

How to say what. Story and interpretation in the Book of Revelation.

Gordon Campbell

Three recent approaches to the story Revelation tells attempt to hunt it down (Alan Garrow),¹ to explore and retell it (David Barr),² or to analyse its component parts (James Resseguie).³ These studies are noteworthy not least because, in making their contribution, all three self-consciously ask *how to say what*, in other words, their proposals offer not just content but reflection on method. This article: 1. briefly surveys past answers to the question *what is Revelation about* from the point of view of the methods employed, hinting that a careful eclecticism is needed; 2. then considers the problem of hermeneutical adequacy (as illustrated by three particular interpretative questions) and highlights the issue of Revelation's unity; 3. finally, the second half of the article examines precisely *how* each selected author conducts a whole-text reading of Revelation, offers an evaluation of their work and makes some suggestions about a way forward for interpretation.

The Book of Revelation has to be getting at something. For all its obscurities the flood of recent books about the Apocalypse in English show that the book is still considered to have meaning

¹ A.J.P. Garrow, *Revelation* [NTR] (London, 1997)

² D.L. Barr, *Tales of the End: A Narrative Commentary on the Book of Revelation* (Santa Rosa, 1998).

³ J.L. Resseguie, *Revelation Unsealed : A Narrative Critical Approach to John's Apocalypse* [Bib.Int 32] (Leiden/ Boston/Cologne, 1998). None of these three works is a commentary in the classical sense, although all three address the whole of Revelation as an entity.

which it is worth taking the trouble to extract. What remains far from agreed is, *how we get at it*. So, behind any answer to the question of *what is Revelation about* lurks the interpreter, and *what he or she is about* (with their agenda, tools and methods). Since “methodological imperialism is passing from the scene,”⁴ and as the methods being applied to Revelation proliferate, now is a good time to ask *how?*

Given today’s bewildering diversity of interpretative approach – as true in Revelation studies as in other areas – one might ask if the multifarious readings of Revelation found on today’s library or book-shop shelves are moving the interpretative task forward. Before assessing three such contributions, we must do two things: Set the question of *how one should read Revelation* in context, to see what is at stake; and first and foremost give a rapid survey of interpretative approaches (*Revelation is about...*), albeit minus both detail and finesse.⁵

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What is Revelation about? There are, in the first place, those who still want to say *Revelation is about us*.⁶ Here, the interpreter always trumps the text, by saying *this in the book means that in our experience*. Where the interpreter stands takes precedence over where John stood, on the assumption that the fog which beclouded

⁴ Joel Green, *The Challenge of Hearing the New Testament*, in J.B. Green (ed.), *Hearing the New Testament: Strategies for Interpretation* (Grand Rapids, 1995), p. 6.

⁵ For a proper digest of interpretation ancient or modern, see A. W. Wainwright, *Mysterious Apocalypse. Interpreting the Book of Revelation* (Nashville, 1993). Regretfully, we virtually restrict ourselves to English-language contributions in this section.

⁶ Hal Lindsey’s decoding of Revelation’s visions in terms of the Cold War and the arms race is probably the most famous recent example (*There’s a New World Coming*, New York, 1975).

John has cleared, allowing us to see.⁷ This could be called the *my time* approach – reading Revelation with an eye on one’s watch.

Hardly anybody now argues that *Revelation is about unfolding history*, programmatic of whole epochs and stages of human development, a huge canvas painted only with broad monochrome brushstrokes till the interpreter, with hindsight, comes and adds perspective, detail and colour.⁸ But there is no shortage of voices to insist that *Revelation is about the End*, that most or all of the book relates to our world’s final tomorrow, that its pages contain some calendar of the future.⁹ We will call these *all time* and *future time* standpoints, respectively, from which to view the Apocalypse.

These interpretative angles on time and history all involve reading meaning into rather than out of the book.¹⁰ The corrective has been

⁷ Another interpretation of this sort, with centuries of pedigree, takes the gaudy whore of chapter seventeen to be the Roman or papal Church – a line sometimes toed by Protestantism, but actually as old as the Montanists. Yet another approach, just as interested in the prostitute but for very different reasons, is post-modern and current, taking John and his depictions of women (from a gender-specific, feminist perspective) to be a misogynist – thus Tina Pippin, *Death and Desire: The Rhetoric of Gender in the Apocalypse of John* (Louisville, 1992). Other deconstructionist approaches belong here, too.

⁸ Related to the previous approach, in this case the interpreter usually situates his or her own era at the ultimate or penultimate level. E.B. Elliott’s three-volume *Horae Apocalypticae* (London, 1846) remain unrivalled in their detailed proposal as to how *this in the book equals that in the history of the West*.

⁹ The assumption that *this in the book means that in tomorrow’s world* plays an important part in the mature, sober exegesis of R.H. Mounce, (*The Book of Revelation*, Grand Rapids, 1998² [first edition, 1977]); it also underpins the wholesale schematising of Revelation’s data into a timetable of end-time events which characterises dispensationalist readings.

¹⁰ It might seem, at first sight, that futurist interpretation cannot be so accused, since tomorrow (being future) is currently unknown. However, this is mere sleight-of-hand, since *future time* still functions in an

to pay closer attention to what Revelation itself is saying about time and history. Academic study of Revelation has therefore largely wanted to say *Revelation is about the first century*. The aim is to safeguard Revelation's relevance to its very first readers by discerning how the book relates to its first-century context.

Scholarship has a short memory, and can give the impression that there is only one variant of this approach: *Revelation is about first-century Roman Asia*.¹¹ Generally, this is a two-part model combining (i) reconstruction of life in Ephesus and her sister-cities in the 90s C.E. – attempting to describe *Asian Christian experience* as interpreters of Paul would for Corinth or Philippi in the 50s C.E.; and (ii) a hermeneutic where *this in the text relates to that in the social realities* (political and religious) *as historically reconstructed*.

An older, forgotten consensus applied a similar strategy while following an alternative paradigm: *Revelation is about the demise of Second Temple Judaism*. Here, John's recipients are caught up in a rift not with the post-Jamnia synagogues but with the Church's Jewish detractors in the pre-70 C.E. period.¹² The set of social realities is different, and an alternative construction is put on textual

identical way as an external lever for prising meaning out of the text. We are emphatically *not* saying, here, that Revelation should not, at some point in the interpretative process, speak to the reader in his or her time-frame (whether *my*, *all* or *future*, for the sake of argument): What we are contesting is the correctness of situating this at the starting-point – it ought to come at or near the end.

¹¹ Most modern scholarly work not only assumes this, but considers it the only legitimate assumption.

¹² This consensus was still adhered to by M.S. Terry, *Biblical Apocalypstics* (Grand Rapids, 1988 [1898]), whose commentary on Revelation (pp.253-481) engages with early proponents of what was to become the dominant twentieth-century view.

materials thought to refer to externals. But both versions might be conveniently labelled *NT time* constructs.¹³

Dropping anchor within the first-century is a fundamentally correct effort to read meaning out of, and not into, the text. Nevertheless, like the three methods already sketched, this strategy too, unless supplemented and corrected, risks imposing realism on a text characterised, instead, by symbolism. Realism is the view that John's *real* story lies not in the apocalyptic symbol-laden tale he tells but in a *real life* story which this one supposedly allegorises.

Whenever the reigning academic model wants to lock Revelation's meaning firmly into contemporary history, or the other approaches seek to tie it into all of history or future history, the result is the same: straitjacketing the perceived message of the book into a particular referential framework to which John's diction is obliged to conform.¹⁴ But it is not at all clear that *this* (or any) apocalypse relates to history in the way thoroughgoing realism posits.¹⁵

We have space to note just one other type of reading which sits more loosely to history and either relativizes or discards time in favour of a different kind of frame – thought, or experience. Here, the interpreter prefers meaningful and timeless ideas to history and,

¹³ These two strategies place Revelation somewhere in the second half of the first century, the period most scholars take as sufficient for situating the genesis of all the NT documents.

¹⁴ A good example of an interpreter unusually alive to the internal subtleties of John's language and message, but nonetheless hamstrung by allegiance to the externals of the *Roman Asia consensus* in the scholarly guild, is Eugene Boring, *Revelation* (Louisville, 1989).

¹⁵ We cannot, here, explore how Revelation might or might not fit a particular historical and social matrix, or broach the complex questions raised by the notions apocalypse, apocalyptic eschatology and apocalypticism, or even review what might be meant by a revelatory account; J.J. Collins considers such issues in *The Apocalyptic Imagination* (Grand Rapids/Cambridge, 1997²), especially ch.1, The Apocalyptic Genre (pp.1-42).

once assembled, they say *Revelation is about Christian life on earth* – nowadays, understood in a positive way.¹⁶ Christian interpreters all aspire to reaching this point eventually, whatever interpretative snakes and ladders they went up or down en route. Based on the perceived theological value of the book, a maxim is formulated and followed: *This in the book inspires that in our Christian living*, in terms of worship,¹⁷ resistance under persecution¹⁸ or simply robust Bible reading.¹⁹ This method could be called *time for the text*; when used to qualify and curtail a flexible, *NT time* sort of reading, a framework begins to emerge for hearing this highly symbolical and rhetorical first-century text.

Just enough has been said to show that we are basically arguing, here, for a certain, deliberate “reasoned eclecticism” (as Guthrie

¹⁶ It was not, of course, always so. Retributive judgment and hellfire were predominant mediaeval focuses grounded in Revelation. The disparagement or more often, the silence of classic theological liberalism concerning the book is probably to be explained by a distaste for the ideas and ideals it was thought to commend, such as the too pressing reality and power of the demonic, its picture of a God given to gory vengeance, and the like.

¹⁷ Readers, depending on their churchmanship, may think of various masses, cantatas, or worship songs which Revelation has inspired in contemporary church music.

¹⁸ We have read the recent German translation of a commentary born in the context of the wartime Nazi occupation of the Low Countries, written by Kleijs Kroon (*Der Sturz der Hure Babylon*, tr. Berlin, 1988); for the relevance of Revelation to oppressed black Christians in apartheid South Africa, compare A.A. Boesak, *Comfort and Protest - The Apocalypse from a South-African Perspective* (Philadelphia, 1987).

¹⁹ We may note, here, the welcome rehabilitation in our day of Revelation as a Christian book, as exemplified by the painstaking work of Richard Bauckham (*The Climax of Prophecy*, Edinburgh, 1993, and *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, Cambridge, 1993).

calls it)²⁰ in interpretation. And most recent interpreters of Revelation have, in point of fact, combined two or more strategies. So, then, the question *how*, to which we now move, can only be answered in the plural.

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What should take methodological priority? The problem can be approached via the following limerick:

*There once was a hacker called John
Who typed **caelum.org** and logged on
He downloaded a story
Of conflict and glory
And a virus: Now the formatting's gone...*

Limericks have severe limitations, yet this little piece of doggerel does highlight some key issues and help us reflect on *how we get at what John is getting at*. First, let us unpack the limerick's baggage – one piece per line – in a simple *this equals that* equation, intentionally reminiscent of much past interpretation of Revelation. We are, by the way, claiming knowledge of authorial intention: The limerick's real author (behind its narrator) and the present writer are one and the same!

There once was a hacker called John: Dubbing John a hacker is grossly anachronistic. But readers will recognise an analogy; the seer who saw and heard what the Apocalypse recounts is being assimilated to modern computer hackers. Where do the similarities lie? In anonymity and ingenuity. The unknown master of web technology who breaks into a supposedly secure site or system, exploiting and divulging what is found there, somehow resembles the almost nameless and faceless medium John whose astral travelling, entrancement or altered state of consciousness made him party to hidden knowledge, which he then revealed.

²⁰ George Guthrie, *Boats in the Bay: Reflections on the Use of Linguistics and Literary Analysis in Biblical Studies*, in S.E. Porter & D.A. Carson (ed.), *Linguistics and the New Testament* (Sheffield, 1999), p.35.

Who typed caelum.org and logged on: You can visit a web-site, watch, listen to, chat about and otherwise interact with what is going on there, yet this multimedia experience remains only *virtual* reality (though tied to the real world of monitors, speakers and headphones), summed up in the one pregnant word *online*. John, in the analogy, had a server connecting him to heaven and letting him see, hear, discuss and participate in heaven-centred action tied in to his ordinary *here and now* but belonging to another *then and there*.

He downloaded a story: New capacity (software), or maybe new music, pictures and film clips (via digital technology), or new text-based information in word-processed documents – once downloaded to disk – can be used and enjoyed, manipulated, modified and shared. Similarly, John in this scenario clicked on a ‘story,’ domesticated it for his own and his readership’s use and profit, filtered it through his mind and related it to his and their experience.

Of conflict and glory: Here, like the document saved to disk with a pithy title, the limerick encapsulates what the ‘story’ is in just two words, *conflict* and *glory*. The claim is that John has told his story in such a way as to make these two themes central, encapsulating what the entire narrative is basically about.

And a virus: Now the formatting’s gone...: The sting of online pleasure is the virus lurking undetected in an e-mail which, if it infects the hard disk, will wreak some degree of havoc with the files. By comparison, some concealed disruptive element has caused trouble with John’s document so that, when it flashes up on our screen, the formatting has gone haywire and we read some or all of it as gobbledegook.

What are the five interpretative options hidden in the rhyme? In a question and answer format, they are:

1. Who was John and what did he get up to? One minority view says John was an otherwise unknown astral prophet

whose esoteric visionary experience lies behind what is now Revelation.²¹

2. What is the fiction we are dealing with? Some would say Revelation comes dressed as an original report of a visionary ascent, in the trappings that mark such scenarios.²²
3. What sort of book is the end-product? Sifted by his personality, filtered through a religious world-view and experience his readers share, John has come up with a finished article whose genre is best called 'narrative'.²³
4. What is the book about? Revelation may be subtle and complex, but this question has received many short answers; one such calls it a book about conflict and glory.²⁴
5. Why so much disagreement? Revelation is persistently called gobbledegook, because of alleged interference affecting what the writing transmits or what the reader receives (or both); the remedy? either rearrange the text or – more frequently – re-educate the reader.

The five questions can be rephrased as tasks, or as handles for grasping at Revelation's meaning: Characterisation of its author;

²¹ Thus Bruce Malina, *On the Genre and Message of Revelation: Star Visions and Sky Journeys* (Peabody, 1995) and, by extension, B. Malina and J.J. Pilch, *Social-Science Commentary on the Revelation of John* (Minneapolis, 2000).

²² John Sweet, *Revelation* (London, 1990), pp.43,44, takes this view.

²³ Pierre Prigent, *L'Apocalypse de St. Jean* (Geneva, 2000), p.64, for example, characterises Revelation as a blend of narrative (vision report) and prophecy.

²⁴ 'Conflict and glory' is our own, tongue-in-cheek proposal. One can even encounter encapsulations of Revelation in just one word, of which 'worship' might be the least misleading.

identification of his original revelatory experience; definition of his book by form, function and content; description of what he basically meant to say; and sorting bad interpretations of his message from good.

Not the *only* or even necessarily the *chief* interpretative tasks, these are just *some* tasks which potentially face *any* serious interpreter of Revelation, and they introduce us to a problematic: *How we get at what John is getting at*. The nature of visionary experience will concern us no further here, and we will return to the question of John as author below (see our discussion of Garrow). The remaining three tasks ever so innocently turn out to address our *how* question, and we must now make this explicit.

First point five. The lingering charge is that Revelation is gobbledegook, insider language, a religious code, accessible only to those readers trained in unscrambling it. The allegation must be rebutted; put politely, calling only code-cracking interpretations of Revelation 'good' is confiscation of the text and a case of *how not to handle it*; moreover, this has had two unfortunate corollaries:

- habitually looking outside the text for *this equals that* solutions to supposedly insoluble conundrums: while this worked well for decompressing our limerick just now, it is a category mistake to be deplored in the case of Revelation; and,
- (worse still) failing to engage seriously with the text in its rich complexity, and causing Revelation's obvious élan to come to a grinding halt²⁵ through exegetical imprecision and lack of literary and theological imagination.

Next task three, which we will use to illustrate the *how* question. Whatever else Revelation may be, the limerick is right to call it a narrative with its own 'story' to tell. Exegesis and interpretation have to find *how* to study and appreciate what holds Revelation

²⁵ This is Jacques Ellul's complaint in *L'Apocalypse, architecture en mouvement* (Paris, 1975), which has largely gone unheeded.

together and what keeps it moving along. As to what *sort* of narrative Revelation is, we will briefly deal with this issue in our closing section.

Lastly point four. If Beethoven met the musicologist who proposed the true but banal insight that the rhythmic motif *puh-puh-puh-pom* is an interpretative key to most of his renowned fifth symphony, he would probably say “ don’t come to the concert.” Similarly, the very idea of boiling down Revelation’s contents to a series of propositions is wrong-headed; it is another example of *how not to handle the text*, of a method which literally kills Revelation’s many-sidedness, movement and vitality,²⁶ characteristics which any one-sitting reading (silent or audible) would pick up.

In other words, neatly boxing Revelation into stultifying categories radically impoverishes John’s work. In saying *what Revelation is about* there must be sensitive interpretation able to account for Revelation’s narrative verve and capable of reflecting something of the depth, breadth and scope of thematic development in the book. Is scholarship ready to meet the challenge?

We believe it is, because of a crucial conclusion around which a strong consensus has formed and upon which, in our view, Revelation studies can resolutely build. In spite of David Aune’s recent, massively erudite three-volume assertion to the contrary,²⁷

²⁶ Ellul again, *op.cit.*, pp.54,55.

²⁷ D.E. Aune, *Revelation 1-5* [WBC 52a], (Dallas, 1997), *Revelation 6-16* [WBC 52b] and *Revelation 17-22* [WBC 52c] (Nashville, 1998). Other recent commentaries had occasionally still advocated a composite view, such as Heinrich Kraft in Germany (*Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, Tübingen, 1974) or Josephine Ford in the United States (*Revelation*, Garden City, 1975). Aune has exhaustively furnished parallel external evidence for better measuring the diction and thought of Revelation, but the interpretative priority he gives to externals borders on parallelomania, distracting exegetical and theological attention from what *what this text uniquely says*. Like Pierre Prigent for instance (*op.cit.*, p.69), we remain profoundly unconvinced by Aune’s *a priori* hypothesis of disparate, pre-existing components assembled later into our Apocalypse; this view still

most scholars now take Revelation to be the intricate compositional unity that Father Allo already demonstrated it to be nearly eighty years ago, when he took on source-critical theory in its heyday.²⁸ Richard Bauckham's careful work has permitted him to reinforce this conclusion: "Revelation... is not simply a literary unity, but actually one of the most unified works in the New Testament."²⁹ We have found in our own research that what is borne out by the data of the text is indeed the view that Revelation is an organically unified narrative.³⁰ Our three dialogue partners here all share this view.

Before turning to their contributions we must first, however, press the point that Rev.1:1-22:21 is to be read as a subtly composed and carefully disposed unity, by asking what would be the consequence (for *how we get at what John is getting at*) if scholarship rigorously set itself to do so. Surely it is simply this: That *what Revelation is about* could only be construed as *what it is ALL about*. In other words, faced with as nuanced and internally coherent a narrative as John's, nothing short of a detailed and subtle account of its complex goings-on will do as a means to obtaining an accurate reflection of its contents and purpose. It is from this resolutely whole-text perspective that we now cursorily examine our three chosen interpretations.

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partially wields Charles' old brush for tarring and feathering the allegedly stupid hypothetical final redactor (*The Revelation of St. John*, Edinburgh, 1920, vol.1, 1, IV The Editor of the Apocalypse, where is expressed the view that Rev.20:4ss "exhibits a hopeless mental confusion and a tissue of irreconcilable contradictions.")

²⁸ E.-B. Allo, *St. Jean, l'Apocalypse* (Paris, 1933) was responding especially to Charles.

²⁹ *The Climax of Prophecy* (Edinburgh, 1993), ch.1 Structure and Composition, p.1, n.1.

³⁰ This has been our own working hypothesis during doctoral research on Revelation from the perspective of its unity of theme (thesis forthcoming).

Alan Garrow thinks John has certainly downloaded a 'story,' summarised (in John's own words, not Garrow's), as *what must soon take place*, Rev.1:1 – yet, he also thinks the formatting has gone, since after this beginning John “ then goes on to confuse us utterly.”³¹ For Garrow, however, it is not that the story's events have got scrambled by some incompetent editor. Instead, the book's hitherto undetected structure (or, ' story organisation,' p.14) has confused readers for centuries – fir this author, not the text as garbled transmitter but the reader as muddled receiver is at fault.

Garrow's principal chapter (pp.14-65) aims to show the hapless reader the story in the text. That story, assumed to involve only action on earth (e.g. p.60), is identified with the contents of the main scroll introduced in Rev.5:1-9 (for Garrow, following Bauckham, one and the same as its diminutive look-alike in 10:1ss). This story's narrative skeleton is first exposed [in 6:1-17, 7:9-17, 8:2-9:21 (with 11:14), 10:1-11 and 11:1-13], before being clad in flesh [by 12:1-14:4, 15:6-16:21 and 19:11b-21:8] in the remainder of the book. Garrow calls the bones 'foreshadowings' – their function is to anticipate – and the flesh ' direct revelations ' (functionally speaking, recountings) of the scroll's contents.

Then an original and provocative case is made for seeing Revelation as a serialised text in six instalments of roughly equal length (where 3:22, 8:1, 11:18, 15:4 and 19:10 represent the 'breaks') and with parallel characteristics (such as suspense build-up, a closing hymn, or a new 'opening'), where episode one (1:1-3:22) majors on getting the audience's attention and insuring they switch on again next week, and every episode finishes with a Eucharist.

Stories often surprise. So, just when we expect Garrow “ to examine the story-telling passages... and demonstrate that the characters therein perform a coherent sequence of actions with respect to one another ” (pp.63, 65), so proving that his structural theory is well-

³¹ Op.cit., p.124. What is significant is that this is Garrow's way of beginning his own *conclusion*. Partly, of course, this is because his book claims to “ solve the age-old problem “ of just what the story is.

founded, he instead says (in a nutshell) *this method is incapable of getting at what the story means!* Why must John's (still untold!) story be labelled, in advance, as inherently incomprehensible? Because – surprise, surprise – what the story means is to be found not in the text, but outside it. Why? Because Revelation is like a political cartoon strip – meaningless “without knowledge of the circumstances on which the cartoonist was commenting” (p.65). Interaction with the questions this remark raises about Revelation's function and purpose would, alas, require a different article!

Of course, Garrow himself tells a good story, and short-changing his reader like this is just postponement. Later, we do get interpretation of 12:1-14:5 (in seven sections), 15:6-21, 17:1-18 (itself an interpretation of the previous unit) and 19:11-21:8 – all summarised in terms of their principal characters and main action (pp.80-102), then helpfully diagrammed (pp.104-17) “to show the broad flow of the events depicted.”

But what has Garrow done here? He has, crucially, stepped *outside* the text of Revelation in search of a referential framework into which to insert its story. The one he finds, like the rest of his book, shows originality, for he glosses the sixth seal as inspired by the eruption of Vesuvius (in 79 C.E.), takes Titus to be reigning emperor and considers the socio-political climate of Roman Asia around the year 80 to be about right for the popular imagination to be haunted by the idea of a returning Nero. Garrow, here, makes a familiar hermeneutical move to the high ground of time and history, to protect the story which John's hearers would have understood, and prevent it becoming some other fanciful tale in the hands of today's undisciplined interpreter.

But was John really a pundit? An otherwise unknown ancient equivalent of a political editor, chronicling and interpreting imperial events for subscribers who more or less shared his perspective? And does Revelation therefore ‘reveal’ the insights of a first-century journalist? Further, do we accept Garrow's implicit claim that our modern reconstructed history of the events (assuming we have got the right ones) is actually the *true story*, or that this *other story* constitutes the interpretative key to unlocking any remaining gobbledygook in John's account?

We can formulate just one criticism here: *Overhasty extrapolation*. On the theoretical assumption that “ the meaning of a text is dependent on the context in which it is read ” (and with the further assumption that we can closely reproduce that context, pp.1-4), Garrow has allegorised John’s story before it has even been heard, thus neglecting the literary phenomena (including the knotty problem of who the hearers are), and electing not to listen to John’s story on its own terms. This is realism untempered by literary appreciation, and Garrow’s final chapter (*Why this story?*, pp.118-23) – which characterises John’s (still unexplored!) story as *polemic response* – is, to say the least, premature.³²

David Barr, by contrast, appears to give John time to tell his own tale, claiming *only* to be interested in Revelation as a story – how it is told, whom it is about, what it consists of, where it is going (preface, x). Before exploring the narrative’s discourse (the way the story is told), Barr does say what for him the story is about: “ The Apocalypse is in its most basic sense a retelling of (the) story of Jesus in a new way and with new images ” (p.3). This is not, however, reductionism but basically pedagogy, so as to orientate the reader at the start of a prologue designed to alert him or her to matters of story content, Revelation’s genre and world-view, visual and audible symbols, structure and plot, audience and characters, and time and place (pp.1-24).

For Barr, John’s story consists of three-tales-in-one or three narrative segments: *Letter Scroll* (1:1-3:22), *Worship Scroll* (4:1-11:18) and *War Scroll* (11:19-22:21). What distinguishes the second from the first is a shift in setting, from earth (or, normal time and space) to the heavenly throne-room (called extra-normal time and space), and what legitimises the claim that there is a ‘ new story ’ after 11:19 is the change in main actor from God to the dragon (pp.101-02) as well as a further shift into “ meta-time and meta-space ” (p.121). Episode three then profits from the change

³² We have said enough in this brief précis to make it clear that Garrow’s work has considerable merit; here, however, we cannot give various important issues he raises the attention they deserve.

brought about by number two to take us back to the concerns of episode one: The letters “ sketched the need for struggle,” the worship scroll showed “ the mode of God’s victory ” and now the war scroll delves “ more deeply into the conflict ” (p.102), explaining “ why it is that Jesus can instruct the churches... and enable the worship of God ” (p.149).

Garrow located Revelation’s main story in the second half of the book. Barr, similarly, calls sub-story three “ the strongest section of John’s writing,” a judgment he substantiates by study of the care with which the author has written it. By a procedure already employed for the first two scrolls, the story elements are isolated and discussed (pp.103-22) under the headings war stories, characters old and new, settings (places and times) and plot. Following this analysis, Barr then provides a synthetic commentary on the story action (pp.122-45) in eight narrative scenes (11:19-12:17; 12:18-13:18; 14:1-20; 15:1-16:21; 17:1-19:10; 19:11-21:8; 21:9-22:7; and 22:8-21), for each of which the details are interpreted via *readers’ notes* (again, as in the previous sections).

Like Garrow, Barr envisages Revelation being performed (though not in a serialised way) in the context of worship including a Eucharist (p.180). Unlike Garrow he largely refrains from extrapolating out from Revelation’s story to the social setting with which it might reverberate until he has thoroughly worked over the story with the tools of narrative criticism. It is only in his epilogue that he considers the relationship between author and audience (pp.160-64) and examines the social situation of Jews and Christians in the Roman world (pp.164-69), before venturing to describe Revelation’s aim as that of promoting “ consistent resistance ” to the encroachments of Roman culture. John’s Revelation, on this view, told a story which powerfully sought to take its hearers, via ritual transformation, “ into a community of a shared vision of the struggle between Roman culture and Christian conviction ” (p.180).

Barr's assessment of Revelation's *Sitz im Leben* thus accords with the predominant view.³³ As with Garrow's reading, we want to ask if he did methodological justice to the *what* question, in other words, we are once more asking *did he go about it right?* Barr himself offers the exhortation "Revelation was primarily a story to be heard... learn to listen," and sets out (preface, xi) to furnish the reader with knowledge and resources for arriving at a viable interpretation of the book. Has he succeeded?

Yes and no. One successful outcome is Barr's refinement and popularising of contemporary literary theory, initiating the neophyte into its resources and showing how to use them to mine some of Revelation's considerable wealth. And one glaring weakness comes from asking a solely literary set of questions of John's book; Barr largely fails to assimilate answers found to other kinds of question already asked of *Revelation as a unified entity* – in particular, the materials provided by many commentators who, when faced with Revelation as a whole, integrated their attention to its nature and function as a literary work³⁴ with historical and other concerns.

Barr's tools, methods and goals in *Tales of the End* prepare us for Resseguie's narrative critical approach to Revelation, and its yet more rigorous use of modern literary theory. Instead of walking his

³³ Thus Jonathan Knight, *Revelation* (Sheffield, 1999), whose revised Domitianic hypothesis may certainly be seen as representative.

³⁴ We ought not to forget that although literary theory has metamorphosed from one –ism to another, changing its philosophy and discarding old tools/methods while fashioning new ones as it goes, study of Revelation as literature has been going on for a long time. A good example is the literary awareness that series of similar judgments means understanding Revelation's goings-on as something other than chronological, an insight present in the very earliest commentary on Revelation that we possess: Victorinus, in about 260 C.E., said in relation to the seals, trumpets and bowls, "nec requirendus est ordo in Apocalypsi, sed intellectus requirendus." Every interpreter owes a debt of gratitude to predecessors; but more than showing gratitude, there is a duty to preserve, transmit and incorporate into interpretation valid insights from the past.

readers through Revelation and alerting them to what is going on along the way, Resseguie as it were backlights the whole text of the Apocalypse in advance as 'narrative,' then carefully spotlights it from five successive angles: rhetoric (numerals, repetition, metaphor and simile); point of view (or narrative modes, covering space, time, emotion, speech and values); setting (or environment, including space, time and also mood); character (characters are 'round,' 'flat' or 'stock'); and lastly plot (involving issues of causality, conflict, suspense and 'defamiliarisation,' or jolting the reader's perceptions). All these analytical tools are explained and their use illustrated (pp.1-27), before they are applied in turn to Revelation.

A final preliminary issue (in this he parallels Garrow) concerns the vexed question, for narrative theory, of where to put the reader. Is the reader of a text to be situated *in it* (with the structuralists, hunting for the one reader who fits the text), *over it* (with any and all subjectivists who say *Revelation* – or any text – *is about us readers*) or *with it* (which unites text and any potential reader in an interactive dialogue)?

Resseguie adopts a form of the third view, seeing possibilities for the author-text-reader relationship optimistically; his is a reader who has worked hard at doing three things: Becoming like one of John's original audience (with its world-view or attitudes); acquiring the author's 'repertoire' which, to refer back to our limerick, is something like virus crunching or maybe self-formatting in "literary and cultural competence" (p.30); and finally, adopting the active role John envisaged for his reader (for example trying to figure out what chapters 6-22 have to do with the seven churches, or what the relationship is between seals, trumpets and bowls, or how Revelation's visions and auditions square up to one another).

Resseguie distils all this literary theory so as to kit his reader out for making an adequate appraisal of Revelation as narrative. The tools certainly look sharp enough once applied to the dismantled text (pp.32-192). Grasp of an overall story begins to emerge when, at the final stage, he considers plot and structure (pp.160ff.) and analyses

Revelation chapter by chapter as an example of the standard U-shaped pattern of comedy.³⁵ Resseguie shows greater sophistication here than Garrow: Initial stability is on earth; final stability is in both earth and heaven; in chapters 6-19, not just from 11:19 onwards, instabilities are on earth but seen from a heavenly viewpoint. [Personally, we would go farther, locating Revelation's deliberate ambiguity on the heaven-earth distinction at the moment of heavenly ascent in 4:1 and charting its progress up to and including the abolition of the frontier in the final vision]

Prior to plot analysis, Resseguie explores the data from three angles: Point of view/rhetoric (pp.32-69) examines the different aspects of narrative perspective which, we might say, colour what is happening where it is happening; setting (pp.70-102) entails recognising John's topographical or architectural places as essentially 'spiritual' (perhaps 'symbolic' would be better) rather than 'physical' – try finding Armageddon on any map – and several 'props' (like scrolls, or trumpets) are also studied; lastly, most space is reserved for character (pp.103-59) and notably, a sustained contrast between 'demonic characters' and corresponding earth-and-heaven characters.

Resseguie's careful attention to narrative components and how they fit together might frustrate readers more interested in, say, historical criticism or a theological appreciation of Revelation.³⁶ But if, as we

³⁵ I.e., moving from stability through misfortune back to happy ending. Resseguie opts for a linear view of Revelation's development, rejecting the idea of recapitulation. Scholars remain divided here (see M.E. Boring, *Revelation*, in M.A. Powell (ed.) *The New Testament Today* (Louisville, 1999). However, the data of the text (notably, the septets) fit a hybrid view best, since they prove that John, as he proceeds, is both going back over old ground and also – often simultaneously – advancing into new territory. If recapitulation is circular, and progress is linear, then the hybrid model (which we favour) is a spiral.

³⁶ In fact, Resseguie finishes (pp.193-209) with a sevenfold *reprise* of Revelation from the standpoint of its theological significance; whilst this means he keeps faith with his intention of resolutely applying narrative criticism to Revelation, the chapter (in our view) fails to capitalise on the

have urged, *what Revelation is about* means *what it is ALL about*, then putting together and using this sort of narrative tool-kit for dismantling and reassembling the workings of the story is what is needed. For the cumulative effect of these analyses is that, by the time the interpreter is faced with the task (on the macro-level of plot and structure), of describing Revelation's unity of action from its origin through complication to final dénouement, he or she has developed a critical awareness of the density and complexity of the sophisticated story being told. In this way, we avoid truncating Revelation's story or yielding to the temptation to tell another.

Barr's endnotes and Resseguie's footnotes show that both endorse the findings of other methodologies for studying Revelation. Neither scholar attempts much dialogue – Resseguie's declared aim was literary introduction to the Apocalypse (p.1), so he is hardly to be faulted for achieving it. However, both studies in building up a narrative critical dossier on Revelation, manage to avoid the danger of retreating into narratology's ivory tower. What must still be attempted, though, is the integration of literary critical expertise with other interpretative skills appropriate to the handling of a book like Revelation, and the synthesis of the results obtained with the data other, compatible analyses provide.

* * *

What might such compatible strategies be if we are to progress farther along the interpretative road which Revelation's essential literary unity opens up? Only two, modest suggestions will now be made.

First, if the bottom line argued here is that we can no longer neglect interaction with Revelation as a self-contained narrative, the question remains of exactly *what sort of narrative* it is; our answers (plural, in the case of Revelation)³⁷ determine how we treat the text. In this connection, we are content here to unzip only one

rich gains of the foregoing study, and reads something like theological afterthoughts.

³⁷ Corresponding to the book's mixed genre.

file, already very compressed but innocuously labelled **ot.zip**, containing three documents all needing additional work:

- *Is Revelation apocalyptic or prophecy?* A well-known and largely unresolved controversy, but for our purposes one aspect of it remains insufficiently explored: *the formal*. The work already done to situate John's Revelation over against Jewish, Christian and other apocalypses needs to be matched by, and later integrated with, careful study of the phenomena that link it almost genetically to the Old Testament books of Isaiah, Ezekiel, Daniel and Zechariah. We have in mind not just intertextual allusions or echoes, but whole-book literary and rhetorical concerns (such things as structures and patterns, imagery and themes, concerns and world-view...)
- *Where did John get this story?* "From Christian experience in 90s C.E. Ephesus" has become the virtually unanimous answer from the NT guild, but we have objected to this view's monopoly. A lot has been made of Revelation's alleged relationship to what little we know about Asian history under the Flavians; so far, only a little has been said about the book's possible connections with a lot of salvation history in the Hebrew Scriptures. The question is, *how does John's story relate to the story or stories the Hebrew Scriptures tell?*
- *What is Revelation's theology?* By analogy with Bauckham,³⁸ who approaches this question with the conviction "the literary and theological greatness are not separable" (p.22), we see a sustainable account of the theology of Revelation as being derivative of a full account of *what the book says and how it says it*. Systematic categories are still pressed into service for this task³⁹

³⁸ *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (Cambridge, 1993).

³⁹ For example, in Georg Strecker's *Theology of the New Testament* (Berlin/New York, 2000) – completed following Strecker's death in 1994

whereas, in keeping with the two previous points, it seems to us that only Biblical Theology can do the data justice. New Testament theology, in this instance, will have to reinvent itself and abandon abstraction for categories that attempt some kind of dynamic equivalence. Just as today, endangered antelope get to roam in managed parks instead of languishing in tiny zoo enclosures, so Revelation's theology needs uncaged, needs room to run.

Second, to return to the issue of 'story,' it is the present writer's opinion that work is only beginning on *how John tells his story*. Careful consideration of *how to explore how he does it* is therefore called for. For the Revelation explorer's kit, one appropriate *method* for studying the narrative, and one type of *analytical implement* for doing the job may be suggested: When examining our three chosen studies and their theoretical bases (in so far as these were explicit), neither this method nor the relevant tools were in evidence. We are talking about *theme* and how to study it.

Resseguie's last chapter does offer "a recapitulation of some of the major theological themes touched upon" (p.194), but since the subjects he summarily deals with (Church, evil, God, worship, salvation, Christ and the future) were not scrutinised by the foregoing literary analysis, this chapter turns out to be a lengthy postscript which, like all postscripts, basically says *I forgot*.

Indeed there is confusion, here, between 'theme' as an interpreter's propositional conclusions about the subject matter abstracted out of a narrative (as something *extraneous to the text*),⁴⁰ and 'theme' as a

by F.W. Horn (German edition, 1996) and translated into English by Eugene Boring – section D.IV The Coming of the Lamb – the Apocalyptic John (pp.515-45), we find after an introduction three headings: *christology*, (almost entirely expressed via christological predicates, with little or no feeling for the dynamic figures of the one like a son of man, the strong angel, the Messiah on his horse or the ubiquitous slain-but-standing lamb); *ecclesiology*; and *ethics*.

⁴⁰ This is, of course, a common understanding of theme. It is what Jonathan Knight means (op.cit.) when, in his conclusion, he groups under

heuristic category for analysing the content, structure or progress of the narrative itself (something contained *within the text*). The latter, with its subsets such as topic, motif or leitmotiv, has traditionally been as much a part of basic literary appreciation as, say, characterisation or locale or plot (all of which Barr and Resseguie study): Now in literature, just as settings change, characters evolve and plots unfold, so also do themes develop;⁴¹ in arriving at a literary appreciation, *all* these aspects – each distinct and each irreducible – must be given due weight.

The compositional sophistication of John's narrative is now increasingly recognised. Put surgically, Revelation as a composition needs to be dissected so as to understand both its anatomy (structure and form) and its physiology (function). One factor in Revelation's broad cohesion as a text, aiding the complex organisation or articulation of its parts into a whole, is theme – literary investigation of Revelation must now address this. Thus, today's discourse analysis may borrow from yesterday's older literary criticism.

If dissection too readily suggests the laceration of something dead, we should simultaneously speak of pursuing life-studies of theme (something like following a two-year-old around for a day). What we have in view here is a dynamic, with the interpreter as it were running alongside the thematic materials as they follow their vectors or trajectories, twisting and turning their way through the text. For example, theme is a major contributor to the linguistic unity of the

Themes of the Apocalypse (pp.156-68) cosmology, theology, sin and salvation, christology, trinitarianism and eschatology. But these are Jonathan's themes, not John's – a shrewd interpreter's conclusions about John's narrative, but certainly not the thematic constituents of that narrative.

⁴¹ Recent scholarship has, from time to time, directed its attention to thematic concerns in Revelation. The most significant recent article to address this issue from the point of view of its hermeneutical importance (via one key theme) is by Kenneth Strand, 'Overcomer': A Study in the Macrodynamic of Theme Development in the Book of Revelation.' *AUSS*, 28 (1990), pp.237-54.

book whose morphology has been variously pictured as a many-layered onion or rose, or “ a prism refracting rich meaning in different and multiple ways ”⁴² or again as “ whorls, vortices and eddies ” in a stream.⁴³

Failure to examine thematic texture in the literary analysis of Revelation will produce skewed results, for major narrative trajectories in the book are clearly thematic and must be factored in along with other phenomena when deciding *what Revelation is all about*. Instead of rapid fly-overs, there is a need for patient on-the-ground exploration of the diverse thematic materials thoughtfully deployed and developed by John as facets of his story.⁴⁴

* * *

Postscript: In their work on Revelation’s story, Garrow, Barr and Resseguie all tell or evoke other stories; so here, finally, is a very short story about conflict (not glory):

*Two interpreters got in a row
Over which matters more: what? or how?
One said, – Method, that’s it!
– No, it’s Content, you twit!
Don’t suppose that we’ll ever know now...*

Gordon Campbell,
Free Faculty of Reformed Theology,
Aix-en-Provence.

⁴² Both from Elisabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza, *Revelation: Vision of a Just World* (Edinburgh, 1993), p.19.

⁴³ This is the image favoured by Leonard Thompson, *The Book of Revelation: Apocalypse and Empire* (Oxford/New York, 1990).

⁴⁴ In our own research (as referred to above) we are engaged in a thematic analysis of John’s Revelation which attempts to proceed from the whole to the parts and back again.

Do you know its history & how those schools of interpretation arose? Answer: I am attaching a detailed outline titled "Hermeneutics." It is a set of notes on how to interpret the Bible. It does include a little bit on the history of these "schools" of interpretation. We also have eight hours of classes on audio on the topic. As for the book of Revelation, definitely the literal approach is very poor as, with apocalyptic literature, what is said should be taken symbolically unless the context demands literal interpretation. Unfortunately, many premillennialists try to overliteralize Revelation and other apocalyptic literature. In any case, how to approach different kinds of literature is covered in the outline I am including with this answer. John Oakes. You May Also Like