REVELATION

AMOS YONG

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BELIEF

A Theological Commentary on the Bible

GENERAL EDITORS

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Contents

Publisher's Note

William C. Placher worked with Amy Plantinga Pauw as a general editor for this series until his untimely death in November 2008. Bill brought great energy and vision to the series and was instrumental in defining and articulating its distinctive approach and in securing theologians to write for it. Bill's own commentary for the series was the last thing he wrote, and Westminster John Knox Press dedicates the entire series to his memory with affection and gratitude.

William C. Placher, LaFollette Distinguished Professor in Humanities at Wabash College, spent thirty-four years as one of Wabash College's most popular teachers. A summa cum laude graduate of Wabash in 1970, he earned his master's degree in philosophy in 1974 and his PhD in 1975, both from Yale University. In 2002 the American Academy of Religion honored him with the Excellence in Teaching Award. Placher was also the author of thirteen books, including *A History of Christian Theology*, *The Triune God*, *The Domestication of Transcendence*, *Jesus the Savior*, *Narratives of a Vulnerable God*, and *Unapologetic Theology*. He also edited the volume *Essentials of Christian Theology*, which was named as one of 2004's most outstanding books by both *The Christian Century* and *Christianity Today* magazines.

Series Introduction

Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible is a series from Westminster John Knox Press featuring biblical commentaries written by theologians. The writers of this series share Karl Barth's concern that, insofar as their usefulness to pastors goes, most modern commentaries are "no commentary at all, but merely the first step toward a commentary." Historical-critical approaches to Scripture rule out some readings and commend others, but such methods only begin to help theological reflection and the preaching of the Word. By themselves, they do not convey the powerful sense of God's merciful presence that calls Christians to repentance and praise; they do not bring the church fully forward in the life of discipleship. It is to such tasks that theologians are called.

For several generations, however, professional theologians in North America and Europe have not been writing commentaries on the Christian Scriptures. The specialization of professional disciplines and the expectations of theological academies about the kind of writing that theologians should do, as well as many of the directions in which contemporary theology itself has gone, have contributed to this dearth of theological commentaries. This is a relatively new phenomenon; until the last century or two, the church's great theologians also routinely saw themselves as biblical interpreters. The gap between the fields is a loss for both the church and the discipline of theology itself. By inviting forty contemporary theologians to wrestle deeply with particular texts of Scripture, the editors of this series hope not only to provide new theological resources for the

church but also to encourage all theologians to pay more attention to Scripture and the life of the church in their writings.

We are grateful to the Louisville Institute, which provided funding for a consultation in June 2007. We invited theologians, pastors, and biblical scholars to join us in a conversation about what this series could contribute to the life of the church. The time was provocative, and the results were rich. Much of the series' shape owes to the insights of these skilled and faithful interpreters, who sought to describe a way to write a commentary that served the theological needs of the church and its pastors with relevance, historical accuracy, and theological depth. The passion of these participants guided us in creating this series and lives on in the volumes.

As theologians, the authors will be interested much less in the matters of form, authorship, historical setting, social context, and philology—the very issues that are often of primary concern to critical biblical scholars. Instead, this series' authors will seek to explain the theological importance of the texts for the church today, using biblical scholarship as needed for such explication but without any attempt to cover all of the topics of the usual modern biblical commentary. This thirty-six-volume series will provide passage-by-passage commentary on all the books of the Protestant biblical canon, with more extensive attention given to passages of particular theological significance.

The authors' chief dialogue will be with the church's creeds, practices, and hymns; with the history of faithful interpretation and use of the Scriptures; with the categories and concepts of theology; and with contemporary culture in both "high" and popular forms. Each volume will begin with a discussion of *why* the church needs this book and why we need it *now,* in order to ground all of the commentary in contemporary relevance. Throughout each volume, text boxes will highlight the voices of ancient and modern interpreters from the global communities of faith, and occasional essays will allow deeper reflection on the key theological concepts of these biblical books.

The authors of this commentary series are theologians of the church who embrace a variety of confessional and theological perspectives. The group of authors assembled for this series represents

more diversity of race, ethnicity, and gender than most other commentary series. They approach the larger Christian tradition with a critical respect, seeking to reclaim its riches and at the same time to acknowledge its shortcomings. The authors also aim to make available to readers a wide range of contemporary theological voices from many parts of the world. While it does recover an older genre of writing, this series is not an attempt to retrieve some idealized past. These commentaries have learned from tradition, but they are most importantly commentaries for today. The authors share the conviction that their work will be more contemporary, more faithful, and more radical, to the extent that it is more biblical, honestly wrestling with the texts of the Scriptures.

William C. Placher
Amy Plantinga Pauw

Preface

Why would anyone want to write a(nother) commentary on the book of Revelation, and what would she or he say? More particularly, how would an Asian American Pentecostal Christian read this book at the turn of the third decade of the twenty-first century? And more precisely, why risk a somewhat respectable reputation as a theologian and missiologist, but certainly not as a biblical scholar by any even gracious stretch of the imagination, by daring to comment on the Apocalypse, long known as *the* book on the so-called *end times*, when even Jesus did not seem to know about these "times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority" (Acts 1:7)? And on the other side of these questions, I have wondered that if I ever finished this book (which I have been thinking seriously about since the summer of 2015), would I have anything else to say after that? Think of it: Would it not be that completing a commentary on arguably the most difficult book of the Bible, which concerns the goal and end of *all things,* mean that any other words would be superfluous?

Well, my introductory chapter tries to provide some of the reasons why I thought, and still believe, this might be a good idea; although in the end, you, my readers, will be the ones who decide if the risk I took was worth the effort. But in the meanwhile, let me thank Belief series editor Amy Plantinga Pauw for the invitation to write this theological commentary, even as I express gratitude to whoever it was who originally agreed to do so but had to withdraw and opened up a slot for me as a second choice. However this commentary is received, I have learned a great deal in this process and

am grateful for how my study of Revelation has pushed me to think about important theological and missiological matters.

I am grateful to Fuller Theological Seminary for a sabbatical leave during the spring term of 2019 during which much of the first draft of this book was completed. If I had waited another year and written this book after the emergence of the coronavirus, this commentary may have made much more of the various racial, economic-political, and environmental crises catalyzed by the global plague. On the other hand, that may well also have dated the theological takeaways of the book as the world inevitably, even if also gradually, adapts to a post-pandemic reality. Yet the increase in North America especially of anti-Asian and anti-Asian American sentiment brought on by foistering the origins of the virus on the Chinese, along with the spike of discrimination against and harassment of those of Asian descent, unfortunately confirms the relevance of the Asian American interpretive optic adopted in the following pages. In attending to the penultimate revisions of the copyedited manuscript received from the publisher in the spring of 2021, I have resisted the urge to rewrite the commentary to address these matters, but I have inserted a handful of footnotes at the end of the "Further Reflections" sections of especially pertinent passages.

Thanks to Alice Song, Gail Frederick, and others in the Hubbard Library for facilitating my access to books and articles over the years. My friend Frank D. Macchia, who himself has commented theologically on Revelation, gave me helpful feedback on an earlier version of my introductory chapter, which was encouraging at that time. U-Wen Low and Jon Newton read the full manuscript, and both sent editorial comments and many helpful suggestions to improve the manuscript, with the former especially pressing me to be more consistent with my Asian American hermeneutical lens. Amy Pauw and Don McKim also sent encouraging words following the first full draft and ensured that I followed the series template, while an anonymous reviewer also read the manuscript very carefully and helped me clarify and improve the book. My graduate assistants Nok Kam and Jeremy Bone both were helpful in my research for this volume. Yosam Manafa, another graduate assistant, helped with creating a full bibliography for the book. Daniel Braden was a copyeditor

extraordinaire, and his attentiveness to details improved the volume enormously. David Dobson, Michele Blum, Natalie Smith, Julie Tonini, and others at Westminster John Knox have been fantastic to work with throughout these years.

My wife, Alma, has been the bedrock of my life and work. We celebrated thirty-two years of marriage in the middle of my making revisions on one of the drafts of the manuscript, which gave me the needed impetus to finish it, and a year later we celebrated our thirty-third-year anniversary, after which I returned to complete the final revisions in response to the reviewer's comments. I am continuously amazed by her steadfastness and delighted afresh each passing year by her companionship. Her love, care, and presence bless me beyond words.

This book is dedicated to three couples, two who have been precious friends since Alma and I met them at Bethany College of the Assemblies of God (which closed in 2009) in the mid-1980s. We reconnected with Rich Coffelt when we first arrived at Regent University in 2005, and he was finishing his Doctor of Ministry degree there at the school of divinity. He introduced us to Helena (who was not a Bethany student), they welcomed us to the Virginia Beach area, and our families bonded. We have missed them since they moved back to Northern California to take a pastorate in Castroville a few years before we came to Southern California to Fuller. Over the last ten plus years Rich and Helena have been faithful in their congregation but have come to be widely recognized as ministers and pastors for the wider community within which they live and serve. We cherish our memories together and always look forward to their visits south or anticipate opportunities to connect in our visits north.

Ben and Debbie Cabitac were part of the ministry team that Alma led at Bethany from 1984–1985 (which was also the venue where I first laid eyes on Alma!). Ben and Debbie have since served faithfully as pastors in both Northern and Southern California, including the last almost decade at Bethel Church in Glendale, a city next to Pasadena. We have been blessed to fellowship with them more regularly since arriving at Fuller—except since the spring of 2020 when most of us have been isolated under COVID-19 circumstances—and have shared life events involving the gradual emancipation of our

adult children (three each). Bethel Church has always also served a Spanish-speaking congregation on their premises, and recently Ben has been invited to serve as minister also to that community; so he is now practicing preaching in Spanish regularly, and his two congregations have worked more closely together than ever before.

I met Siang Yang Tan when I first arrived at Fuller Seminary in the fall of 2014 where, as a member of the School of Psychology, he welcomed me to the seminary faculty. Having taught at Fuller since the mid 1980s, Siang Yang and his wife, Angela, have also pastored First Evangelical Church in Glendale for the last two-plus decades. Amid his bivocational commitments—shepherding this large and vibrant trilingual ecclesial community (with weekly services in English, Cantonese, and Mandarin) while being engaged teaching and mentoring as a full professor, publishing important and renowned works in pastoral ministry and counseling, and retaining his clinical practice as our School of Psychology professors often do—he found time to take me to lunch every few months. Over curry laksa and char kway teow, we shared our lives and prayed together. Siang Yang retired from the Seminary last year but will continue to serve the church locally and globally through his writing, preaching, and teaching.

These ministry couples are our heroes because there is no vocation more challenging than the shepherding of local congregations in very different and diverse parts of California that they have been faithfully persistent during a period of history that has seen, in many respects, the marginalization of the church in North America. The book of Revelation repeatedly urges "anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches" (Rev. 2:7 passim). The Coffelts, Cabitacs, and Tans have shown us what that means in pastoral, congregational, and wider community contexts, even as they have embraced us on our common journey of faith that waits for when "the kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah" (Rev. 11:15).

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Note to the reader: It is highly recommended that this theological commentary be read with the text of the book of Revelation close at

hand. May working through the former not replace reading the latter but instead motivate deeper engagement with this final book of the Bible. All parenthetical citations of chapter and verse are also to the book of Revelation unless otherwise referenced.

Introduction
Why Revelation? Why Now?

This initial chapter takes up the three elements of its title in reverse order. We begin by situating our theological reading of the book of Revelation—also known as the Apocalypse, from the Greek *apokalypsis,* which is the first word of the Greek text and can be translated as "disclosure" or "unveiling"—at this moment in history, which will provide the guidelines and constraints for how we will approach the book. Then, the middle section will elaborate on the major theological aspects of this final book of the Christian canon that frame the rationale and motivation for engaging in this commentarial task. Finally, we turn toward some introductory matters related to this biblical book, briefly taking up questions regarding authorship, date, genre, and more, but do so with an eye toward implications for our own theological engagement. In each case, I also situate more precisely my own Asian American Pentecost[1] approach to this portion of Scripture.

1. I say "Pentecost" purposively although I am also a lifelong member of modern pentecostal denominations and continue to retain ministerial credentials with such; but while I therefore recognize that I read Revelation from my perspective and experience of the modern pentecostal movement, I am more conscious and intentional in this commentary to highlight the Day of Pentecost as a hermeneutical frame. I say more about this throughout this introductory chapter, but see also my essay "Unveiling Interpretation after Pentecost: Revelation, Pentecostal Reading, and Christian Hermeneutics of Scripture—A Review Essay," *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 11:1 (2017): 139–55.

To the Seven Churches in Asia: An Asian (American) Reading after Pentecost

At first glance, to suggest an Asian American reading of Revelation seems quite parochial.[2] Unless we American readers (presumably many who pick up this book) shed our American exceptionalism and realize not only that the continent of Asia holds 60 percent of the world's current population but also that the Asian diaspora has brought them to every place on the globe, including to the United States. Now of course, Asian America is a political construct related to the consideration of migrants who realized that together they could exert more social and political influence in this country than when categorized according to countries of national origin (e.g., China, India, or, as in my case, a first-generation immigrant from Malaysia). But to be frank, Asia itself is not much more than a geographical construct. There is little the binds East Asians and South Asians together, not to mention those spread out across Central Asia. Not even the landmass holds Asia together, since Southeast Asia includes the Indonesian archipelago and the Philippine islands out east.[3]

If Asian Americans are effectively multiply constituted, so also is every other of these geographically considered Asian regions. Whereas East Asia includes China, Mongolia, North and South Korea, and Japan, West Asia includes modern-day Turkey, countries in the Arabian Peninsula, and those in the regions of the South Caucasus (e.g., Georgia, Armenia, and others) and the Fertile Crescent (from Iraq to Israel). Surely any Asian American experience is vastly different from any East or West Asian one. Yet, any Asian American perspective begs to be further specified relative both to the country of origin and to the distinctive North American regional contexts that forms it (for instance, mine is a Malaysian Chinese experience

2. Mainstream scholarship would ignore or dismiss such readings, e.g., Nyugẽn văn Thanh, "Revelation from the Margins: A Vietnamese American Perspective," in Uriah Y. Kim and Seung Ai Yang, eds., *T&T Clark Handbook of Asian American Biblical Hermeneutics* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2019), 439–49.
3. I grapple with the notion of Asianness (and Americanness) in the first few chapters of my book, *The Future of Evangelical Theology: Soundings from the Asian American Diaspora* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2014).

currently in Southern California but with prior sojourn in the Pacific Northwest, the Northeast, the Upper Midwest, and the Eastern seaboard) in very similar ways to how any continental Asian perspective can and should be further specified relative to both historical and contemporary realities that inform it.

The Apocalypse, it is clear, is written "to the seven churches that are in Asia" (Rev. 1:4a). Since the second millennium BCE, the Greeks had understood Asia to refer to the landmasses east of Europe, yet also distinct from Africa, and by the first century, it was known as that segment off the Aegean coast (what is now part of the western Turkish peninsula) populated by Greeks, indigenous groups, and also those from the Jewish diaspora.[4] The reality is that large portions of the New Testament derive from or address Asian communities—e.g., think of the Pauline Letters to Ephesians, Colossians, Timothy, and Titus; of James and 1 Peter, written to diaspora Jews across the Asian region; of the Fourth Gospel and the Johannine letters, traditionally situated at Ephesus—so much so that it is generally uncontroversial to claim that Christianity has Asian origins, if not being, at least originally, an Asian religion. The inception of the Christian community, dated from the perspective of the Day of Pentecost event in Jerusalem not too long after the life and ministry of Jesus, is also indicated as including Jews and proselytes from around the Mediterranean world—"from every nation under heaven," Luke puts it (Acts 2:5)—including, specifically mentioned, also from Asia (Acts 2:9b).

I will later say more about each of the seven churches and consider why only these seven are addressed. Yet if Revelation may in light of its intended recipients be understood as an Asian document, it is equally comprehensible as involving and engaging with multiple Asian experiences, at least as many as the number of churches to which it was composed. Revelation hence evinces and concerns a plurality of Asian realities, not just one, even while we may nevertheless talk about these under a single (Asian) rubric. This is actually consistent also with the Day of Pentecost narrative that insists that Christian witness proceeds not in one but in many

4. David E. Aune, *Revelation 1–5*, Word Biblical Commentary 52A (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997), 29.

languages, including, by extension, those of the Asian region (see Acts 2:5–11). The point here, then, is not only a political and geographical one but also a theological one, leaping off such a Day of Pentecost hermeneutical horizon that is cast over the entirety of the early Christian experience: that consciously adopting an Asian and Pentecost-related standpoint in reading Revelation cautions against any monovalent understanding and prompts instead recognition that such an approach necessarily involves diverse perspectives and considerations.[5]

The plurivocality of Pentecost, however, extends not only synchronically across the Mediterranean and West Asian world but also diachronically back into the Semitic history of ancient Israel. Pentecost was an ancient Hebrew festival, and its ongoing celebration was an extension and development of that memory. If the Day of Pentecost event empowered resourcing of the messianic message from the earlier covenant with Israel, so also does the book of Revelation heavily depend on and demonstrate a creative reappropriation of the Old Testament canon, not least the prophets.[6] Although our efforts will not be devoted to identifying every allusion—over five hundred by various counts![7]—to the Hebrew Scriptures, the point is to note that the many tongues of Pentecost both draw from a multiplicity of ancient sources and enable a variety of witnesses and testimonies. Our reading of Revelation will attend to these many voices as relevant for current theological purposes.

Yet my Asian American background also invites recognition and embrace of a more specific positionality, one that is rather conducive to reading the book of Revelation more on its own terms, to the degree that such may even be possible two thousand years later. I am referring to what many in my community call the *perpetual foreigner* experience, the sense that because of our racial phenotype, skin

5. For more on my Pentecost hermeneutic—not quite pentecostal in the sense of the modern churches that go by that name but, I would grant, informed surely by my own lifetime participant in the Assemblies of God and various other pentecostal and charismatic movements—see my book *The Hermeneutical Spirit: Theological Interpretation and the Scriptural Imagination for the 21st Century* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2017).
6. See G. K. Beale, *John's Use of the Old Testament in Revelation*, Library of New Testament Studies 166 (1998; reprint, London and New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015).
7. Steve Moyise, *The Old Testament in the Book of Revelation* (1995; reprint, New York and London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015), 16.

color, and sometimes also because of our linguistic accents, we are presumed when in the United States to be foreigners to this nation, even while we are assumed when in our Asian countries of origin to be aliens from there also.[8] The result is a somewhat liminal identity, always betwixt-and-between, continually seeking home but never quite able to secure that sensibility.[9] Even if we were to desire to belong in one or the other space—in *any* space, honestly speaking—we never feel fully at ease. While the notion of perpetual foreigner has been developed theoretically most extensively vis-à-vis Asian American history,[10] many other ethnic groups resonate with that description even as minoritized communities also empathize with aspects of that experience under majority or dominant cultures. In other words, while my own Asian American location informs my use of the perpetual minority trope, I do not believe its effectiveness is limited only to those from such contexts.[11]

Further, as I hope to show, something like the perpetual foreigner experience is inherent in the early Christian milieu. While surviving as perpetual foreigners sometimes breeds resentment, inevitably those so located learn to draw resources from both or multiple sites to develop hybridic identities that enable at least persistence and endurance. This is found in early Christian documents, including both apostles like Paul who took advantage of their Roman citizenship for evangelistic and missiological purposes (e.g., Acts 16:37–39; 22:22–29; 25:9–12) and messianists (the early followers of Jesus) who drew encouragement from their Hebrew ancestors

8. I have written some on the perpetual foreigner experience elsewhere, e.g., "American Political Theology in a Post-al Age: A Perpetual Foreigner and Pentecostal Stance," in Miguel A. De La Torre, ed., *Faith and Resistance in the Age of Trump* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2017), 107–14.
9. See Peter C. Phan, "Betwixt and Between: Doing Theology with Memory and Imagination," in Peter C. Phan and Jung Young Lee, eds., *Journeys at the Margin: Toward an Autobiographical Theology in American-Asian Perspective* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1999), 113–33; also, Sang Hyun Lee, *From a Liminal Place: An Asian American Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010); and Russell Jeung, *At Home in Exile: Finding Jesus among My Ancestors and Refugee Neighbors* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016).
10. E.g., Frank H. Wu, *Yellow: Race in America Beyond Black and White* (New York: Basic Books, 2003), ch. 2.
11. For instance, African American scholars, like Lynne St. Clair Darden, *Scripturalizing Revelation: An African American Postcolonial Reading of Empire* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2015), talk about the "strangeness of home" (ch. 3 of her book); see also a perspective informed by resistance to apartheid: Allan A. Boesak, *Comfort and Protest: Reflections on the Apocalypse of John of Patmos from a South African Perspective* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1987).

who navigated covenantal promises regarding the land of Canaan on the one hand but also found their values oriented toward Yahwistic commitments on the other hand. As the author of the Letter to the Hebrews put it, the ancient exemplars of faith "confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth, for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of the land that they had left behind, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one" (Heb. 11:13b–6a). These early followers of Jesus found themselves citizens of imperial Rome but also anticipating the divine rule revealed in Jesus. Might delving deeper into such hybridic experiences in dialogue with these early disciples enable us to transcend the binary options that we often find ourselves trapped in even as we may be also more open to adopting a transcendent (heavenly) perspective required for prophetic stances in our socio-historical and political lives?[12]

Rather than bemoan marginality, then, as a perpetual foreigner, I proffer that being the perpetual foreigner is both closer to and more conducive to fostering an empathetic disposition with the author and perhaps also the original audience of the Apocalypse.[13] Not only does it appear that the author wrote this book while exiled and perhaps imprisoned (1:9), but the book's readers or hearers—it was intended to be read aloud to the community (1:3a)—were repeatedly both commended for and urged to persist in patient endurance (2:2, 3, 19; 3:10, 13:10; 14:12), even while anticipating an "hour of trial that is coming on the whole world" (13:10), and admonished to be faithful through persecution and even impending death (e.g., 6:9–11; 7:9–14; 12:11; 13:7; 16:6; 17:6; 18:24; 20:4).[14] John of Patmos surely found himself existing in this liminal site, being

12. See my "From Every Tribe, Language, People, and Nation: Diaspora, Hybridity, and the Coming Reign of God," in Chandler H. Im and Amos Yong, eds., *Global Diasporas and Mission*, Regnum Edinburgh Centenary Series 23 (Oxford: Regnum Books International, 2014), 253–61.

13. Deploying Korean American theologian Jung Young Lee's *Marginality: The Key to Multicultural Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1985), which urges that life on the (any) border opens up on both directions, Nyugĕn, "Revelation from the Margins," reads both John and Jesus as marginal and hybridic figures *par excellence*, and the seven churches as marginalized groups within the Roman Empire.

14. John E. Hurtgen, *Anti-Language in the Apocalypse of John* (Lewiston, NY: Mellen Biblical Press, 1993), 3, does not refer to my *perpetual foreigner* notion but deploys sociolinguistic

under Roman rule on the one hand even as he castigated its imperial designs in terms of the biblical Babylon and then urged his audience of (seven) churches to be wary of, if not attempt to live outside as a counter- or alternative social body to, a state engulfed by beastly mechanisms. Even if there is scholarly debate about the existence and extent of persecution of Christians during the time in which this document was written (which we will return to below), the literary and rhetorical point remains: that members of these seven churches in Asia were at best at the edges of the existing sociopolitical order and at worst de facto outcasts, persecuted for their faith and faithfulness. As such, adopting a socially peripheral perspective, one perhaps drawn from the perpetual foreigner horizons of Asian America (which by no means needs to be the only source), provides a more conducive point of entry to the world of Revelation.

Put otherwise, any reading of the Apocalypse from a position of sociopolitical power and privilege may be misleading. We shall see that the author castigates, and predicts the final destruction of, the worldly powers of his day and age. This would have been the Roman Empire, close to the height of its strength and expansiveness in the first century.[15] Intriguingly, in the twenty-first century, with the center of gravity for Christianity having shifted from the Christian Euro-American West to the non-Christian global South, there are more Christians reading this book from Asia, Africa, and Latin America than ever, and many of these do so either at the sociopolitical margins or in contexts where Christianity is either subordinated to other dominant religions or problematically situated vis-à-vis the existing political powers. And wherever such readings are occurring in countries or regions of the world that were colonized by Western

analysis to identify how John's apocalyptic language displays "all kinds of verbal play that a group employs to register its opposition to a dominant group in the culture."

15. In his study of first century Jewish apocalypses, Richard A. Horsley, *Revolt of the Scribes: Resistance and Apocalyptic Origins* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010), 193 and 201, concludes: "the contents and principal concerns of the Second Temple Judean texts customarily classified as 'apocalyptic' indicates that they are all responses to imperial rule"; and: "Far from looking for the end of the world, they [the authors of these texts] were looking for the end of empire. And far from living under the shadow of an anticipated cosmic dissolution, they looked for the renewal of the earth on which a humane societal life could be renewed." Let us see as we move forward if and how close our seer from Patmos comes to fitting in with other apocalyptically minded authors and communities of his (and our) time in countering imperial rule.

. . . the genre of apocalyptic in its very structure is the quintessential expression of local opposition to the Greek kingdoms and the Roman empire. It might be said that without such powers, there would not have been apocalypses. . . . In short, the apocalypse served as a genre of local resistance and non-translatability aimed at the imperium of foreign powers.

Mark S. Smith, *God in Translation: Deities in Cross-Cultural Discourse in the Biblical World* (2008; reprint, Grand Rapids and Cambridge, UK: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010), 290–91.

nations during the early modern period, they continue to struggle with the colonial legacies and in that respect comprehend their faith within the shadow of alien and oppressive (economically at least) foreign powers. Unless something like a perpetual foreigner mentality is sought out, it will be challenging to hear the message of Revelation; and any approach to the book from a position of socioeconomic privilege will in turn expose us directly to the harshest of the author's polemical and uncompromising rhetoric.

The Theology of Revelation: Toward a Pentecost Praxis for the Twenty-First Century

The preceding overview of *how* we will be approaching the book of Revelation today—from an Asian American (e.g., perpetual foreigner) Pentecostal perspective—here connects with and is extended in discussion of the *why*: because the Apocalypse resounds meaningfully for our time when read theologically in light of the New Testament Day of Pentecost event. I grant that my own discovery of what I call a Pentecost hermeneutic grounded in this central salvation historical event recorded in Acts 2 was routed through the emergence of a self-conscious interpretative standpoint developed by scholars connected with the modern Pentecostal movement. Now into its second century (if the origins are dated to the time of the Azusa Street revival in the early twentieth century), the burgeoning Pentecostal academia has forged its own hermeneutical self-understanding and has begun to apply it to reading the book of Revelation.[16] My own approach is

16. Leading the way are R. Hollis Gause, *Revelation: God's Stamp of Sovereignty on History*

surely rooted in my upbringing in the movement and engagement for almost three decades with the Society for Pentecostal Studies. Yet I read theologically for the church ecumenical and catholic (universal) and do so intentionally from what I consider a more radical Pentecost perspective, one grounded at the core of the New Testament itself. More precisely, I suggest that Christian faith itself proceeds not just after Easter—after incarnation, death, resurrection, and ascension—but after Pentecost: after the outpouring of the holy spirit by the resurrected Jesus from the right hand of the Father.[17] If Christian faith and life itself comes through the working of the spirit, then Christian theological reflection is also pneumatologically funded.[18] The New Testament witness itself proceeds from out of the Pentecost event.

Yet what does such a Pentecost reading of the Apocalypse entail and why is such relevant for us at the beginning of the third millennium? Let me respond to this along four interlocking and interwoven theological trajectories: the pneumatological, the christological,

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(Cleveland, TN: Pathway Press, 1998); Robby Waddell, *The Spirit of the Book of Revelation*, Journal of Pentecostal Theology Supplement Series 30 (Blandford Forum, UK: Deo, 2006); Rebecca Skaggs and Priscilla C. Benham, *Revelation*, Pentecostal Commentary Series (Blandford Forum, UK: Deo Publishing, 2009); John Christopher Thomas, *The Apocalypse: A Literary and Theological Commentary* (Cleveland, TN: CPT Press, 2012); Melissa L. Archer, *'I Was in the Spirit on the Lord's Day': A Pentecostal Engagement with Worship in the Apocalypse* (Cleveland, TN: CPT Press, 2015); and David R. Johnson, *Pneumatic Discernment in the Apocalypse: An Intertextual and Pentecostal Exploration* (Cleveland, TN: CPT Press, 2018). Other pentecostal New Testament scholars who have provided readings of Revelation but not foregrounded their ecclesial positionality include Craig S. Keener, *Revelation*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000); Gordon D. Fee, *Revelation*, New Covenant Commentary Series (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011); John Christopher Thomas and Frank D. Macchia, *Revelation*, The Two Horizons New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids and Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 2016); and Jon K. Newton, *The Revelation Worldview: Apocalyptic Thinking in a Postmodern World* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2015).

17. Intriguingly, Revelation does not mention the *Holy Spirit* explicitly. Further, the book's rich pneumatology anticipates but is not equivalent to the Trinitarian theology codified at the Council of Nicaea (325), which is presumed in our contemporary theological understandings of Father, Son, and Spirit. For these and other reasons (see also the further explanation in ch. 1 below), I do not capitalize *holy spirit* or any references to the divine *spirit* unless quoting other sources. The goal is to call attention to the continuities between the New Testament materials, Revelation included, and later understandings, but also be careful about presuming that John's perspective is the same as our own Nicene-formulations. See also John R. Levison, *Filled with the Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), for other cautions against reading Nicene trinitarianism back into our biblical theological interpretation.
18. See my *Learning Theology: Tracking the Spirit of Christian Faith* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018).

the eschatological, and the practical or missional (or missiological). We shall see that these theological themes work together to chart our reading of Revelation.

First, to read Revelation after Pentecost is to attend to this book as one that not only speaks *about* the divine spirit but also addresses its readers *in* and *through* that same spirit.[19] Here we are talking less about what the Apocalypse tells us about the spirit of God (and there is much *information* about the pneumatological that can be gleaned),[20] and more about what it itself continually reminds its readers and hearers: "Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches" (2:7a and passim). Such is effectively an injunction toward what the New Testament elsewhere calls life in the spirit, and is consistent with the visions of the book being spiritually given to John—e.g., when he was "in the spirit" (1:10; also 4:2; 17:3; 21:10)—and its message mediated in or as "the spirit of prophecy" (19:10b).[21] In other words, to appreciate the words of John, readers will need to be attentive to the manifold and pluriform witness the divine spirit is calling for or inviting toward (see 22:17). Just as Day of Pentecost is not only about the outpouring of the spirit but about the many tongues the spirit seeks to enable and redeem in the followers of Jesus as Messiah, so also is Revelation focused not on what the divine *pneuma* is doing but on what that breath seeks to accomplish in the hearers and readers of these visions that come "from every tribe and language and people and nation" (5:9b).

Second, note that any Pentecost reading, as already indicated, centers not on the divine spirit but on the living Messiah, the one anointed by that divine breath. The principal and predominant figure of the Apocalypse is, after all, Jesus Christ, both as object and

19. See also the discussion of John's pneumatic perspective in Ronald Herms, "Invoking the Spirit and Narrative Intent in John's Apocalypse," in Kevin L. Spawn and Archie T. Wright, eds., *Spirit and Scripture: Exploring a Pneumatic Hermeneutic* (London and New York: T&T Clark, 2012), 99–114.

20. An excellent summary of the pneumatology of the Apocalypse is Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), ch. 5; see also Hee Youl Lee, *A Dynamic Reading of the Holy Spirit in Revelation* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2014).

21. Richard Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy: Studies in the Book of Revelation* (1993; reprint, London and New York: T&T Clark, 2005), ch. 1, suggests that the fourfold formula of John being "in the spirit" serves to structure his visions into four parts.

subject. The first words of the book thus announce, "The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place . . ." (1:1a), even as in the closing segment, John has the protagonist himself say, "It is I, Jesus, who sent my angel to you with this testimony for the churches . . ." (22:16a). Jesus the anointed one thus is uncovered and lifted up throughout the book on the one hand even as he also unveils himself through angelic and human messengers on the other hand. In short, reading Revelation after Pentecost introduces us to Jesus the Messiah anointed by the divine breath who also invites us to follow in his same steps by the power of the same divine wind that enabled his own testimony and witness.[22] This christological focus ensures that we are oriented around what John himself identified as being most important: the lamb who is also the lion at the right hand of the throne of God.[23]

The pneumatological perspective on Revelation lends meaning to the all-containing vision. "Although quantitatively the Spirit is seldom mentioned, his deeds in Revelation are qualitatively active: so much so that Revelation was realized *in coram Spiritu.*"

Kobus de Smidt "Hermeneutical Perspectives on the Spirit in the Book of Revelation," *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 7 (1999): 27–47, at 44.

Third, then, note that Pentecost carried forward the eschatological redemption initiated in the life and ministry of Jesus the christened Messiah. Luke records Peter, drawing from the prophet Joel, explain the events of the festive event thus: "*In the last days* it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh . . ." (Acts 2:17a, emphasis added; cf. Joel 2:28a). If Jesus the anointed one heralded the coming reign of the Lord (Luke 4:18–19), then the outpoured spirit of God further instantiated and realized the divine

22. The hermeneutical key must also be christological because of the need to discipline the fantasticness of the interpretations of the book; see Judith Kovacs and Christopher Rowland, *Revelation*, Blackwell Bible Commentaries series (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004), 247–50.
23. Christological readings of the Apocalypse have been led by Mennonite/Anabaptist scholars like Mark Bredin, *Jesus, Revolutionary of Peace: A Nonviolent Christology in the Book of Revelation* (Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster, 2003), and Loren L. Johns, *The Lamb Christology of the Apocalypse of John*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 2.167 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003). My own approach is spirit-christological, to be developed in the rest of this book.

rule. Now it is important here to clearly recognize that reading Revelation eschatologically has had both a long and illustrious history, one which has intensified in the last two hundred years, especially among those who approach the book with hermeneutical and theological perspectives guided by dividing up salvation history into several dispensations in which God deals with humanity variously and distinctly. If the former more historically traditional approaches have given way to a variety of millennial interpretations of the book—e.g., how to understand the one thousand years referred to in Revelation 20:4, in particular whether such is to be comprehended more or less literally, more spiritually, or more figuratively and symbolically—Dispensationalist readings have spawned a range of eschatological interpretations revolving around whether the Parousia will occur before or after the millennium, or, at a further level of differentiation, whether such will happen before, during, or after the so-called "great tribulation" (2:22; 7:14, KJV) that precedes the millennium.[24] Our Pentecost reading, outlined above and to be developed in the rest of this book, however, relies neither on a literal understanding of the millennium (although such is not necessarily rejected either) nor on views that insist that much of Revelation 4–22 pertain to the future unfolding in linear, sequential, and chronological ways suggested especially by Dispensationalist schemes of interpretation. Instead, in accordance with the Lukan witness, the eschatological involves *both* the *now-and-the-not-yet*, the present and the future, together.[25] As such, amid much out-of-control speculation in many Christian circles about the *end times*, our approach will be robustly eschatological but missiological and pastoral rather than conjectural: hope for the full salvation to come empowers our present endurance and witness in the divine spirit. Such eschatological confidence means that the ends of which the prophet sees and writes about concern not just those in that final generation but also empower the seven

24. These various positions are debated in C. Marvin Pate, ed., *Four Views on the Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998). Because of the prominence of interpretations of Revelation that distinguish between tribulation, millennium, and other events or periods as distinct "dispensations" of divine interation with the world, I will capitalize *Dispensationalism* and its forms when so-referring in the rest of this book.

25. See ch. 2 of my *Renewing Christian Theology: Systematics for a Global Christianity*, images and commentary by Jonathan A. Anderson (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2014).

churches in first-century Asia Minor, and every generation since who attend to these words, to live faithfully and hopefully in a world that is passing away.

Finally, then, if the eschatological involves and relates time and history to the thereafter and eternity, then we return full circle to the Pentecost message, one in which witness is borne through the divine spirit to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). If the Pentecost wind empowered witness in many tongues, even to the point of death (as in Stephen in Acts 7), so also does the Apocalypse feature both the testimony of Jesus himself (1:2, 9; 19:10; 22:20) and the testimonies of his followers to him (12:17), even to the point of death (2:13; 6:9; 11:7; 12:11; 17:6; 20:4). We also need to distinguish that although the Pentecost witness included the establishment, growth, and expansion of the church in local communities to the ends of the earth, this evangelistic and missiological component, especially as more traditionally comprehended, is secondary at best in the Apocalypse. Yet the bearing and giving of witness is at the heart of each of these books.[26] Our own missional-missiological reading, then, will focus on the illocutionary dimensions of Revelation's rhetoric: what kinds of emotions, dispositions, and actions does John wish to prompt in the telling of his visions? The gerunds—verbs with *-ing* endings that function also as nouns—appearing in many of the chapter subtitles call attention to this performative aspect of our theological approach: What ought we to do in light of what the divine spirit is saying and doing? The question here is less the what and how of mission and evangelism, especially as defined by colonial modernity, than the embodiment and practice of faithful messianic discipleship relevant for our late and even postmodern time.[27] More precisely, as the Apocalypse will itself insist to us, the question has to do with faithful witness in the many tongues of those who experience reality as perpetual foreigners in an otherwise pluralistic and

26. See also vănThanh Nguyễn, "The Final Testimony of *Missio Dei*: A Missiological Reading of Revelation," in Dale T. Irvin and Peter C. Phan, eds., *Christian Mission, Contextual Theology, Prophetic Dialogue: Essays in Honor of Stephen B. Bevans, SVD* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2018), 3–16.

27. I apply such a missiological (and pneumatological) hermeneutic to Revelation in my *Mission after Pentecost: The Witness of the Spirit from Genesis to Revelation*, Mission in Global Community (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019), §§8.4–8.5.

idolatrous cosmopolis.[28] Each chapter of our commentary after the two devoted to Revelation 1, then, will conclude with some "further reflections" that invite contemporary readers to consider the performative dimensions of faithful apocalyptic discipleship relevant for our present contexts and occasions.

Introductory Matters: Reading in the Spirit

In this final section of the introduction, I wish to comment briefly on the history behind the text of Revelation, clarify what kind of document it is, and draw out the implications of its symbolic language. Throughout, however, the goal is to invite readers of this theological commentary further into its Pentecost and pneumatological approach. What does it mean to read Revelation in the spirit, and how might this be accomplished?

Traditional considerations of introductory matters related to authorship, date, circumstances of writing, and original audience are important for providing context for reading ancient texts. In the case of the Apocalypse, we are told both at the beginning and the end that the author's name is John (1:1, 4, 9; 22:8), although which John this is—given how many are associated with the early Christian and apostolic periods—or even whether he was a Jewish-Christian (from Palestine) or a Gentile-Christian is not easily decided, even among scholars.[29] Nevertheless, John, taken as indicative of he or those (editors and others) responsible for the final form of the text as we have it, may well have drawn from visionary and other experiences spanning decades. Not only might the command to measure the temple (11:1) presume that the Roman sack

28. Whereas my *In the Days of Caesar: Pentecostalism and Political Theology* (Grand Rapids and Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 2010) was developed in conversation primarily with Luke (the Gospel and Acts), here we chart an apocalyptically informed public theological witness.

29. My *Renewing Christian Theology*, §12.1, discusses up to a half dozen possible persons going by the name John within the first generation or two of Jesus' life and ministry. Robert K. MacKenzie, *The Author of the Apocalypse: A Review of the Prevailing Hypotheses of Jewish-Christian Authorship*, Mellen Biblical Press Series 51 (Lewiston, NY: Mellen Biblical Press, 1997), examines evidence over the last century of Revelation scholarship about John being Jewish-Christian and suggests that such is rather thin and that there is at least as much evidence he was a Gentile Christian whose prophetic biblicisms provide just as good an explanation for the unusual Greek syntax of the book.

of Jerusalem (and temple) in 70 CE had not yet occurred when that vision was received, but opaque references to the mortal wound and yet survival of one of the dragon's heads (13:3, 12, 14; 17:10) has been taken as alluding to or based on the legend that the Emperor Nero, although supposedly having committed suicide in 68 CE, was believed to be still living or would soon be returning to continue his infamous persecution of Christians. On the other hand, the letters to the seven churches of Asia suggests a later date, as they evidence a further development of early Christian communities beyond what is described in the book of Acts as having happened by the end of the sixth decade CE and depict emergence of sociopolitical conditions that allow for the kind of exile characterizing John's self-described situation as "your brother who shares with you in Jesus the persecution and the kingdom and the patient endurance, was on the island called Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus" (1:9).

The question of whether and to what degree John and his fellow addressees were the subjects of political persecution is an open and complicated one, with arguments that such persecution was real or at least perceived to be real as well as counterarguments that John wished to "otherize" those he deemed to be opponents of his message and thus portrayed these as evil, oppressive, and dangerous.[30] These are not necessarily exclusive of each other. For the moment we might conclude that if Irenaeus, who served as bishop of Lyon (modern France today) during the latter half of the second century, is close to the truth in dating John's Revelation "toward the end of [Emperor] Domitian's reign"—which would have been in the early to mid-nineties[31]—then we might grant that portions, if not the bulk, of the twenty-two chapters that we have may have originated in the late sixties when the Neronic persecution was more intense and worrisome, and then the final form of the book as we know it

30. Leonard L. Thompson, *The Book of Revelation: Apocalypse and Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), argues that the traditional assumption of extensive persecution of Christians is historically untenable, although Adela Yarbro Collins's, *Crisis and Catharsis: The Power of the Apocalypse* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984), is also potent in arguing that whatever the historical realities, the original audience of the Apocalypse certainly perceived that they were the targets of an antagonistic Roman state (which is discussed more later in this commentary).

31. Domitian was Roman emperor from 81–96; see Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 5.30.3.

gradually came together over three decades or so during periods when other issues, particularly teachings in the churches that John deemed to be false and contrary to his own views, were more at the fore.[32]

More important than determining the precise *Sitz im Leben,* or sociohistorical context, of this Revelation is discerning its form. Revelation has been labeled as part of apocalyptic literature, no doubt due to its title but also given both its contents about a sectarian community anticipating the end of a hostile world as they knew it and its medium as a series of visions delivered by angels (many of them!) to a seer via ecstatic journeys—"in the spirit," it will be recalled—transcending the phenomenal world. Both are surely features of apocalypses preceding and following the latter half of the first century. Yet the author also identified what he wrote as a prophecy (1:3a; 22:7, 10)—even as he considered himself a prophet and to be numbered among them (22:6, 9)—and commended it as an expansive circular letter to be read among the churches with conventional epistolary greetings and farewell (1:4, 11; 22:21). Approaching Revelation as an epistle concerns the destination of this book for the Asian churches and opens up considerations of how local particularity interfaces with ecclesial catholicity (to which we return in excursus A below), while reading it as a prophecy invites adoption of both apocalyptic and prophetic perspectives together, especially as we see these overlap among some of the Old Testament writings. Receiving Revelation as a prophetic text, however, means recognizing that the author is less interested in foretelling the future than he is in forthtelling the word of Jesus through his spirit in calling the book's readers and hearers to repentance and faithfulness. Attentive

32. Aune, *Revelation 1–5*, cx–cxxxiv, overviews both the major source-critical theories of Revelation's text and proposes his own speculative hypothesis of the book's two major stages or phases of composition, even as J. [Josephine] Massyngberde Ford, *Revelation: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, The Anchor Bible 38 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1975), 28–45, 50–56, hypothesizes an early date for the majority of the text (under the authorship of John the Baptist and his disciples) and a much later Christian redaction (of the prologue and letters to the seven churches, among other sections) that is distinct from but not inconsistent with Aune and other theories of production extending over decades of the first century; one does not need to agree with each and every detail of Aune's or Ford's reconstructions to appreciate how the final form of the text might have evolved and then, for our theological purposes, retrieve such as addressing multiple first-century audiences, contexts, and equally dynamic reading communities.

to and recognizing this distinction, then, we do not need to choose; rather, to receive prophetic disclosure through the divine spirit is to be invited into a transcendent viewpoint, one that reveals and illuminates the meaning of Jesus Christ and the God "who is and who was and who is to come" (1:4; cf. 1:8).

Recognizing this threefold temporal characterization of this central figure of the Apocalypse might invite reading the book also according to such a template, especially given that John is told to "write what you have seen, what is, and what is to take place after this" (1:19). Readers across the last two millennia then have been divided into how to take, and then interpret, the book. Four general camps have emerged: *preterists* prioritize the first century "what is" context and seek to grasp how the book was understood by its original audience; *historicists* emphasize the "what is to take place after this" but do so historically, especially in relationship to the unfolding history of the Christian church over the centuries; *futurists* also zero in on "what is to take place after this" but hold that much of the book, specifically chapters 4–22, concern the end of history and therefore remain ahead of "us" readers across historical time (Dispensationalists are futurists who believe that most of Revelation remains ahead of us living in the early part of the twenty-first century); finally, *idealists* are those looking for transcendent truths that may be applicable regardless of how one feels about the issues raised by those advocating the other perspectives.[33] Our own (Asian American) Pentecost approach is fundamentally theological, and in that sense characterizable as idealist, although we are also devoted to understanding the text in its original context—the preterist commitment—as much as possible since our conviction is that the latter both constrains and is generative of theological interpretation in every generation.

Revelation as an apocalyptic prophecy requires that twenty-first-century readers put on hold as much as possible their own prejudgments about such texts. Our literal approach, in particular to what the future holds—about which we are understandably both fascinated and anxious—is or ought to be tempered by John's announcement

33. See Steve Gregg, ed., *Revelation: Four Views—A Parallel Commentary* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997), for how these approaches engage with the text of the Apocalypse.

that the "revelation of Jesus Christ" is being "made . . . known" (*esēmanen* from the Greek *sēmeion* or sign) angelically (1:1), which means also "by means of symbols."[34] John invites, in other words, a symbolic hermeneutic, an approach to his apocalyptic prophecy that is attentive to the many ways in which symbolic language operates,[35] much of which is quite different from the linearity and discursivity presumed by us "enlightened" moderns. Sometimes the symbols are explained, but mostly they are not, which means that because this is a symbolically rich text, we will have to see how the various symbols function in order to discern their meaning. Hence, we will be cross-referencing quite a bit across the Apocalypse, particularly in order to trace symbolic representations and how their interconnections within the seer's account might be illuminative.

I would like to characterize John's pneumatic and symbolic imagination also as thoroughly embodied rather than only and abstractly intellective and cognitive. Let's parse out what might seem paradoxical—a pneumatic-and-embodied-hermeneutic[36]—along three lines: the visual, the audial, and the affective.

First, John's being "in the spirit" enables a visionary seeing. Thirty-five times throughout Revelation, John tells us "I saw." It is important to distinguish at this point that seeing is not quite the same as reading. Reading is a discursive task that moves from words to ideas in order to develop the ideas sequentially across the process of engaging a text. Seeing, on the other hand, involves both simultaneity and imagination, the latter involving the capacity to fill in the blanks around what is occluded visually. More important, seeing is an act that processes imaginatively and imagistically, meaning, among other things, being attentive to polyvalence rather than expecting single meanings, inferentially guided rather than having

34. Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 55; see also Beale, *John's Use of the Old Testament in Revelation*, ch. 4, esp. 295–98, for more on John's use of *esēmanen* to frame his prophecy.

35. Richard Shiningthunder Francis, *The Apocalypse of Love: Mystical Symbolism in Revelation* (n.p.: Bookman Publishing, 2004).

36. Again, modernity assumes a binary between the material and the spiritual; a Pentecost approach precedes such modern bifurcation—see Yong, *Spirit of Love: A Trinitarian Theology of Grace* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2012).

explicit instructions, dependent on dynamic, dramatic, and narrative movements as opposed to being propositionally dominant.[37]

Second, and extending from the first, John's Revelation involves sound as much as sight. John not only sees, but he also hears, especially voices. Of the forty-six times that the verb *to hear* occurs in the book, more than two dozen of those apply to John's hearing (not to mention the about three dozen references to voices in the book, only some of which are related to the instances John tells about his own hearing).[38] Our seer also seeks to be clear: "Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of the prophecy, and blessed are those who hear and who keep what is written in it" (1:3)—so that he expects both the resonating of his prophecy, read in its entirety perhaps in one sitting (it is suggested), and that most who encounter these visions will do so audibly. If seeing nevertheless allows still some semblance of subject-object detachment, hearing collapses that gap since sound reverberates in our bodies in and through distances.[39] Somehow, then, visionary encounters in the spirit enable unconventional

The imagination of the reader is stimulated by this wide-ranging and wild narrative, in which action, images, actors, sights, and sounds converge. . . . At any moment the reader expects the narrative to come to a conclusion, but instead meets a "deceptive cadence."

Edith M. Humphrey, *And I Turned to See the Voice: The Rhetoric of Vision in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 198–99.

37. For more on such an imagistic hermeneutic, see M. Eugene Boring, *Revelation*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville, KY: John Knox, 1989), esp. 53–59. On this point, Austin Farrer, *A Rebirth of Images: The Making of St. John's Apocalypse* (1949; reprint, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986), is a whirlwind of imagistic and symbolic reasoning about Revelation, which even if true (which is unconfirmable due to the speculative nature of the argument) would not be comprehensible by most (because of the complexity of Farrer's interpretation of John's symbols). Ingolf Dalferth, "The Stuff of Revelation: Austin Farrer's Doctrine of Inspired Images," in Ann Loades and Michael McLain, eds., *Hermeneutics, the Bible and Literary Criticism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1992), 71–95, is correct to respond that readers of Revelation (not to mention of Farrer) would need to be just as inspired by the divine spirit to be edified by the angelic message (certainly to comprehend *A Rebirth of Images*).
38. Kayle B. de Waal, *An Aural-Performance Analysis of Revelation 1 and 11*, Studies in Biblical Literature 163 (New York: Peter Lang, 2015), 63.
39. See my discussion in "Orality and the Sound of the Spirit: Intoning an Acoustemological Pneumatology," part 2 of a longer essay in *The Living Pulpit* (May 2015), http://www.pulpit.org/2015/05/.

seeing and hearing, as when John tells us: "I turned to see whose voice it was that spoke to me" (1:12). If creational space-time sensory capacities see things/forms and hear voices, as distinct perceptions, prophetic visions *see voices*. The point is that engaging the Apocalypse invites suspension, to whatever degree possible, of our normal perceptual capacities so that we can appreciate the unveiling and disclosure of Jesus Christ and his message.[40]

This means, last but not least, hearing and reading Revelation affectively. The affective is not entirely disconnected from the cognitive; rather, the opposite is the case: our intellectual considerations derive from and emerge out of underlying emotional and embodied perceptions and experience. Hence, we must *feel* John's visions *before* they are processed cognitively. As Robin Whitaker shows, "The full version of the adage 'seeing is believing' is actually 'seeing is believing, but feeling's the truth.'"[41] And to feel the Apocalypse is to be touched—emotionally in fear or anticipation, affectively in hope or aspiration—and to be moved in our heart of hearts, so to speak.[42] Note that Luke tells us also that the divine spirit is poured out at Pentecost not on immaterial souls but "on all flesh,"[43] on the carnal bodies of men and women, young and old, slave and free (Acts 2:17–18), precisely so that those to whom the divine spirit is given can see, hear, and feel the reality of that breath.[44] Revelation, in

40. See Sean Michael Ryan, *Hearing at the Boundaries of Vision: Education Informing Cosmology in Revelation 9*, Library of New Testament Studies 448 (London and New York: T&T Clark, 2012), chs. 2–3.
41. Robyn J. Whitaker, *Ekphrasis, Vision, and Persuasion in the Book of Revelation, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 2.410* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015), 221; *ekphrasis* (in the title of this book) has to do with vivid descriptions. For more on the emotional and pathic dimensions of John's text, see David A. deSilva, *Seeing Things John's Way: The Rhetoric of the Book of Revelation* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2009), esp. chs. 7–8.
42. See Alexander E. Stewart, "*Ekphrasis*, Fear, and Motivation in the Apocalypse of John," *Bulletin of Biblical Research* 27:2 (2017): 227–40.
43. I use "souls" conventionally throughout the book to refer to human persons but not assuming the veracity of popular beliefs in a tripartite anthropology (of bodies, spirits, and souls); for my own emergent anthropology, see Yong, *The Spirit of Creation: Modern Science and Divine Action in the Pentecostal-Charismatic Imagination*, Pentecostal Manifestos 4 (Grand Rapids and Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 2011), ch. 5.
44. See Yong, "The Spirit Poured Out: A (Pentecostal) Perspective after Pentecost," in Guido Vergauwen, o.p., and Andreas Steinbruber, eds., *Veni, Sancte Spiritus! Theologiesche Beiträge zue Sendung des Geistes/Contributions thélogiques à la mission de l'Esprit/Theological Contributions to the Mission of the Spirit* (Münster: Aschendorff-Verlag, 2018), 198–210; also,

short, is not just about information (related to the mind) but about transformation (of the heart),[45] so that its hearers and readers can be those who live differently—who "keep what is written" (1:3b)—as material and historical creatures yet in light of spiritual and heavenly realities.[46]

Come, holy spirit, as we reread this book.

David Trementozzi, *Salvation in the Flesh: Understanding How Embodiment Shapes Christian Faith* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2018).

45. This is also the conclusion of scholars who have attempted to provide a visual exegesis, so to speak, of the book; see Natasha O'Hear and Anthony O'Hear, *Picturing the Apocalypse: The Book of Revelation in the Arts over Two Millennia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 293.
46. David L. Barr, "Beyond Genre: The Expectations of Apocalypse," in David L. Barr, ed., *The Reality of Apocalypse: Rhetoric and Politics in the Book of Revelation*, SBL Symposium Series 39 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2006), 71–89, is correct that this is how John anticipated that the seven churches (and beyond) would receive his visions; the question is whether or not we can approach Revelation with similar expectations.

Outline of the Book

Every commentary will include the author's own efforts to outline the book. The following provides a sketch of how I approach the Apocalypse, which correlates, generally, with the divisions of the chapters in the following pages. Informed readers will observe in the following my own interaction with and response to various scholarly proposals regarding the structure of the book, including but not limited to how there is a prologue and epilogue, how the first half's author addressing seven churches anticipates the latter part of the book's seven visions and concluding authorial discourse, and how the central sections compare and contrast the majesty and glory of God with the judgment and wrath of God. Further rationale is given in the course of the commentary, but also especially in the four excurses.

I. Prologue ~ 1:1–9

II. Author's first words and the seven churches ~ 1:10–3:22
  A. The unveiling of Jesus Christ ~ 1:10–20
  B. Letters to the churches ~ 2:1–3:22
    i. In Ephesus ~ 2:1–7
    ii. In Smyrna ~ 2:8–11
    iii. In Pergamum ~ 2:12–17
    iv. In Thyatira ~ 2:18–29
    v. In Sardis ~ 3:1–6
    vi. In Philadelphia ~ 3:7–13
    vii. In Laodicea ~ 3:14–22

III. The Majesty and glory of God ~ 4:1–11:19
- A. The heavenly setting ~ 4:1–5:14
  - i. The throne ~ 4:1–11
  - ii. The Lamb ~ 5:1–14
- B. The seven seals ~ 6:1–8:5
  - i. Celebration: Seal interlude ~ 7:1–17
- C. The seven trumpets ~ 8:6–11:14
  - i. Prophetic interlude ~ 10:1–11:14
- D. The final celebration (anticipated) ~ 11:15–19

IV. The Justice and wrath of God ~12:1–19:10
- A. The earthly setting ~ 12:1–13:18
  - i. The dragon ~ 12:1–18
  - ii. The beasts out of the sea and out of the earth ~ 13:1–18
- B. The seven angelic messages–signs ~ 14:1–20
  - i. On Mt. Zion: Song of the Lamb prelude ~ 14:1–5
- C. The seven bowls and judgment of Babylon ~ 15:1–18:24
  - i. In the heavenly temple: Song of Moses prelude ~ 15:1–8
- D. Hallelujah! Celebration of justice ~ 19:1–10

V. Seven final visions and the author's last words ~ 19:11–22:17
- A. Visions of the final judgment and salvation ~ 19:11–22:5
  - i. The rider on the white horse ~ 19:11–16
  - ii. Angelic announcement ~ 19:17–18
  - iii. The final battle ~ 19:19–21
  - iv. The judgment of the dragon ~ 20:1–3
  - v. Millennial and final judgments ~ 20:4–10
  - vi. The judgment of the dead ~ 20:11–15
  - vii. The new heaven and the new earth ~ 21:1–8
    - a. The new Jerusalem ~ 21:9–22:5
- B. The last words of Jesus Christ ~ 22:6–17

VI. Epilogue ~ 22:18–21

1:1–9
Apocalypse: Then and Now

Because 1:1–9 is the opening prologue to the entire book of Revelation, I want to attend to matters the author himself identifies—namely, the from, through, and to of this Apocalypse—before turning to the *why* and especially its theological implications. Our goal here is to provide a preliminary answer in dialogue with John's own introduction to the question of the relevance of this mysterious book for Christian discipleship at the beginning of the third millennium.

This is a revelation of and from Jesus Christ, given to him by God (1:1). More precisely, greetings are invocated "from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, and from Jesus Christ . . ." (1:4–5a). There is a proto-trinitarian ring to this threefold salutation, even if we would do well to resist moving too quickly to that conclusion, especially if that also means rereading back the later (Nicene) tradition into the Apocalypse. For instance, because John also sees "the seven angels who stand before God" (8:2), some commentators believe that in Revelation, the seven spirits are better understood "as the seven principal angels of God."[1] Revelation is unique in referring to the seven spirits, and the number seven's notion of fullness and completeness is consistent with seeing this vis-à-vis what the broader New Testament tradition calls the holy spirit. However, John never refers to the holy spirit as such, even as the seven messianic spirits in the Old Testament background (Isa. 11:2) are also described as being of God

1. E.g., David E. Aune, *Revelation 1–5*, Word Biblical Commentary 52A (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997), 34.

(Rev. 3:1), portrayed as "seven flaming torches[burning] in front of the throne" (4:5), and related to the eyes of the Lamb that are "sent out into all the earth" (5:6).

I take it that Nicene Trinitarianism is much too clean and neat to be able to account for the complexity of the biblical witness, including these references to the seven spirits in the Apocalypse.[2] The triune character of John's greetings suggests that what the later tradition understands as the holy spirit is in John's cosmology intelligible in terms of seven spirits, and these overlap with, rather than exclude, angelic realities. So, although I treat the seven spirits and the divine spirit practically synonymously in the rest of this theological commentary, the point is that the spiritual realm in the seer's imagination is cosmologically varied, and these seven spirits caution us to envision a complex, rather than simple, Christian monotheism.[3] Two referential guidelines for the rest of this commentary thus emerge from this discussion. First, I will not capitalize divine spirit, which will be used regularly since its semantic range includes what most Christians understand by the holy spirit on the one hand but yet its ambiguity is a reminder that for John, the spiritual and divine realm is intertwined with the created and ecclesial domains. Second, I will periodically deploy spirits in the plural when discussing Revelation's pneumatology in order to remind us that John's is a pluralistic—not pluri-theistic!—rather than singular perspective of the divine breath and wind. Catherine Keller rightly thus notes about John's pneumatology, "In order therefore to release the radically democratic, plurivocal, and sustainable potencies of the present we may need to retrieve a relation to select premodern traditions of spirit."[4]

How else then is the God from whom this revelation derives described? God is the one who is, was, and is to come, and is also

2. See also the introductory chapter to my *Mission after Pentecost: The Witness of the Spirit from Genesis to Revelation,* Mission in Global Community (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019) for more on sorting out how the ecumenical and theological tradition post-Nicaea ought to relate to our biblical theologies (and pneumatologies).
3. See also Bogdan G. Bucur, "Hierarchy, Prophecy, and the Angelomorphic Spirit: A Contribution to the Study of the Book of Revelation's *Wirkungsgeschichte*," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 127:1 (2008): 173–94.
4. Catherine Keller, *Apocalypse Now and Then: A Feminist Guide to the End of the World* (1996; reprint, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 288.

"the Alpha and the Omega" and "the Almighty" (1:4, 8). It is precisely this trans-temporal and omnipotent deity who can provide glimpses to his servants about "what must soon take place" (1:1). Regardless of what may happen, the destiny of God's servants is secure because their future is also not just in the divine hands but is part of that divine life and identity. Put otherwise, God is transcendent over the vicissitudes of time, but time itself, both in its dynamic character and in its temporalized terms of the present dividing the past and future, is taken up into the nature of divinity.

And the identity and character of this God is manifest and revealed in the "Son of God," Jesus Christ (2:18). Elsewhere in Revelation, Jesus is also referred to as "the Alpha and Omega" (22:13a)—so that his identity and that of God is equated—even as these opening remarks identify him as one who "*is coming* with the clouds" (1:7a, emphasis added). Yet Jesus is not only on the future horizon, but he is also multiply characterized: according to this status as "the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth"; according to what he has done, as he "who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father"; and according to being worthy of worship, as one who "to [whom] be glory and dominion forever and ever" (1:5–6). If the Father is Almighty and has supreme authority (2:28), the Son is ruler over kings; if the Father is on the throne (3:21), the Son has accomplished the salvation from sins that enables those so redeemed to serve in and according to the authority of the divine reign. Will those so delivered live into their promised potential as priests in the kingdom of God (cf. 5:10, 12:10)?

Before delving further into this question regarding the addressees of these visions, we turn quickly to those *through* whom they are circulated: an angel and John himself (1:1b). Angels are not only innumerable when manifest in Revelation but they also appear innumerably (dozens of times). For our purposes, the opening verse emphasizes the double mediation of these apocalyptic visions: through an angelic mediator and then through the human agent, John the prophet, both of whom reappear, as if reiterated, at the close of the book (22:8). The former alerts us to the heavenly character of these messages and anticipates the plethora of angelic

manifestations to follow; the latter, John the human agent, confirms that this disclosure unfolds through a visionary conduit, one involving symbolic elements requiring semiotic or interpretive elaboration. If the Gospel accounts reveal God in and through the human life of Jesus of Nazareth, then this revelatory apocalypse unveils the divine figure of Jesus Christ in and through intermediaries divine (angelic) and human (John).

What we know otherwise about John can be briefly summarized from what he self-discloses in his book. He is a servant or slave of God and Jesus Christ (1:1b), and "was [past tense] on the island called Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus" (1:9). Since a number of other instances when John refers to the testimony of or to Jesus occur in the context of persecution (e.g., 12:17; 20:4), some find it plausible that John himself was exiled to Patmos as punishment for his religious beliefs and practices, especially as these had political ramifications.[5] Whether or not this can be confirmed beyond any shadow of historical doubt, or whether or not the Apocalypse was finalized after John was released from exile (as the aorist tense related to the Patmos reference might suggest), is less material than that we appreciate his own self-perception as a visionary prophet. Most important, whenever we might get carried away by the extravagance of the visions that John recorded, we must not forget that ultimately he is attempting to convey "the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ" (1:2), nothing more, nothing less.

And who was this revelation intended for, first and foremost? As already indicated, the seven Asian churches. More precisely, however, the title of the book indicates that the recipients of this epistolary prophecy be no less than "servants" of God and Jesus Christ (1:1). Thus, they were to read aloud, hear, and keep these words (1:3). From this perspective, however, the seer also cast a wide net of possible hearers and readers: "Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of the prophecy, and blessed are those who hear and who keep what is written in it" (1:3). In other words, the blessing surely was intended for those among the seven churches (on which more

5. E.g., Allan A. Boesak, *Comfort and Protest: Reflections on the Apocalypse of John of Patmos from a South African Perspective* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1987), 25–27.

in a moment)—as are the six other words of blessing, or macarisms (from the ancient Greek term for beatitudes or sayings praising or wishing and promoting happiness), that are found in the rest of the book (14:13; 16:15; 19:9; 20:6; 22:7, 14)—but beyond that, those who find themselves within the echoes of its reading are invited to listen and obey, and those who respond as such are promised divine blessing.

Why does the seer bless the book's readers, hearers, and keepers? The prophet's introductory comments present two interrelated reasons: because the visions concern "what must soon take place" and because "the time is near" (1:1, 3b). Let me elaborate on each.

The first relates to the concerns about what will happen next. Human creatures with only much better hindsight and minimal foresight want especially the latter in order to anticipate and prepare for what is coming. The book of Revelation thus presents itself as providing some kind of roadmap for the future. If its readers and hearers can decipher the trajectories imaged, they will be in a better position to navigate the coming unknowns. This was presented to the members of the seven churches in order to engage their attention. It has surely been successful in drawing ongoing attention to any and all who wish a more detailed forecast of their times, and especially of the time when Jesus will be returning in and with the clouds.[6]

Part of the challenge of seeing John's perspective involves understanding what he means by "soon" (*en tachei*, "quickly"). The rest of the New Testament evinces widespread convictions about the impending return of Jesus, but there are also indicators that this belief had eroded over time and was not very compelling to unbelievers (e.g., 2 Pet. 3:3–4). If "soon" means imminent and it has been almost two thousand years since Revelation was written, then how reliable is its message? Yet, as will be argued in this book, although John's language might imply that he is interested in unfolding future events in a predictive sense, his deeper and more foundational

6. For histories of readings of this book, see Arthur W. Wainwright, *Mysterious Apocalypse: Interpreting the Book of Revelation* (1993; reprint, Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2001), and Judith Kovacs and Christopher Rowland, *Revelation*, Blackwell Bible Commentaries series (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004).

motivations are pastoral, intending to shape his readers' and hearers' actions in the present. In other words, John's prophecy is fundamentally theological and eschatological, yes, with one eye on what will (soon) come to pass but, more important, with the other eye on how we are postured in the present toward the unknown but anticipated future. We will need to read with both eyes, to use the preceding metaphor, as we work our way through the text: one attentive to the urgency of John's message and the other to the pastoral care that message communicates.

John's message, and the eschatological message of the New Testament more generally, becomes distorted when we interpret the future coming in ways disconnected from the incarnational and pentecostal realization, already, of the divine reign. Recall that in Lukan perspective, the "last days" refer not only to the end of the world but also to the salvific events inaugurated in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus and in his giving of the divine spirit to the world. From that perspective, then, the Greek *en tachei* refers less to the speed or nearness of historical and experiential time than to the quality of theological time: the Pentecost time of the divine spirit's outpouring that carries forward the reign of God announced in the anointed Messiah, even as this same temporal dispensation eagerly awaits, and works for, the full consummation of God's salvific work. This does not undermine the apostolic belief in the imminent Parousia of Jesus since even Jesus himself, Luke records, responds to the disciples' question about when the final restoration of Israel would be achieved: "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority . . ." (Acts 1:7). The return of Jesus can continue to be expected at any time as any later generation, ours included, is patient in heralding and in that sense witnessing to its (partially realized) promise. From this perspective, then, John expected that "the final tribulation, defeat of evil, and establishment of the kingdom . . . would begin in his own generation, and, indeed, that it had already begun to happen."[7]

This helps us also understand John's claim that "the time is near"

7. G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (1999; reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, and Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 2013), 182.

(1:3). Remember that this nearness of time is intertwined by the promised blessing for those who read, hear, and obey: precisely *because* (*gar*) "*the time* is near" (*ho kairos engys*). The biblical *kairos*, of course, refers not to historical but to theological time: the time of salvation history, understood for us incarnationally and pentecostally. So here again, those who encounter the apocalyptic visions are admonished that the time of contrition and salvation is near indeed. *Now* is that moment when the words of Revelation could resound in our hearing or come across our sight, and whenever that is the case, readers and hearers are given time—the opportunity—to listen and respond. This occasion will not last indefinitely, which highlights its urgent character.

As we begin our consideration of John's visions, then, the question is posed: What kind of hearers and readers will we be of this apocalyptic prophecy? How will we respond to its images and voices? What are we prepared to do, if anything, in light of its commendations? We might be drawn to this book for many of the same reasons its countless interpreters have grappled with its words and symbols: because we wish to know what the future holds and how to traverse its turbulences. The book of Revelation will surely illuminate what is to come, although perhaps not in ways that we are expecting. The question is how we will then respond to the future that is actually unveiled, and to the Jesus that is revealed as ahead of us but also present in our midst by his (seven) spirit(s).