relevance of John’s Apocalypse*, The Didsbury Lectures (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 19.

³⁰ The translation of Jewish apocalypses used in this survey was that of James H. Charlesworth, ed. *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, vol 1, *Apocalyptic Literature and Testaments* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1983). For a translation of Christian apocalypses was that of Wilhelm Schneemelcher, *New Testament Apocrypha*, vol. 2, *Writings Relating to the Apostles; Apocalypses and Related Subjects*, trans. by R. McL. Wilson, rev. ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1992), 542–752.

Whereas the Jewish and Christian apocryphal apocalypses attempt to gain credibility through pseudonymity,³¹ the author of the Book of Revelation simply identifies himself as “I, John, your brother who share with you the persecution and the kingdom and the endurance in Jesus” (Rev 1:9). As stated earlier, the testimony of the early church with regard to Johannine authorship is strong.

The presentation of the visions themselves also marks a difference. Some of the non-canonical apocalyptic/prophetic writings are strictly prophetic in form. Rather than presenting symbolic visions, they purport to set out in straightforward language the coming events of the end times, and these are often composed as “history in future-form.”³² When those apocryphal writings do present visions, most of the time the symbols are followed immediately by an interpretation by an *angelus interpres*, sometimes by question and answer between the prophet and the angel.³³ In contrast, the Book of Revelation records a large number of symbolic visions recorded by John but left uninterpreted.³⁴ When certain elements of the visions are finally interpreted, even those are cryptic, leaving the readers without a precise understanding (Rev 17:7–18). In apocryphal writings the visions either purport to be non-symbolic,³⁵ or the symbols are interpreted in clear language.³⁶ The reader of these non-canonical apocalypses is left with virtually no questions regarding the meaning of the supposed revelation.

Based on these contrasts, I conclude that the authors of the apocryphal apocalypses began with *doctrine* and *content* they wanted to promote in an authoritative and compelling way, which they therefore encapsulated in the apocalyptic *form* to accomplish their goal. Comprehension of the message in their details was essential. However, the author of the Book of Revelation does the opposite. The reader is left with a wide range of unexplained visions that have received a plethora of interpretations throughout history, few with an enduring consensus. In this light, the view that John accurately reported what he saw and heard gains credibility. While apocryphal writers began with an idea they dressed in vision, John began with a vision, often stopping short of interpretation.

³¹ E.g. Isaiah, Peter, Paul, Ezra, Elijah, Mary, and Thomas. Only a few authors of apocalypses are of less repute, such as the Sibyl and Elchasai (cf. Schneemelcher, *New Testament Apocrypha*, 542–752).

³² Schneemelcher, *New Testament Apocrypha*, 547. See Book 12 of *Sibylline Oracles*, which reports historical events in prophetic form similar to Dan 11 of the Old Testament, though more extensively and with greater detail.

³³ See 1 En. 18.14–16; 21.10; 22.3–13; 23.1–4; 32.5–6; 2 En. 10.4–5; 18.2–5; 5 Ezra 2.42–47; 6 Ezra 15.28–16.1; Ascension of Isaiah 7–11; Apocalypse of Peter 11–13; 19; 21–23.

³⁴ Just a sampling of elements in the Book of Revelation that are simply reported by the author are the hidden manna and white stone (2:17), the twenty-four elders (4:4); the four living creatures (4:5–8); the riders on the horses (6:1–8); the “little book” (10:2), the “woman” (12:1), the two beasts (13), and the harlot (17:3). Mounce points out one difference between Revelation and other apocalyptic works as “its practice of simply narrating visions and leaving the interpretive task to the reader instead of supplying a heavenly tutor (17:7ff. and a few other passages are exceptions)” (Mounce, *Revelation*, 7).

³⁵ For example, Paul’s alleged journey to the third heaven includes a tour of the destination of the righteous souls as well as the wicked (see Apoc. Paul). The writer appears to present the vision as Paul seeing the way the heavenly realm actually is rather than a symbolic representation of it. Nevertheless, the interpreting angel serves as a tour guide in answering Paul’s questions about the significance of various elements and events in the vision. Cf. the detailed cosmological descriptions in 2 En. 5–6; 12–13.

³⁶ 6 Ezra, 2.42–47.

In light of these considerations, some recent scholars have moved away from the theory that Revelation is simply one of a series of Jewish apocalypses of the first century that depends heavily on its predecessors for its images. Instead, the emphasis has shifted to the author's use of the Old Testament apocalyptic and prophetic imagery.³⁷ Of course, nothing prevents a genuine divine vision from utilizing language and images of non-canonical apocalypses or other ancient literary or cultural images in communicating to an audience steeped in such a context.³⁸ Yet commentators who have seen evidence for mythical sources have sometimes overlooked more subtle and meaningful Old Testament allusions.³⁹ Beale goes so far as to say, "It is absurd to think that John is 'a copyist of ill-digested pagan myths,' since it is clear that the thrust of his whole book is a polemic against tolerance of idolatry and compromise with pagan institutions."⁴⁰

Old and New Testament Allusions with No Formal Quotations. Though the Apocalypse has many allusions both to the Old and New Testaments,⁴¹ neither is formally quoted in the Apocalypse. The previous discussion concluded that the Book of Revelation is more consistent with, and lies in the tradition of, Old Testament apocalyptic prophecies rather than non-canonical apocalypses or pagan mythologies. Yet, if John were using primarily the Old Testament as his source, we would expect to find formal quotations of those sources, even if he were drawing strictly from memory without access to written documents.⁴² Not only are there no formal quotations—merely a gradation of allusions—it is difficult to determine which Old Testament textual tradition John was using in making those allusions, since the wording frequently departs from both the Septuagint and Hebrew texts.⁴³

If we allow for a supernatural origin of the visions of the Book of Revelation, this problem of Old Testament allusions and text forms is afforded an interesting solution, for we need not answer

³⁷ Beale, *Revelation*, 76–105.

³⁸ Beasley-Murray likens the use of these common images to the political cartoon. He writes: "For example the monsters in Daniel 7, which emerge from the sea as representations of world empires and culminate in the last anti-god kingdom, are variants of the evil sea-monster Tiamat which defied the gods of heaven. The earliest readers of the book will have recognized the caricature immediately.... This is the source of the portrayals of the antichristian empire and ruler in the book of Revelation" (*The Book of Revelation*, rev. ed., New Century Bible Commentary, ed. Ronald E. Clements, Matthew Black [London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1974; reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981], 17).

³⁹ Beasley-Murray approximates this error when he suggests that for the beast of Rev 13 John "did not draw immediately on the book of Daniel for his description of the dragon with seven heads and ten horns, for not all the details are contained in Daniel's descriptions. John drew from the living tradition about the monster, and he followed in the wake of the Old Testament prophets and contemporary apocalyptists in applying the symbol to the oppressor power of his day" (*Book of Revelation*, 17). But Beale has demonstrated the association of the dragon and beast of Rev 12 and 13 with Old Testament images, especially from Daniel (Beale, *Revelation*, 632–34), specifically countering Beasley-Murray's speculations.

⁴⁰ Beale, *Book of Revelation*, 634.

⁴¹ According to Swete, at least 278 verses out of 404 have Old Testament allusions (*Apocalypse*, cxl). Though exact figures vary, all agree the number is high (Beale, *Book of Revelation*, 77).

⁴² The complexity and frequency with which John's Apocalypse alludes to Old Testament Scripture is so great that it would be difficult to conclude that a writer relying on purely human means of composition could ever construct a kaleidoscopic literary work like Revelation without multiple revisions. Yet the rough grammar and syntax and apparently disjointed sections argue against the work being the result of such revisions.

⁴³ See Beale, *Revelation*, 77–78 for his brief distillation of the debate over text form among Revelation scholars.

what form of the Hebrew Scriptures John had before him as he wove his composition. Nor must we marvel at the complexity and skill with which he assembled the various images from the Old Testament—now here, now there, drawing together multiple passages of Scripture into one loaded phrase. I concur with Beale, who holds that “the references to the OT and its various versions are the result of a mere recording of the actual visions themselves, which would have been influenced by the author’s learned tradition, and of subsequent reflection on the OT during the writing down of the vision. No doubt John would have associated some of his visions and auditions with similar OT passages and would have employed the language of those passages to record what he saw and heard.”⁴⁴

Not only do we find a plethora of Old Testament allusions in Revelation, but we also find distinctly Christian and New Testament allusions as well. Swete provides us with a number of “fairly certain” parallels with New Testament literature of the day.⁴⁵ The presence of these allusions to New Testament thought also fits well within a model of Revelation as a report of the author’s actual experiences. In such a case, John would not have required access to specific New Testament documents, nor be familiar with their content. Rather, allowing for a supernatural origin of John’s visions also allows for access to New Testament themes outside of John’s own capacities.

Independent Textual Units. Aune has pointed out at least twelve independent textual units that “have little to do with their immediate contexts or indeed with the macronarrative of Revelation.”⁴⁶ A possible explanation of the presence of such disjoined units would be that the author was the recipient of a number of successive and episodic supernatural visions, which he wrote down more or less in the order he saw them, rearranging the material very little.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Beale, *Revelation*, 80–81.

⁴⁵ Among these are Rev 3:3 and Matt 24:43; Rev 3:5 and Matt 10:32; Rev 13:10 and Matt 26:52; and Rev 21:6; 22:17 and John 4:10; 7:37. Compare Swete, *Apocalypse*, 40.

⁴⁶ Aune, *Revelation 1–5*, cxix.

⁴⁷ I suppose this is as good (or as poor) a place as any to address very briefly and by way of mere passing comments the numerous allegations of a complex macro-chiastic structure in the book of Revelation or elsewhere in the Bible. With the vast majority of Old and New Testament scholars, I affirm the existence and helpfulness of micro-chiasms, but my feelings toward “macro-chiasms” and the identification of “chiastic structures” has waffled and waned over the last few decades. I find many of the identifications to be arbitrary, forced, or even fantastical. Whereas the identification of micro-chiasms appears to be driven by careful exegesis, the identification of macro-chiasms appears to sometimes trump careful exegesis to force parallels that are not evident in the text (see discussion in Wayne Brouwer, “Understanding Chiasm and Assessing Macro-Chiasm as a Tool of Biblical Interpretation,” *CTW* 53.1 [2018]: 99–127; and for an example of problems with identifying macro-chiasms, see Stanley E. Porter and Jeffrey T. Reed, “Philippians as a Macro-Chiasm and Its Exegetical Significance,” *NTS* 44 [1998]: 213–31). Perhaps I am wrong. Perhaps chiasms are, indeed, almost everywhere. Perhaps many are hiding in the text waiting to be discovered. Or perhaps not. Regardless, because of the general unprovability of chiastic structure, I will not appeal to any alleged chiasms to defend any interpretations of Revelation, and I preemptively reject any rebuttals of my exegetical arguments that rely on chiastic structures. See, e.g., Ed Christian “A Chiasm of Seven Chiasms: The Structure of the Millennial Vision, Rev 19:1–21:8,” *AUSS* 37.2 (Autumn 1999): 209–225; Kenneth Strand, *Interpreting the Book of Revelation*, 2d ed (Naples, FL: Ann Arbor, 1979). While I am addressing chiasms, I might as well also note that I will not be adopting or responding to the claims of scholars who provide well-defined outlines of Revelation and use such identifications to govern the exposition or exegesis of individual passages. Cf. Anthony A. Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 223, who adopts the outline of William Hendriksen (*More Than Conquerors: An*

However, such a view does require a supernaturalist presupposition as well as a traditional Christian view of divine revelation. Therefore, the introduction of sudden, unexpected, and apparently independent visions throughout the otherwise well-structured macro-narrative corroborates the view that John experienced authentic, supernatural prophetic visions that he faithfully reported in literary form.

To What Do the God-Given Visions of Revelation Point?

It has become commonplace to refer to a variety of “approaches” or “interpretive models” for the book of Revelation: futurism, preterism, historicism, and idealism. However, in most cases, expositors employ a kind of eclectic or integrative approach, relying on one of these basic models as the foundation of their reading of Revelation while also drawing on insights from other approaches.⁴⁸ And throughout history, many interpreters have employed a multi-level interpretation similar to the classic fourfold exegesis of biblical texts.

The *futurist* view of the book of Revelation understands the visions and prophecies primarily portraying real events that will take place mostly in the future from our present vantage point.⁴⁹ The futurist perspective enjoyed strong support in the earliest centuries of the church (e.g., Justin Martyr, Irenaeus of Lyons, Hippolytus), but waned in the face of more idealist approaches in the medieval period. In the wake of the Reformation, while Protestant interpreters were identifying historical figures and events as fulfillments of visions in the book of Revelation and often calculating dates for the advent of the kingdom, some Roman Catholic scholars responded by eschewing the historicist understanding of Revelation and opting for a futurist perspective.⁵⁰ Today it is a fairly popular position among conservative evangelical scholars and especially premillennialists who believe the book of Revelation describes in vivid figurative language “the final cataclysmic event that will yet transpire on the earth.”⁵¹

The *preterist* view of Revelation sees the symbolic visions of Revelation as pointing to events that were, at the time of John’s writing, yet future; but from the perspective of present readers the

Interpretation of the Book of Revelation [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1967]: 22–31), which sees progressive parallelism in seven sections (Rev 1–3; 4–7; 8–11; 12–14; 15–16; 17–19; and 20–22). Demonstrable exegesis, not appeals to macro-level outlining, must determine the meaning of individual texts.

⁴⁸ Hoekema, *Bible and the Future*, 69; John Noë, “An Exegetical Basis for a Preterist-Idealist Understanding of the Book of Revelation,” *JETS* 49.4 (2006): 776–96. How one understands the basic thrust of the book of Revelation also tends to affect how one views the timing of the fulfillment of other portions of Scripture related to the eschatological Day of the Lord or Great Tribulation, especially Daniel, the Olivet Discourse, 2 Thessalonians 2, and even 2 Peter 3. In my own contemporary Irenaean millennial approach, I maintain this same consistency, as did the early Christian futurists.

⁴⁹ Thomas, *Revelation 1–7*, 32–34.

⁵⁰ Kenneth G. C. Newport, *Apocalypse and Millennium: Studies in Biblical Eisegesis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 15.

⁵¹ John H. Sailhamer, *Biblical Prophecy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 71.

prophecies were mostly fulfilled in the past. Newport notes, “According to the preterists, most of Revelation was fulfilled within a relatively brief period following the composition of the book. What little was yet to be fulfilled would not occur until the very last stages of the world’s history.”⁵² Most forms of the preterist approach allow for certain aspects of the book to await a future fulfillment with the second coming of Christ, judgment, and resurrection. However, a minority version “sees the whole of the text as referring to events prior to the destruction of Jerusalem...and that the End is fulfilled in Jerusalem’s destruction.”⁵³

The *historicist* view of Revelation identifies events throughout the history of the church from the first century to the return of Christ as being progressively fulfilled. This approach came relatively late on the scene: “Berengaudus (840–92) was the first to suggest that Revelation described events through history to the writer’s day.”⁵⁴ Thus, as Erickson notes, “The historicist sees the apocalyptic as pertaining to events which at the time they were described (the Biblical period) were still future, but which have occurred and are occurring within the lifespan of the church.”⁵⁵ Many sixteenth-century Protestant historicist interpreters identified the Antichrist and the symbol of the Beast and/or False prophet of Revelation 13 as the Pope and the papal system, and through the nineteenth century historicists tended to approach chronological indicators in Revelation like 1,260 days as referring to 1,260 years, and they calculated the timing of future eschatological events based on that assumption. This latter approach often resulted in setting dates yet future to the interpreter, on which particular events were to occur.⁵⁶

The *idealist* view of Revelation understands the symbolic visions as pointing to theological truths or spiritual realities true in every age. Newport notes, “According to the exponents of this approach, the book of Revelation is not to be understood literally at all. Rather in its strange symbols and bizarre images one finds a general commentary on the struggle between good and evil.”⁵⁷ Mounce thus characterizes the book of Revelation as “a theological poem setting forth the ageless struggle between the kingdom of light and the kingdom of darkness.”⁵⁸ This approach to Revelation comes on the scene sometime in the fourth to fifth centuries. It also has found eager adherents among modern interpreters.

To this list, we could also mention the *historical-critical* approach, which would see the book

⁵² Newport, *Apocalypse and Millennium*, 15.

⁵³ Ian Paul, “Introduction to the Book of Revelation,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Apocalyptic Literature*, ed. Colin McAllister (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 53.

⁵⁴ Paul, “Introduction to the Book of Revelation,” 53.

⁵⁵ Millard Erickson, *A Basic Guide to Eschatology: Making Sense of the Millennium* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 30.

⁵⁶ Examples of this abound from almost every theological and ecclesiastical tradition. Baptist preacher Hanserd Knollys calculated the millennium to begin in 1688. Charles Wesley calculated that the end of the world would come in 1794. Samuel Hopkins set the date for the beginning of the Millennium for 2016. And William Miller calculated the end for October 22, 1844. See Newport, *Apocalypse and Millennium*, 20, 28; Noë, “An Exegetical Basis,” 775; Samuel Hopkins, *A Treatise on the Millennium* (Edinburgh: John Ogle, 1794), 108.

⁵⁷ Newport, *Apocalypse and Millennium*, 15.

⁵⁸ Mounce, *Revelation*, 28.

of Revelation written either soon after the time of Nero or sometime in the first century not as a genuine record of prophetic visions, but to a particular audience, reflecting the author's original circumstances. Thus, Newport notes, "In its own context it almost certainly relates to the persecution of Christianity under the Roman Empire, and perhaps under Nero in particular."⁵⁹ Because the historical-critical position regards the book of Revelation as having no quality of divine revelation, it must be interpreted only in light of the author's original context and intent; it cannot refer to anything real either in the heavenly realm or in the future.

Almost nobody holds strictly to one view; most expositors believe the Book of Revelation relates in some way to past events, to ongoing and present realities, and to future fulfillments. Thus, historicist interpreters have understood parts of Revelation to have already been fulfilled in the previous centuries of the church while other aspects refer to the future. Almost all futurists understand at least Revelation 2 and 3 to refer to historical situations of the seven churches in the first century, to spiritual/moral truths relevant to all believers in every age, and typologically to eschatological events. Preterists believe the visions in Revelation were at one time awaiting fulfillment in the future, and most expect some elements of Revelation—especially the final chapters—to be fulfilled in the future. And every view tends to acknowledge the spiritual, moral, and theological relevance of the visions to every Christian of every age, just as all Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, correction, rebuke, and training in righteousness (2 Tim. 3:16). Thus, many have taken an "eclectic" approach to Revelation,⁶⁰ though they usually adopt one of the above models as their foundational approach and draw from other perspectives as they feel the text demands it.

As a historical example, the fourth-century amillennialist, Tyconius, understood the book of Revelation to refer primarily to "the whole time of the church" (Tyconius, *Exp. Apoc.* 2 (4:1)).⁶¹ This places him more in the category of an idealist or historicist, though Tyconius is not completely consistent on this, as he also understood the "hour of trial" that is coming on the whole earth (1 [3:10]) to have both present application as well as to the "last persecution" under the future antichrist.⁶²

⁵⁹ Newport, *Apocalypse and Millennium*, 49.

⁶⁰ See Beale, *Revelation*, 48.

⁶¹ Translation from Tyconius of Carthage, *Exposition of the Apocalypse*, trans. Francis X. Gumerlock, *The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation*, vol. 134 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2017). Cited as Gumerlock, *Tyconius*, 62.

⁶² Gumerlock, *Tyconius*, 56.