

# **The ethos of the Book of Revelation**

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## **ABSTRACT**

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*Recently, scholars consensus concerning the biblical hermeneutics seems to have become a holistic and integrated perception. Therefore, for the sake of probing the well-balanced and controlled ethos of Revelation, the argument here is that several pertinent methods should be used in an interactive fashion and with a view to achieving the desired result. The aim of this paper, therefore, is to investigate the ethos of the Book of Revelation based on integrated interpretation of the literary, the historical, and the theological. The ethos of Revelation distinguished through this study is that of the eschatological coming of the Kingdom of God which can be accomplished by identifying Christians identity (as kings, prophets and priests) with Christ. The Christ event is the ground of the eschatological hope for John's audiences who live in the New Covenant.*

## **1 INTRODUCTION**

The scope of this paper does not permit an exhaustive probe of a holistic interpretation of the ethos of Revelation. Instead, this paper will serve to paint several, colourful, broad brush strokes upon the canvas of pertinent methods in the hopes of investigating the balanced ethos of Revelation.

## **2 THE ETHOS THROUGH LITERARY, HISTORICAL, AND THEOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION**

### **2.1 An ethos through a literary interpretation**

Revelation is an apocalyptic-prophetic letter with a strong eschatological alignment. That means that Revelation does not merely supply the calculation of the ultimate occurrences, but that it is the prophetic communication of God's words and the witness of Christ to the audiences.

### 2.1.1 Apocalyptic rhetorical approach

Rhetorical appeals to ‘ethos’ seek to persuade the audiences by demonstrating the credibility and authority of the speaker (cf. Kennedy 1984:15). Ethos, then, is an attempt to grasp power (the authority) to represent oneself and the world in a given rhetorical situation. Greek and Latin rhetorical theorists recognized that ethos was an essential element of persuasive speech (Carey 1998:732). In order to acquire his authority of speech in Revelation, John evidently manifests the original source of his message in the very first verse of Rev. 1 (God and Christ), instead of using pseudonymity, which is a common rhetorical tactic in the apocalypse. Thus, because John’s ethos is based on the divine authority (cf. Rev. 14:13), his rhetorical impact on his audiences is a kind of divine persuasion (Kennedy 1984:158).

By advocating the use of rhetorical criticism of Revelation, Schüssler-Fiorenza (1991:26) warns against identifying any one of the three modes of rhetoric - deliberative, forensic (judicial), and ceremonial (epideictic) - as central at the expense of the rest. Revelation’s epistolary framework and its calls to deliberation and decision function as ‘deliberative rhetoric’ in the assembly of the community. Its indictments, warnings, testimony for Christ, and narrative symbolisation of divine judgments, as well as its promises and depictions of the heavenly liturgy and its hymnal praises identify it as ‘forensic’ and ‘ceremonial rhetoric’ (cf. Du Preez 1979:221; DeSilva 1998b:799, 803). In connection with rhetorical criticism, as Du Rand (1993:254) notes, in order to achieve effective communication, the symbolic, apocalyptic, and poetic language of Revelation has to be analyzed. Because rhetoric is always enacted as a reciprocal interaction between readers and author, *an apocalyptic rhetoric* can refer to the ways in which speakers and writers not only use apocalyptic themes, forms, arguments, and style but also share their common symbolic world in order to address and persuade people in their everyday situation (Brummett 1991:10). The author of Revelation constructed a symbolic universe that made intelligible both the audiences’ faith that Christ is Lord and their daily experience of injustice and suffering at the hands of Caesar (Verhey 1997:348; cf. Schüssler-Fiorenza 1991:124).

The rhetorical force of the Apocalypse is to teach the audiences to see the world from a certain perspective, to see the plot of the world as a contest between the powers of beasts and saints. Revela-

tion intends to reveal not the future but the present; or more precisely, it intends to reveal the true nature of Roman culture to those who may be blinded by its gaudy dress. Its rhetorical purpose is to remake the lives of its audience (Barr 2000a:4). At this point, it is clear that one of the main purposes of John's ethos is to correct the distorted ethos of his audiences.

As Van de Kamp (2000:40, 43) observes, due to his education or his naturally gifted talent, John is accustomed to his contemporary rhetorical techniques and capitalises on various kinds of rhetorical devices including symbolical numbers, repetition, metaphor, simile, setting, character, and plot in order to shape and correct the ethos of his spiritually young audience (mainly epideictic and deliberative rhetoric; cf. Kennedy 1984:74). The following rhetorical techniques make John's audience remember the message efficiently and dramatically during the liturgy, i.e. the oral performance:

(1) Symbolical numbers: e.g. 2= witness; 7=totality or completion; 3= trinity; 3½or 42 months= the (short) period of persecution and that of God's protection (11:3; 12:6).

(2) Setting: the throne as the central symbol on which God as a round character sits and expands his rule outwardly. The throne visions (21 times= 7 x 3) as the encompassing frame of the all events in Revelation appear whenever the awful crisis-events occur in order to manifest God's sovereignty.

(3) John uses off-stage narration to describe Babylon's fate. By contrast, he uses first person narration to describe the New Jerusalem. The form of narration - on-stage - encourages the reader to identify with the New Jerusalem.

(4) Tense: the destruction of Babylon, for instance, is shown by three tenses (18:9, 11, 15, and 19) in which the eschatological aspects of the destruction of evil are stressed.

(5) Many parodies or antitheses emphasise the importance of keeping the power of discernment.

(6) *Inclusio*: Rev. 1:8 and 21:5-8 manifest the eternal God who begins and completes history and creation. The image of God sitting on the throne is not so much inactive as faithful and everlasting. Three other *inclusios* are ἐκκλησία (1:4, 11 and 22:16), John's urgent expectancy of the fulfillment of his prophecy (1:1, 3 and 22:6, 7, 12, 20; see Gentry 1999:124-125), and the Exodus motif (1:6 and

20:6; Ford 1993:245, 249). In addition, it seems to be a broad *inclusio* in Rev. 1 and 22 (cf. Barr 1998:12). For example, the first (1:3) and the sixth (22:7) *makarisms* of the prologue and epilogue frame Revelation with an invocation and penultimate benediction; the former calls the gathering community into worship while the latter exhorts the dispersing community to fellowship.

(7) The sexual image: it mainly enables the audience to recognize the seductive powers of evil (concerning a typical feministic response to this imagery (see Garrett 1998:474).

(8) The use of *passiva divina*: it stresses the sovereignty of God even over the Satan (13:5; Peerbolte 1999:9).

(9) Pseudonymity as the most universal means of achieving apocalyptic ethos is abandoned (cf. Carey 1998:750).

(10) The repetition of words reinforces the incompatibility of piety and idolatry by subtly moving the audience to see bipolar oppositions (4:8-14:11; 14:11-14:13; 14:7-14:9-14:11; 14:11-19:3; DeSilva 1998b:800-802).

(11) 'Naming' in Revelation as epideictic is one of the more effective ways in which the author blames and praises (Johns 1998:764-765). By his name, ἘΝΤΙΠᾶΣ (2:13) implies the quality of a martyr: 'against all (kinds of evils)'.<sup>1</sup>

(12) John takes what he wants from the OT, makes various changes and weaves in order to enrich the rhetorical effect of the allusion (Moyise 1999:112).

The dualistic viewpoint and the conflict between (faithful, sovereign, eternal, and salvific) God and (seductive, destructive and tentative) Satan come to the fore in these rhetorical devices. John's intention is to communicate with his audiences and persuade them through the symbolic world (i.e. through the heavenly perspective), in which the above-mentioned rhetorical devices stress the risen Christ's rule of the cosmos. From the apocalyptic rhetorical viewpoint, the beleaguered audiences are encouraged and corrected not only by the recognition of the false aspect of the Roman and the false Judaism but also by participating in Christ's rule depicted in the symbolic world of Revelation, while their real situation is unchanged.

To summarise: as Reid (1983:242) lucidly remarks, on the negative side, the rhetorical function of the apocalyptic in the Book of Revelation enhances hatred and fear of a clearly defined enemy

(i.e. the Romans and the false Judaism). On the positive side, it turns one's cause into a holy crusade, thereby making its adherents a Chosen People who are duty-bound to work in God's service and who will eventually triumph despite temporary afflictions. The ethos of Revelation (cf. the normative viewpoint) in the apocalyptic rhetoric is that the audiences should identify themselves with the triumphant Christ and equip themselves with the heavenly standpoint depicted in the symbolic world John suggests through the evocative and apocalyptic language. This ethos is in accord with De Wit's (1995:189) remarks on the function of the apocalyptic vision: the apocalyptic texts provide the audiences not only with the hope for the future, but also with orientation to a praxis with their own 'identity', which they should sustain, against a different, alienated praxis. As Johns (1998:784) clearly observes, the most significant battle in the Apocalypse is thus a battle for perception fought on the rhetorical battlefield. At stake are the hearts, perceptions, and allegiances of the Asian believers, who should find the survival strategy (cf. De Wit 1995:190).

### **2.1.2 Narratological approach**

The Book of Revelation can be regarded as a functional narrative (cf. Barr 1998:175). Not only the visions that form the content of the Apocalypse are narrative in nature; 'apocalypse' as a genre of revelatory literature also has a narrative framework. Through its narration Revelation offers its audiences encouragement and perspective based on Christ's two comings and its significance in an oppressive situation (cf. Boring 1992:703; Du Rand 1993:261). Actually, there are almost as many plots as there are commentators doing the organising. How he/she arranges the material depend on what he/she is looking for (Barr 2000b:1). Nonetheless, Revelation can be divided into three phases in the construction of narrative:

(1) Through his ascension, Christ became the ruler of the universe (Ch. 1) - the narration of the past.

(2) Jesus sends messages to the churches (Chs. 2-3) and inaugurates both the New Covenant and the universal salvation by judging the apostate Jerusalem and the Roman (Chs. 4-19) - the description of the time of John.

(3) Christ will consummate his covenant by inaugurating the New Jerusalem (Chs. 20-22) - the story of the future.

Each phase is grounded in the person and the redemptive work of Christ. The narrative plot can be shown by the expanding scope of God's people, i.e. the kingdom of God (cf. Du Preez 1979:216-218):

Christ (Rev. 1) → The 7 churches (Rev. 2-3) → The twenty-four elders (Rev. 4:4) → The 144,000 of sealed (Rev. 7:1-8; 14:1-5) → The woman and the rest of her offspring (Rev. 12:1-17) → The twelve tribes of Israel and the twelve apostles (Rev. 21:12-14)

In terms of the plot analysis, at the heart of the notion of plot is the idea of a causal connection between events in a sequence. The plot analysis of Revelation demonstrates that the progression is primarily a literary one and not chronological sequence, although the broad contours of chronological series may be embedded in the literary format. The plot of Revelation is a W-shaped structure that begins with a steady condition (Ch. 1), moves downward into the unstable condition of the Early Church (Chs. 2-3), moves upward (Chs. 4-5) into the stable condition of heaven, moves downward due to a series of threatening conditions and instability (Chs. 6-19), and at the end moves upward to a new stable condition (Chs. 20-22) (cf. Resseguie, 1998:166). This W-shaped structure shows the dynamic and suspenseful development of Revelation's plot in which the (Messianic) Holy War motive plays a vital role.

Though a narrative ethos should be constructed throughout the narrative, its ethos can be usually identified especially through the beginning and end of the narrative (cf. Carey 1998:741). Consequently, the stable conditions and clear perspectives as revealed in Rev. 1 and (20)-22 are important to establishing its ethos. In consequence, while the ethos of the seven churches is unsteady, that of John (derived from Christ) is reliable in the plot of Revelation.

In connection to the narrative ethos of Revelation, the following four-narratological viewpoints are the crucial ground for the normative (ideological) point of view (cf. Resseguie 1998:7, 33, 39, 44-47):

(1) From *the spatial viewpoint*, the throne, the Lamb, and the two witnesses, for instance, as central characters transform their perimeters.

(2) The *phraseological viewpoint*, John narrates Revelation in the first person-not-omnipotent perspective. And he must have accustomed both to LXX and to the Hebrew Bible.

(3) From *the psychological viewpoint*, the reaction of characters to events in Revelation is twofold: they either respond with amazement, praise, and terrified fear that results in their glorifying God or they react to God's judgment by cursing God's name and remaining obdurate. The audience is forced to choose between them. Furthermore, a *psychological domain* is brought about, in which the boundaries of time and space have faded away and God's salvation is manifested, because the events in heaven reflect those on the earth (Peerbolte 1999:11).

(4) The *temporal viewpoint* of Revelation is compatible with the NT eschatology demonstrating that the past Christ event determines the present and the future course of events. Thus, it is the Christ-centric eschatology, not the time-lapse eschatology that determines the temporal point of view in the Book of Revelation (cf. the covenantal eschatology).

The *normative (ideological) concept*, as emphasised by John - the narrator - on the basis of the above four viewpoints, has to do with its narrative ethos. It stresses that the world history is under the control of God and that readers have to choose between the below/earthly viewpoint and the above/heavenly viewpoint. By using the sociological analysis, DeSilva's (1992:380) observation on the ideology of Revelation is similar with the above normative viewpoint. He lays stress on the fact that John develops a different ideological landscape in which the emperor (and the apostate Judaism) is no longer in the central position, but rather off-centre and antagonistic towards the centre, which is now represented as God, or the Lamb and their cult.

The distance between narrator and audience is a critical factor in the apocalyptic narrative. By identifying himself with his audience (Rev. 1:9), John enlists himself in a partnership of interest (cf. Carey 1998:744). As a first-person narrator, John participates and identifies with his readers. In fact, a central aspect of John's narrative technique is a sort of deflecting of the audience's identification with the various narratees - from the extradiegetic narratee of the whole vision (i.e. real reader), to the specific church recipients of the messages (i.e. narratee), to the character John, who hears of the fate of the saints and martyrs (Barr 2000a:4). As Gnatkowiak (1988:98) elucidates, to read the narrative of Revelation successfully, the real reader must identify with the implied reader (esp. 'the

conqueror' as an ideal model of both the historical and modern reader).

In the narrative ethos of John, a distinctive characteristic is the identification of identities among John, his readers, and Christ from the above (heavenly) standpoint, in which the stable condition (i.e. the eschatological coming of kingdom of God through Christ's reign) is established after the conquering of the unstable (the Satan, the Romans, and the false Judaism). In sum: John tries to bring about the performative response of his readers/hearers through his functional narrative and rhetorical devices on the basis of the conviction that they are under Christ's rule. Those who adopt the apocalyptic rhetoric and the narratology of Revelation perhaps downplay the historical, 'real-world' connections of the Book and highlight its construction of a story in which the conflict between good and evil comes to the fore (e.g. see the strong emphasis of the alternative *symbolic* universe by Schüssler-Fiorenza and Barr; regarding the idealistic character, see Clarke 1995:209). For that reason, the *historical interpretation* of Revelation is essential.

## **2.2 An ethos through a historical interpretation**

The Book of Revelation originated in a historical way, not in a vacuum, and therefore, can be understood in the light of history. It is impossible to understand an author and to interpret his words correctly unless he is seen against the proper historical context. Nevertheless, it is true that Revelation has suffered from anachronism or ethnocentrism (Malina 2000:5). The Johannine church is located in Asia Minor. And much in the Johannine writings shows how stimulating influences - images and ideas - not only from the Hellenistic world but also from the Palestinian sphere as well as from Jesus Himself are unmistakably present and play a decisive role (cf. Gerhardsson 1979:94).

### **2.2.1 The socio-scientific approach**

Indisputably, the socio-historical context of John's *young* community (esp. during 66-70 AD) is that it suffered not only from external pressures but also from inner compulsions. The former derives from the State, the Greco-Roman society, and the Jewish synagogue (Rev. 2:9; 3:9; 13:16-17; 17:4; cf. the gruesomely widespread Neronian persecution of Christianity as a *religio illicita*, see Gentry 1989:222, 286-299). The latter comes from the false prophets within the Asia



Minor churches (Rev. 2:2). The argument of the latter seems that the way for the community to survive would be through compromise in form while preserving the essential meaning unharmed, or else the community could no longer survive. By recognising the strong connection between formal and essential compromise, John also advocates formal accommodation in order to intensify the identity of his *young* readers (DeSilva 1992:384).

In his significant socio-rhetorical argument, DeSilva (1998a:87-88) states that words denoting *honour* and honouring appear rather frequently in Revelation (τιμή: 6 times; δόξα: 17 times; δοξάζω: twice). He goes on to claim that beyond the bare occurrence of lexical entries, however, John indicates honour and *shame* through terms indicating approval (or blessedness) and disapproval (e.g. punishment or judging), through physical replications of status (e.g. crowning, bowing, imprisoning, leaving corpses unburied), through identifying an action with a virtue or vice (chief components of honour and dishonour), and through discussion of status through birth or other ascribed means. Revelation's engagement with honour language, therefore, goes well beyond its use of the word group.

In reality, John is intensely interested in the question of whom to honour, and at what cost that honour is to be safeguarded. John attempts to catch his audience up in the sense of gratitude and the immensity of the honour of God and the Lamb, who by his death people from every nation have been ransomed from a servile status. What is more, they have been ascribed the honourable standing of priests serving God, enjoying the honour of face-to-face access to the Divine Patron. At this stage, two conspicuous elements, the honour-shame and the client-patron, are interacted (cf. DeSilva 1998b:791-792).

In addition, the following six phrases are remarkable (Malina & Pilch 1993:12; DeSilva 1998a:93, 105, 108, 109):

(1) John preserves a set of seven (perfect) *makarisms*, strung throughout his visions (μακάριος or μακάριοι- 1:3; 14:13; 16:15; 19:9; 20:6; 22:7; 22:14-15). These seven makarisms frame the whole of the book, pointing to the call to remain exclusively loyal to the Lamb and separated from the idolatry and luxury of the dominant culture as the way to stand honoured in God's sight and to remain within God's favour. John's readers can gain honour through victory and lost through defeat, where it is replaced by shame (regarding the

three functions [ecclesiological, ethical, and eschatological] of the sevenfold *makarisms*, see Hatfield 1987:169).

(2) Φοβήθητε τὸν θεόν (Rev. 14:7) means the nurturing respect for God's honour and a caution concerning affronting God and failing in one's obligations to one's divine benefactor.

(3) In Revelation *God's wrath* can be regarded as a culturally contextualised expression of God's honour against all kinds of challenges to it. John is forcing his readers to choose the eternal honour or the temporal honour, which becomes dishonour *sub specie aeternitatis*.

(4) In Revelation as a covenantal prophecy in epistolary form, *the reciprocal covenantal honour* is accentuated. To repay honour is the apposite response to one who bestows honour to God - the Suzerain par excellence in New Israel grants John's readers honour through his Embassy (or the Broker of God's royal patronage i.e. Christ). John's readers should repay honour to God through worship, victory and covenantal loyalty. God as the Suzerain is able to honour one vassal more than another, creating a hierarchy of honour (Rev. 22:12). Thus, this reciprocal honour is not static but dynamic and hierarchy (Oakman 1993:203; Olyan 1996:204-205).

(5) As Malina & Pilch (1993:12) observe, any perusal of the Bible, including Revelation, will readily reveal how the God of Israel requires *total submissiveness*. It would seem that the whole of the ancient Mediterranean world was *authoritarian*: total submissiveness to 'authority' and high regard for a person's ability to endure pain were regarded as an honour. In fact, God is essentially a powerful and mighty God who expels all other deities, e.g. the deceiving authority/power of the Roman Empire in John's time. In Revelation, by showing a dichotomy between his authority and that of other deities, God commands his people to choose the right one related with the Christian identity.

(6) The social utility of *name-calling* (or vilification) is an exercise in boundary maintenance in that it declares who is in and who is out and - even more important - it strengthens the *self-identity* of the in-group (cf. Balaam, Jezebel, the whore of Babylon, the beast; Barr 1986:410).

The ethos of Revelation from the socio-scientific study is that only the authoritative God (as the divine Patron) exclusively deserves the

honour and is forcing the faithful to choose true and eternal honour instead of temporal honour viz., eternal dishonour (cf. Heb. 10:32-34; 13:13-14:2; 2 Co. 4:16-18). As Oakman (1993:209) tellingly summarises, John's overriding theme throughout Revelation is that God alone is honourable, that God's patronage alone is reliable and worthy of trust, and that God's vengeance upon the whole dishonourable system is sure. Actually, most of the seven cities were dominated by their patron gods and goddesses and their temples and shrines (Ford 1993:246). The tribute, which God alone is worthy of receiving, will be reliably redistributed to clients (2:7; 7:15-17; 21:4-7). Moreover, John consistently emphasises the honour and glory of the faithful by describing it in terms of the metaphors/images of a banquet, wedding, victory, and name-calling. John advocates the eternal honourable identity of the faithful in Revelation by their submission to God, and accentuates the dynamic reciprocal honour between God (as the covenantal Patron) and John's readers (as trustworthy clients) through Jesus (as the Broker of God's patronage; see Kümmel 1972:322). For that reason, the aroused conflict in Revelation serves the purpose of promoting group solidarity and cohesive identity.

### **2.3 An ethos through a theological interpretation**

Unlike other Jewish apocalyptic books, the Book of Revelation claims to be inspired by God as a prophecy. Moreover, the conception of salvation history, in whose centre Jesus stands, lies at the basis of Revelation's philosophy of history, gives to it the tone which comes from the certainty of salvation (Kümmel 1972:323). So a probe into the revelation history of God in the Book of Revelation is absolutely indispensable.

#### **2.3.1 The canonical approach**

Those seeking to understand the canonical approach have often encountered a considerable amount of confusion, not only because the discipline offers differing methodologies, but also because these methodologies are not completely explained (Clarke 1995:196). Regardless of this methodological puzzlement, this section, in principle, will attempt to explicate the principles and tenets of the canonical approach as defined by Childs with his emphasis upon the final form of the text.

Although all hypothetical theories of source and redaction need not impede the current use of the Book of Revelation, the fact that the entire book as we have it is canonically accepted is of the utmost importance (cf. Childs 1985:41). In regard to the canonical approach of Revelation, Clarke's process is appropriate (1995:204-215): (1) canonisation of Revelation (canonical process); (2) canonical position of Revelation (i.e. broader context or macro-canonical analysis); and (3) canonical shape of Revelation (i.e. immediate context or micro-canonical analysis) (cf. Wall 1992:274-275):

In connection with (1), until the time of Constantine, who used the Book's imperial imagery for self-promotion, Revelation was not recognised as canonical in some important regions of the early Catholic Church. But the canonising church, in recognising Revelation's inspiration, included it as part of the Christian biblical canon (AD 397 - the Synod of Carthage) because of its normative character for subsequent generations of believers. As Wall (1992:278) concludes: throughout history, certain groups of believers have elevated the importance of Revelation as their 'canon within a canon'. For other believers, the presence of Revelation in the NT is a mere technicality.

Regarding (2), the NT canon in its final form is the product of an intentional process. The Book of Revelation is the Bible's 'conclusion' and should be interpreted as such (Wall 1992:279). Revelation effects a canonical *inclusio* with the first chapter of Genesis in which a canon-logic comes to the fore in that a faithful Creator God has kept the promise to restore all things for his Kingdom (Groenewald 1986:15). The interpretation of Revelation is not only assisted by reading it in its fixed canonical position and relationship to Genesis, but also in its general canonical relationship to a number of other biblical writings or collections of writings (Clarke 1995:210-214): (a) Revelation echoes something of the Exodus motif (Rev. 15-16); (b) going further, Revelation has a number of close affinities with the OT prophets (esp. the similar vocabulary, symbolism, and prophetic nature in Dan and Ezk); (c) the final concern is the consideration of Revelation's canonical setting within the NT (esp. the Olivet Discourse, the other Johannine writings; Acts, Heb., 1-2 Pe., Jude).

The canonical shaping (3) attempts to discover traces within the text itself as to how the biblical author intended the material to be understood: (a) although the issues of Revelation's unity and *struc-*

*ture* will continue to be a matter of debate, the canonical critic must focus primarily upon the final form of the Book rather than upon its underlying sources. (b) Childs (1985:517) draws attention to the fact that ΑΠΟΚΑΛΥΨΙΣ ΙΩΑΝΝΟΥ as the *title* of Revelation has the canonical significance that the Book is to be read in conjunction with the larger Johannine corpus. The point is not to harmonise Revelation with the other Johannine writings, but rather to affirm that there is a larger canonical unity to the church's scriptures. The readers of Revelation might have read and understood the Book from other Johannine writings. The title of Revelation reflects the ancient tradition of the canonising agents and the Early Church who ascribed *authorship* to the Apostle John. (c) In the *prescript* of Revelation, the eternal message of God is emphasised, for example, the number 7 symbolising the universal churches in every period (Childs 1985: 517). (d) For the last Book of the Bible such canonical control (Rev. 22:18-19) is especially needful in the *epilogue* of Revelation. The conclusion of Revelation repeats many of the themes presented in the introduction. In this way, Revelation's prescript and epilogue function again as an immediate canonical *inclusio* (cf. Barr 1998: 12). In short: by playing the role of the conclusion (climax) of the Bible, the Book of Revelation is the evident *manifesto* of Christian eschatological hope, of God's victory over the Satan, of the church over the false church and all its signs.

### 2.3.2 The partial preterism

Even though the partial preterism has strong historical characteristics, because of the adjective 'partial', this approach is so compatible with the NT eschatology that it can be categorised in theological interpretation. As Mounce (1983:44) and Martin (1990:377-378) note, there are four long-established ways of making sense of Revelation's message: preterist, idealist, continuous historical, and futurist. There is a measure of truth in each of the above captions. An interaction of them is feasible. History is the arena of the fulfilment of God's purpose throughout its long haul, and yet there is reason to believe that at the end there will be a critical summing up of the features distinguishing the present age of conflict between the church and anti-God forces in the world. Such an *interacted interpretation* focuses rightly on the first-century situation in the churches of Asia Minor as providing the *Sitz im Leben* for most, if not all, of the allusions in the entire treatise. It also allows room for the possibility that an immediate first-century fulfilment does not eliminate the chance

of further fulfilments in the subsequent history of the world and the church (cf. Van de Kamp [1990:331] misreads the partial preterism as the other extreme of futurism). Furthermore, it respects the biblical assertion that the conflict between God and evil is not an everlastingly unresolved metaphysical dualism, but will be settled in the end with the triumph of God and the establishment of his rule in his world.

The audiences of John might have recognised the content of Acts, therefore the gist of the partial preterism is more suitable to them than the other three traditional approaches: the futuristic, idealistic, and (church and world) historical interpretation. As a justifiable part of the grammatical-historical method, the partial preterism in which the content of Revelation is almost consistent with that of Acts, refers to the historical context of the first century (esp. 64-70 AD) and links up with the NT eschatology (cf. Gentry 1999:122-123):

- (1) The church's confrontation with the synagogue.
- (2) The central position of the Jerusalem city in the last chapter (Acts 28; Rev. 21-22). As a symbolic centre, a spiritual alternative to Rome, Jerusalem was of great importance to Diaspora Jews, even after AD 70 (Bauckham 1993:129).
- (3) The same central position of the temple.
- (4) The antipathy of the Jews and the Romans against the Christians (Acts 4:27; 21:11).
- (5) Throughout the Book of Acts the deliverance of the righteous and the judgment of the wicked come in response to *prayer*. Correspondingly, one of the most crucial weapons of Christian warfare (a prayer army) is prayer in Revelation (Rev. 5:8; 6:9-10; 8:3; Du Preez 1979:223; Jordan 1997:14).
- (6) Strong emphasis on the suffering for witness (Acts 1:8; 22:20; Lohse 21).
- (7) God's judgment on the pseudo-religious reverence for the Jerusalem temple (cf. Van der Waal 1981:13).
- (8) According to the sequence of the NT books in the Canon of Mommsen (AD 360), Acts is immediately followed by the Book of Revelation (Du Toit 1989:255; and see the canonical approach).

These relevancies between Revelation and Acts put the accent on the visible extension of God's kingdom, i.e. the coming worldwide dominion of the Gospel through the destruction of Jerusalem temple (as a Parousia) and the witness of the faithful (cf. Chilton 1985: 172). To put it in another way, the fall of Jerusalem, the persecution to the faithful and the Diaspora in the first century can be regarded as *birth pangs* (ὠδίν: Mt. 24:8; Mk. 13:8; Rev. 12:2) for the realisation of the eschatological kingdom of God.

For the partial preterism, the relation of the Olivet Discourse to Revelation is crucial in that both show the situation of the Jerusalem fall as well as that of a/the Parousia of Christ. Jesus' leaving the temple (Mt. 24:1; Mk. 13:1; Ezk. 10:18-19) symbolises the end of its relevance in the purpose of God. Like the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost, the destruction of the Jerusalem temple is a great turning point in the revelation of God in that the New Covenant with its eschatological, universalistic, and salvific implication starts from that time. There is a close theological connection between 'the Jerusalem fall' and 'the end of the age' (Mt. 24:1): (1) both are aspects of the consummation of Jesus' ministry. (2) Both involve a judgment that will vindicate Him as the Messiah. The former is the end (consummation) of the old age (cf. Lightfoot 1997:320; Jordan 1999:8). Thus, the significance of the devastation of Jerusalem as an eschatological exaltation of the exalted Christ has its relevance until the time of the Parousia.

There are two lines of thought in the circle of partial preterism: one line (David Chilton, Milton Terry, J. Stuart Russell, Philip Carrington; cf. Boring 1995:574-577) believes that the whole content of Revelation is the story of the fall of Jerusalem and its universal impact. The argument of the other line (Moses Stuart, Jay Adams, David S. Clark, Greg L. Bahnsen) is that Rev. 1-11 describes the destruction of Jerusalem, but from Rev. 13 the judgment of Rome starts (Gregg 1997:254; cf. Kümmel [1972:329] & Barr [1998:24] one-sidedly put emphasis on the persecution by the Roman Empire). In spite of their difference, they agree that the judgment of Judaism depicted as Jerusalem has inaugurated the time of the New Covenant in which the universal redemption has dawned. In short, from the standpoint of the partial preterism, the ethos of the Book of Revelation, like that of Acts, is that John's readers/hearers as the people of the New Covenant have to carry out the appointed task with regard

to the universally visible realisation of God's kingdom until the Parousia.

### 2.3.3 The revelation history based on the (Christological) covenant eschatology

The Book of Revelation as *a covenantal epistle* graphically portrays through its various visions and hortatory expressions the inestimable honour and worth of the church's covenant relationship with her Suzerain, the Lord Jesus Christ. And the whole concept of vassal obligation within the covenant relationship is built upon the prior (and continuing) goodness of the Suzerain. In fact, for the vassal it is the highest honour to perform the stipulations in spite of ensuing suffering or even death (Du Preez 1979:221; cf. Poythress 2000: 20).

As Strand (1983:251-254, 264) aptly elucidates, the (unilateral) vassal-suzerainty covenant evidently appears both in Revelation 2-3 and in the whole Book (cf. Chilton 1990:17; Oakman 1993:203):

|                           | Revelation 2-3  | The Book of Revelation                        |
|---------------------------|---|---|
| • The Preamble            | Identifying the suzerain, Christ under appropriate symbolism                        | Who Christ, the Suzerain, is: 1:5a            |
| • The Historical Prologue | Indicative of past relationships (presupposed in the 'I know your works' statement) | What Christ has done for his vassals: 1:5b-6a |
| • The Stipulations        | The prescribed course of action for each congregation in view of its circumstances  | Call to loyalty and faithfulness: Chs. 2-22   |
| • The Call upon Witnesses | The repeated imperative to 'hear what the Spirit says to the churches'              | 22:16a, 17a, 20a                              |
| • The Blessing and Curse  | The promise to the overcomers and the warnings for unfaithfulness                   | 22:7a, 14a, 18-19                             |

The images of Christ as the Suzerain in the Apocalypse reflect the three tenses of God (Rev. 1:4) - past, present, and future (cf. Boring 1992:713-718; Resseguie 1998:206-207):

(1) The past activity of the Christ: the slaughtered Lamb is an image of Christ's past work on the cross. The references to the historical Jesus are concentrated on the death/resurrection/exaltation. The aorist ἐνίκησα is repeatedly used for the once-and-for-all redemptive work of Christ (Rev. 3:21; 5:5).

(2) The present work of the Christ: despite the strong eschatological orientation of the Apocalypse, there are even more references to the present activity of the Christ than to the future activity. In the present



Christ is the exalted King of the universe. His blood shed in the past is effective in the present (12:11); He is present in and to the churches (1:13; 2:1; 3:19). Above all He speaks (1:1; 2:7, 2:24; 4:1; 16:15; 22:6; 22:20). It is clear that Christ works in the present as the King, Priest, and Prophet. The present participle ὁ νικῶν is used for the faithful Christian's response to Christ's call to follow Him actively in the present.

(3) The future work of Christ: most of the future activity of the Christ is related not to the historical future between John's writing and the *eschaton*, but to the Parousia. Christ will consummate the kingdom of God in his Parousia (cf. Beale 1999:173).

From the above-mentioned Christ's activities, it is evident that most of attention is focused on the activity of the historical Jesus (his death and resurrection) and the present activity of the exalted Christ. It is vested in the person of Jesus Christ who binds together the past, the present and the future (Groenewald 1986:26). Therefore the message of Revelation should be understood Christologically and eschatologically: the kingdom of God is already present on earth in the Christian community who has the task to make God's purpose with this world visible. The Christian communities have *already* become God's visible representatives through their personal confession and pious lifestyle. Everything John writes centres around the person and work of Jesus. In a sense, the Johannine theology is nothing but Christology, and his Christology is his soteriology (Gerhardsson 1979:95). Put another way, the church's ethos is Christological in that the ontological *imitatio Christi* for the visible Kingdom of God on earth as in heaven is the core of the ethos of Revelation (cf. Wall 1992:334).

This fact is closely connected with the NT eschatology in which 'already' and 'not yet' make all generations relevant (Bandstra 1992:23; Beale 1999:134). The depiction of Jesus standing in front of the throne proves that his consistent ministry brings about the fulfilment of redemptive work instead of God the Father. After finishing 'the not yet' event, Jesus sits on the throne (22:1). Nevertheless, the focal point of the 'already' and 'not yet' of the eschatological salvation is not so much the linear concept of history (i.e. a time-lapse category) as the kingdom of God and the rule of Christ on the throne as the main symbol (cf. Schüssler-Fiorenza 1989:419). In Rev. 1:4, for example, the linear concept of time is broken through in its third term (ἐρχεται instead of εἶναι). This has a substantial

significance for the understanding of God and the time in Revelation. God's future is not that He will be as He was and is, but that He is on the move and coming towards the world. As the Coming One (ὁ ἔρχομενος), God now already sets present and past in the light of his eschatological arrival, an arrival which means the establishment of his eternal kingdom, and his indwelling in the creation renewed for that indwelling (cf. Boring 1992:718).

In other words, as a prototypical victory the decisive battle on the cross makes possible all other victories of his followers up to his Parousia. Because the *eschaton* of the Kingdom of God has arrived through the Christ-event, a 'new moral order' has been made possible and Christians are to live according to it. The Christian commitment to non-violence is an eschatological commitment demonstrating to the world their confidence that they do live in a new age (cf. De Villiers 1987:138). The faithful can survive in a nonviolent way in this distorted world by realising the fact that God controls the beginning and the end. In John's worldview, history is the sphere in which God has wrought out redemption. Though John depicts evil realistically, his book is basically not pessimistic but sanguine. Accordingly, the main subject matter of Revelation is the victory of Christ for his oppressed church (Rev. 1:7, 8; 17:14) (Gentry 1989:127). Christ is going to reconfirm his universally visible reign and rule over the world, which has been managed not so much in a concealed way for a long time as in the similar way, in particular, like in the Gospels and Acts.

To sum up: the ethos from the revelation history on the basis of the (Christological) covenantal eschatology is that the dynamic kingship of God has been fulfilled in the period of the New Covenant, which Christ as the Lord of the new *aeon* has to consummate by his Parousia and by the churches' undertaking. The faithful have to perform as kings, prophets and priests even though their suffering in the present situation (cf. Kümmel 1972:322). The Parousia is to consummate the visible realisation of God's kingship as well as to solve the identity tension ultimately (Rev. 21:3; 7; 22:4).

### 3 CONCLUSION

This paper tends to focus on specific passages and limited materials in Revelation, rather than treating the Book's development of all kinds of elements in a progressive fashion throughout its entire scope. The salient ethos of the Book of Revelation unfolded by this

limited study is that **the eschatological coming of the Kingdom of God can be accomplished by identifying Christians' eschatological identity with that of Christ in the New Covenant.** This identification of Christians' honourable and dynamic identity with Christ (as kings, prophets and priests) should and could be performed by their prayerful witnesses up to the point of death (like Jesus and the ethos of Acts), non-violent (unlike the Zealots; Sproul 1998:119) but active submission to God in all their spheres of life (unlike the retreatist pietism of Essene), and uncompromising endurance (like the idea of the Fourth Gospel and the Epistles of John). All these phases are derived from both the Christ event and the Jerusalem fall that are the grounds of the eschatological hope for all Christian generations as well as John's audiences. The ethos of Revelation has two aspects: (1) the absolute intolerance in terms of the identity of John's audiences, (2) the absolute tolerance for the visible fulfilment of God's Kingdom in the New Covenant in terms of the mission of John's readers/hearers.

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