

The Apocalypse of John as Oral Enactment

DAVID L. BARR

*Associate Professor of Religion
Wright State University*

The hearers of the Apocalypse enter another universe, a temporary arena in which the norms and realities of everyday life are laid aside and a vision is opened of the final reign of God.

The one having an ear should hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches (2:7).

WE HAVE SO TRUNCATED our experience of hearing that we usually understand this plea as simply, "pay attention," but it is the thesis of this essay that the orality of the Apocalypse is an essential element of its hermeneutic.¹ The original audience encountered it as an aural experience (1:3), and that experience determined both the way the Apocalypse is structured and the meaning the auditors found in it. The first section of this paper will seek to demonstrate the signs of orality evident in the structuring of the Apocalypse, pointing up three techniques that make the Apocalypse "more immediately understandable and retainable."² The

1. The now basic source on the implications of orality for New Testament hermeneutics is Werner Kelber, *The Oral and the Written Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983). While I think Kelber fails to take seriously the possibility of an oral text, confusing sixteenth century hermeneutics with first century, his remarks on the difference between orality and textuality are immensely instructive, especially in his discussion of Paul. Walter Ong's discussion of the "overlap" of written and oral media is more persuasive, *The Presence of the Word* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1967), pp. 22-76.

2. Bennison Gray, "Repetition in Oral Literature," *American Folklore* 84 (1971), 289-303, shows that a primary concern of oral literature is the ease with which it can be

second section will then explore the implications of this orality for interpretation.

THE ORAL TECHNIQUES OF THE APOCALYPSE

The Apocalypse is a lengthy work, but not as lengthy as we might at first imagine. When we read it aloud in class, it takes a little more than an hour. Listening to it may take more concentration than the generation of the thirty-second commercial can muster, but the ancients were both more patient and had better trained memories than we.³ I do not need to rehearse here the prodigious feats of a Seneca to make my point that a person accustomed to listening to such oral recitation could hold the whole of the Apocalypse in the mind, providing the reciter gives enough clues.⁴

That the prophet meant for the auditor to retain the structure of the work in memory seems likely. In fact, he provides a great deal of assistance, and just a little review of the techniques used will enable us to grasp the basic shape of this work.

The Technique of Numbering: 7—3—2

Even in silent reading, we cannot help noticing the lists of sevens that the author provides. These septets take us safely about halfway through the work: seven letters, seven seals, seven trumpets. After several hearings we might even note that each septet is divided into two subseries of four and three. In fact, the series of seven trumpets is deliberately labeled, with the last three trumpets also being a series of three woes.⁵

Yet when we pass beyond the seventh trumpet, we look in vain for more sevens—encountering only one more seven-cycle in the whole last half of the book (15:1, 16:1).⁶ We are not, however, left entirely to our own

remembered by the audience, a concern which accounts for the repetitiveness of such literature in his view. While both verbal repetitions (2:7, 2:11, etc.; 8:5; 11:19; 16:18, etc.) and repetitions of incidents (16:1–21 repeats 8:7–9:19 in essential elements) are characteristic of the Apocalypse, in what follows I will concentrate on more formal devices.

3. See the provocative summary of Daniel J. Boorstin, "The Lost Arts of Memory," in *The Discoverers* (New York: Random House, 1983), pp. 480–97, and the substantive treatment by Frances Yates, *The Art of Memory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966).

4. Albert B. Lord reports that a trained reciter could repeat a lengthy epic poem of several hundred lines after only one hearing, *The Singer of Tales* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1960), pp. 26–29, 98.

5. This is not quite accurate, since the third woe cannot coincide with the seventh trumpet, that trumpet being the proclamation of the reality of God's rule (11:15). Still the third woe is associated with this last trumpet (11:14). See also 12:12, which could imply that the whole last section of Revelation is the third woe (and, in a sense, the content of the last trumpet).

6. It is possible to see other series of seven in the unnumbered material, but I doubt that it was possible to hear such subtle arrangements.

devices. We hear of "a great portent in heaven" (12:1) and twice of "another portent" (12:3 and 15:1).⁷ These three signs are supplemented by the seven bowls and by two contrasting visions of Woman, each introduced by a messenger from the last septet (17:1 and 21:9).

While these obvious numerical techniques do not account for all the material in the Apocalypse, they certainly provide sufficient landmarks to enable the auditors to keep their bearings. In addition, there is another technique more subtle to us but a commonplace one to the ancients. It is, in fact, the concept of place as a technique of memory.

The Technique of Place and Image

The Goddess Memory, and her daughters the Muses, had many devotees in antiquity, and the arts of memory were highly trained. The techniques used were conveniently summarized by the anonymous author of the *Rhetorica ad Herennium* in the early first century B.C. and elaborated by Cicero in the next generation.⁸ The ancient rhetors taught their students to remember by using a combination of places and images: One first memorized a place so as to create numerous "pigeon-holes" into which appropriate images could be placed. These images then, recalled in the appropriate order, would assist one to remember the topics to which they referred.

Place and image are, of course, prominent features of the Apocalypse. One who paid attention to the places and associated images could, one supposes, largely memorize the sequence of the Apocalypse after just a few hearings. Notice how the seven letters are also seven places and how the topics of those letters are related to images unique to that place, as William Ramsay pointed out long ago.⁹

7. These two heavenly signs apparently reflect two astrological phenomena: Scorpio pursuing Virgo through the zodiacal cycle and, perhaps, the seven sisters.

8. *Rhetorica ad Herennium* 3:28-40 and Cicero's *De Oratore*, esp. 87; Cicero treats the subject briefly because it was, he says, a "well-known and common subject."

9. In 1904 in his *Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia* (repr. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1963). Notice that anyone familiar with the geography of Asia Minor would have no difficulty keeping these seven in the proper order, for they are presented in the geographical order beginning at Ephesus, the nearest to Patmos, and proceeding in a circle along the Roman postal road. Further, the content of each letter is related to the place to which it is addressed. Thus, Ephesus, twice forced to move because of the silting of the harbor, is threatened with the removal of its lamp; and this home of Artemis, Goddess of Life and symbolized by a tree, is promised to eat of the tree of life. Smyrna, itself destroyed and rebuilt, is addressed by the one "who died and came to life." Ten days of tribulation are prophesied for this city which is home to the Rites of Niobe, rites which include ten days of mourning. Pergamum, the earliest and greatest center of the Imperial Cult, dwells "where Satan's throne is." Thyatira, known only for its commerce, is charged with doing commerce with idols. This least significant of the seven cities receives the longest and central letter.

After the letters, the scene shifts to heaven and stays in that one place throughout the seven seals and trumpets. It is just as we leave such numeric structuring that place takes on more significance. Our gaze is directed in a descending and ascending pattern: first to the sky, then to earth and sea, followed by the mountain and the temple in heaven (12:1, 13; 13:1, 11; 14:1, 14). With each place a dominant image is associated: woman and dragon with sky, beast with earth and sea, lamb with the mountain, and one seated on a white cloud with the temple. This is a logical sequence of places and the images are strong enough to allow us to remember the associated actions. From this temple there now proceeds the messengers with the seven bowls, who then present us with two more places-images: They show the harlot seated on seven hills and the bride, viewed from the mountain, descending out of heaven. This marked sequence of places and images, images "not meant to be seen with the eye, but rather to provide invisible images for the memory,"¹⁰ would allow the attentive hearer to fix the scope of the action of the Apocalypse in memory. A third technique, really just another sort of place, allows us to grasp the movement of the whole action, for the author places his visions into three depositories, three scrolls.

The Technique of the Scrolls

There are three distinct scrolls mentioned in the Apocalypse, and each of them constitutes a separate action:

"What you see, write in a scroll and send to the seven churches" (1:11).

And I saw in the right hand of the one sitting on the throne, a scroll—which had been written within and on the back and sealed with seven seals (5:1).

And I saw another mighty messenger . . . who had a small opened scroll in his hand . . . (10:1).

Each scroll corresponds to a discrete action.¹¹ The scroll of the churches

Sardis, a nearly impregnable city that was twice conquered through surprise nighttime attacks, is warned that the Christ comes like a thief. The Christians there are called to be awake. Philadelphia, with its large Jewish community, is addressed by the one who has the key of David and is comforted in its suffering at the hands of these former religious compatriots. Laodicea, city of tepid water, is rebuked for its lukewarm religion; specializing in the production of a rich black wool, they are offered white robes; famous for its eye salve, they are taunted for their blindness and urged to buy salve to anoint their eyes. These places and their associated ideas are not merely historical correlations, as Ramsay saw, but they are an oratorical device which would enable easy memorization of the order and scope of these seven letters.

10. Boorstin, p. 484.

11. On the action of the Apocalypse see David L. Barr, "The Apocalypse as a Symbolic

shows the action on Patmos: the risen Christ dictating seven letters to the seven churches (2—3). The sealed scroll shows the action in Heaven: worship, judgment, and salvation (4—11). The little scroll, which John is told to eat (10:9), shows the action on earth: cosmic warfare in which the Dragon attacks the Woman but is overcome by the Divine Warrior (12—22). Let us briefly consider the action of each.

(1) *The Scroll of the Letters*. The letters to the seven churches are small rhetorical gems, not only perfectly balanced within themselves, but each correlated with the opening vision of the risen Christ. Every reader recognizes that they constitute a discrete unit of the story of Revelation. They also contain all the basic themes of the work: Judgment (2:5), Salvation (2:10), Worship (1:17; 2:13), Eucharist (3:20), Attack by Evil (2:10), Martyrdom (2:13), even the coming of Jesus (2:5; 2:16; 3:3) and the New Jerusalem (3:12). They are, in other words, a sort of miniature of the Apocalypse in prosaic style. They are, in a rather obvious fashion, "The Revelation of Jesus Christ" (understood as a subjective genitive). They conclude with the Eucharistic call (and notice the aural metaphors):

Those whom I love, I reprove and chasten; so be zealous and repent. Behold I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will enter and we shall dine together, sharing the common meal. To the one overcoming I will give the honor of sitting on my throne, even as I also overcame and sat with my Father on his throne.*The one having an ear should hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches (3:19—22).

With these words the Letter Scroll comes to an end and John is transported to Heaven, where he sees this throne and witnesses the ceremony of the Heavenly Court.¹² The logic of this scene involves the ancient conception of the correlation between Heaven and Earth, so that actions in Heaven will manifest themselves in earthly counterparts.

(2) *The Scroll of the Liturgy*. The primary dramatic technique John has chosen to show this correlation is the unsealing of the Heavenly Scroll. As each seal is peeled away, we catch a glimpse of the human counterpart: Conqueror, War, Famine, Death, Cries for Justice, Judgment, Silence,

This phrase suggests a correlation with the intention to relate the whole to a hearer not of the churches

Transformation of the World: A Literary Analysis," *INTERP.* 38 (1984), 39—50.

12. See David Aune's discussion of the relation of this ceremony to that of the Imperial court in "The Influence of Roman Imperial Court Ceremonial on the Apocalypse of John," in *Biblical Research* 18 (1983), 5—26. Aune sees this correlation as another example of the conflict between Christ and Caesar. I would not, however, be as quick as Aune to separate this political reality from worship, for I take a basic theme of Revelation to be the interrelatedness of politics and religion. For other possible analogs see J.M.P. Sweet, *Revelation* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1979), p. 116.

then trumpets; and finally the proclamation, perhaps best understood as the reading of the scroll: "The kingdom of the world became the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ and he shall reign forever and ever" (11:15). At this point the heavenly worship, interrupted when no one could open the scroll, resumes with the prayer:

"We offer thanks to you (*eucharistoumen soi*), Lord, God, Ruler of All, the one Being, the One who was, because you have taken your great power and reigned. And the nations were angry. And your wrath came, even the time for the dead to be judged and for your servants the prophets to be rewarded, along with the saints and the ones fearing your name—small and great—the time to destroy the ones destroying the earth" (11:17–18).

More than one commentator has observed that this would be a perfectly appropriate place to end the book. Everything has seemingly happened. We have moved from the time of distress (6:1–11), through the time of judgment (6:12–17; 8:7–9:21), to the time of God's rule (11:15). Once again the scroll is a complete action and a miniature version of the action of the whole of the Apocalypse.

(3) *The Scroll of the Heavenly Signs*. Even though he promised "no more delay" (10:7), John has already forewarned the audience that there would be more to come. He has introduced, as an intercalation between the sixth and seventh trumpets, a third scroll, to which he attached the meaning that he must "prophesy again" (10:11). This new prophecy now begins in chapter twelve, with the vision of the heavenly woman attacked by the dragon. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza has shown that a new type of action begins here.¹³ This final scroll reveals the eschatological battle, the attack by Satan and his defeat by Christ, the heavenly warrior.¹⁴ In fact, we witness a series of victories: first in heaven (12:9), then by the "son of man seated on the cloud" (14:14), then by the "Word of God" mounted on a white horse (19:13, 20–21), and finally by "fire from heaven" (20:9). Interlaced with these scenes of victory are repeated scenes of, and declarations of, the fall of Babylon, (14:8; 16:19; 17:16; 18:2; and 18:21). Thus the hearers are repeatedly shaken, as with a great earthquake and its several aftershocks, till their vision of the world is altered. The whole

13. "Composition and Structure of the Apocalypse," *CBQ* 39 (1977), 344–66, now revised and reprinted as Chapter Six of *The Book of Revelation: Justice and Judgment* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985). Whereas the subject of the action heretofore has been Christ (the author of the letters and the opener of the seals), now the subject is the dragon who launches his attack on the woman and "the rest of her offspring" (12:19).

* 14. See Adela Yarbro Collins, *The Combat Myth in the Book of Revelation*, Harvard Dissertations in Religion 9 (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1976) for a complete treatment of this theme. She tends to take the motif more literally than I think warranted.

cf. Mos. 15 "who are his seed?" →

section culminates in two visions of woman: the prostitute and the bride.

This brings the action full circle, as the scene revolves back to the person of John as it had begun. Once again John directly addresses the audience (22:8; 1:9); once again he blesses the hearers (22:18; 1:3); the closing benediction (22:21) takes us back to the letter salutation (1:4). The oral enactment of the story of salvation has ended.

This return to normal reminds us that the oral enactment itself was something other than normal. The hearers of the Apocalypse entered another universe, experienced a new reality. They experience what Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann aptly called a "finite province of meaning,"¹⁵ a temporary arena in which the norms and realities of everyday life are laid aside. We all experience many such enclaves: the theater, a ball game, a worship service. They are each marked by a "going in" and a "going out": raising and lowering a curtain, blowing a whistle, playing an organ, or some such device. For the audience of the Apocalypse, the direct address of the prophet at the beginning and the end provided the bridge into and out of this experience. We must now inquire more specifically what the social significance of this oral experience may have been.

THE ORAL SETTING OF THE APOCALYPSE

The assumption of the work is that a reciter stands before the community in the place of John, who is himself confined to Patmos (1:3, 9). However the oral setting of the Apocalypse is a bit more complex than just to say it is being read aloud to the congregation. Let us examine this dynamic in more detail.

The Prophet's Voice: The Voice of Jesus

The phenomenon of early Christian prophecy is little understood, although it has attracted increasing attention of late.¹⁶ Much of this attention has focused on the historical issue of the prophet speaking for Jesus and thus distorting our knowledge of the historical Jesus.¹⁷ Some attention has been given to the issues of the social dynamic of prophets, often with an examination of the conflict between the settled ministry and

15. *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (New York: Doubleday, 1966), pp. 25-28.

16. Most especially by the SBL Seminar on Early Christian Prophecy in the mid-seventies and the writings of David Aune (*Prophecy in Early Christianity and the Ancient Mediterranean World* [Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publ. Co., 1983]), Eugene Boring (*Sayings of the Risen Jesus: Christian Prophecy in the Synoptic Tradition* [New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1982]), and David Hill (*New Testament Prophecy* [Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1979]), among others.

17. This was the focus of the SBL Seminar.

the peripatetic prophet—as seen in the curious regulations of the *Didache*, for example.¹⁸

While there may have been such conflict in John's communities, there is very little evidence to prove it. Rather, what evidence there is suggests a struggle between prophets—especially between John and the woman he calls Jezebel (2:20–23). In typical prophetic fashion, John confronts Jezebel, not with logic and debate but with pronouncement and curses: It is very hard to argue with someone who talks to God. Yet anyone with whom God talks must surely be impossible to persuade.¹⁹ Thus, John meets opposition with the strong prophetic word. It is the ancient understanding of the force of the word that is of concern here.

Yet John faced an enormous obstacle in delivering this word to his people. He was not present. The Apocalypse tells us that he had been removed to Patmos. He must make his voice heard from afar.

I will not debate here just how convincing the Apocalypse is as a "letter from prison." For my part I find it doubtful that we should take this context literally. This was surely a work intended for repeated performances, but this fictional setting does highlight an essential element: the absence of the prophet. He clearly cannot be present in all seven cities at once. In his absence there are two dangers: that his voice will not be heard or that it would be heard in a distorted fashion. John meets both these eventualities in the blessings and curses attached to his writing.

(1) *Blessing and Cursing as Social Control*. In his absence John encourages the reading of his apocalypse by pronouncing a divine blessing on the public reader:

Divinely favored be the one who causes the word of this prophecy to be heard again and the ones hearing and keeping the things that have been written in it, for the appointed time is at hand (1:3).

Then at the end he issues solemn warning:

I bear witness to all who hear the words of the prophecy of this scroll: if anyone would add to these things God will add to that one the plagues that have been written in this scroll; and if anyone would take away from the words of the scroll of this prophecy God will take away that one's share in the tree of life and in the holy city, the things written about in this scroll (22:18–19).

18. See *Didache* 11–13 and Aune, *Prophecy*, pp. 203–11. Gerd Theissen addressed social issues in *Sociology of Early Palestinian Christianity*, trans. J. Bowden (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977).

19. The amusing story of Jeremiah's conflict with the prophets of his day who rejected his word of judgment illustrates the point nicely (Jer. 27–28).

We can posit two social correlates to these words. On the one hand, they function in the situation of extended orality as a control on the reader to faithfully reproduce the words of the prophecy.²⁰ They serve as limits on oral invention.²¹ On the other hand, as words read before the assembly they function to increase the status and power of the reading. By guaranteeing the integrity of the presentation they increase the power of the oral message. The hearers are assured that they hear the "very word of John," so to speak.

In hearing the voice of John, they hear far more, which leads us to the next point: the prophet as surrogate for Jesus.

(2) *I John: I Jesus*. It is now familiar to us, but nonetheless shocking, that a prophet like John claimed to encounter the Risen Jesus, hear him speak, and then forward his words to the communities of his followers—and this near the end of the first century. John goes so far as actually to have the Risen Jesus dictate letters to the seven churches.²² But the Apocalypse does more: the public reader actually speaks in the voice of Jesus. We must notice the careful way John builds to this possibility.

The Apocalypse begins with a general declaration: It is a revelation of Jesus Christ which God gave him to show to his servants . . . and he communicated through sending a messenger to his servant John. There is then a blessing on the lector, followed by the letter address: "John to the seven Asian churches, grace to you and peace . . ." (1:1-4). This letter form signals the audience to accept the reader as the "presence" of the author.²³ The lector takes on the persona of John. This device is then pushed one step further when Jesus becomes the author of letters (2-3). The lector takes on yet another persona, speaking for Jesus. Then, at the

20. A somewhat similar situation is posed in *The Shepherd of Hermas* when Hermas is asked, "Can you take this message to God's elect ones?" He replies, "Lady, I cannot remember so much; but give me the little book to copy" (2.1.3). Hermas is to take this book back and give it to the "elders" to be read in church and send it abroad to others to do likewise (2.4.2-3).

21. Consider, e.g., the prolific interpretations of the oral "translators" of Scripture in the synagogue services who were responsible for the *Targumin*. See the summary in Bruce Chilton, *A Galilean Rabbi and His Bible* (Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1984), pp. 35-56.

22. This is a fairly radical development and would seem to contradict Kelber's thesis that only the prophet in the situation of primary orality (that is face to face) was taken to speak for Jesus (or as Jesus). In the prophetic imagination Jesus could even write letters which could be read to the congregation. See Kelber's discussion of "Orality and Actuality" (pp. 70-77) and of "Textuality as Disorientation" (pp. 91-105) in *The Oral and the Written Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983).

23. On the letter as a presence of the author see Robert Funk, "The Apostolic Parousia: Form and Significance" in *Christian History and Interpretation: Studies Presented to John Knox*, ed. W. R. Farmer et al. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1967), pp. 249-68; Holberg; Meeks; and with reservations Kelber, pp. 140-41.

beginning of the next scene (4:1), the lector falls back to the persona of John, which he maintains till near the end of the reading. Then, in the midst of the sixth and climactic vision of judgment in the Bowl Septet, the voice of the Jesus of the letters breaks through: "Look. I am coming as a thief. Divinely favored is the one staying alert and keeping watch of his garments, lest he walk naked and they see his shame" (16:15). This saying is so isolated from its contexts that some have suggested it is a displacement,²⁴ and many translations put it in parentheses. It is, I suggest, an imitation of the ecstatic prophecy of the oral prophet; it is enthusiasm.

A similar interjection in the voice of Jesus occurs in the final scene. Having finished the cycle of visions, the lector first addresses the audience in the name of John: "And I John, the one hearing and seeing these things . . ." (22:8). This serves to lead the audience out of the vision and back to the world of normal consciousness: from the finite province of meaning to the world of everyday reality in our earlier terms. But now just as things wind down we suddenly hear: "I Jesus sent my messenger to bear witness to you these things concerning the churches. I am (*ego eimi*) the root and the offspring of David, the bright, morning star" (22:16). To hear the lector declare this orally in front of the congregation must surely have made a dramatic impression. We are justified, I think, in concluding that the oral performance of the Apocalypse served to make Jesus present. There is a kind of secondary—or rather tertiary—incarnationalism in the reading of the Apocalypse. The prophet stands in the place of Jesus and makes him present to the community; the public reader stands in the place of the prophet and makes him (and Jesus) present. We must now consider what kind of a social situation such presence implies and validates.

The Liturgical Context

Most commentators posit a liturgical context for the performance of the Apocalypse. Indeed, it is hard to imagine any other occasion in which an audience would gather together to have such a work read to them, and it can be added that the portrayal of scenes of worship and the extensive liturgical language makes such a conclusion nearly inescapable. We might also add that it was on just such occasions that a public letter might be read to the assembly if the Pauline tradition is any guide.

The only argument I know against this conclusion is that the length of the Apocalypse makes it unlikely that it was actually and repeatedly read

24. R. H. Charles pointed to the "utter inappropriateness" of the verse to its present context and "how fitly" it comes after 3:3a to support his rearrangement (*The Revelation of St. John*, ICC [Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1920], II, 49). For counter arguments see J.P.M. Sweet, *Revelation* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1979), p. 249.

aloud as a part of a service. It would seem to take up the whole service. Perhaps it did. Or perhaps early Christian worship lasted longer than this argument assumes. Acts reports that Paul prolonged his speech till midnight (thereby immortalizing the drowsy Eutychus), then afterwards broke bread and spoke with them till daybreak (Acts 20:7–12), and the extensive lists of spiritual gifts imply a rather lengthy service for their exercise. At one place Paul argued for the unity of the congregation on the basis of what happened in the liturgy: “When you come together each [contributes something] one has a psalm, one has a teaching, one has an apocalypse, one has an ecstatic speech, one has an interpretation” (I Cor. 14:26). Such a service would take more than sixty minutes (and notice that presenting an apocalypse was a standard expectation). If we do not confuse what would be possible within contemporary liturgical practice with what was possible in early Christianity, there is no reason to reject the idea that the Apocalypse functioned within a liturgical service—and several reasons for believing it did. Can we be more specific?

We learn something of the liturgical practices of Christians in Roman Asia Minor from Pliny, the provincial governor under Trajan, about two decades after the composition of the Apocalypse. He had learned from certain apostates that the Christians

... were in the habit of meeting on a certain fixed day before it was light, when they sang in alternate verses a hymn to Christ, as to a god, and bound themselves by a solemn oath, not to any wicked deeds, but never to commit any fraud, theft, or adultery, never to falsify their word, nor deny a trust when they should be called upon to deliver it up; after which it was their custom to separate, and then reassemble to partake of food—but food of an ordinary and innocent kind (*Letters* 10.96).

It is highly probable that the “certain fixed day” was Sunday or, as John says, “the Lord’s day” (1:10) and that the food mentioned was, or at least included, the Lord’s Supper. It is also likely that the reassembling occurred after sundown, with a day’s labor transpiring between the two meetings.

Just such an evening Eucharistic service provides the most likely social context for the oral enactment of the Apocalypse.

⌋1) *Evidence for a Eucharistic Setting.* Certainly this would be appropriate, for the Eucharist—like the Apocalypse itself—looks back to the death of Jesus and forward to the messianic banquet in the Kingdom of God. An apocalypse is a dramatic portrayal of the coming of the Kingdom of God; a Eucharist is an active celebration of the coming of that Kingdom. What the Apocalypse does in word, the Eucharist does in deed; it is the myth that

corresponds to the ritual.

Even more, Eucharistic themes pervade the Apocalypse: eating and drinking, wine and blood, the tree of life and the water of life, manna and images from the feast of Tabernacles, grain harvest and grape harvest, being sealed and encountering Jesus.²⁵ All these are associated with the Eucharist in Christian tradition. Each Scroll contains explicit Eucharistic scenes: the first scroll closed with the invitation to the common table; the second promises to satisfy hunger and thirst (7:16) and closes with "We give you thanks, O Lord," a form of Eucharistic prayer; the third includes the explicit invitation, "Blessed are those bidden to the marriage supper of the Lamb" (19:9) and closes with a scene nearly every element of which parallels Eucharistic celebrations.

While our knowledge of early Christian liturgical practice is meager, we do have one source which gives the elements of a Eucharist—probably deriving from the Syrian church (or perhaps Egyptian) in the early second century. This is Chapters nine and ten of the *Didache*. Let me briefly outline that service:

There are separate blessings over the cup and bread, each beginning, "We give thanks to you, O Father" (*eucharistoumen soi*) and each ending with "to you be glory unto the ages." Jesus is called the "vine of David." Only the baptized are allowed to participate, for they are not to give what is holy to the dogs. God is said to "tabernacle" with them and is praised as creator and provider of spiritual food and drink. Prayers for the deliverance of the church from all evil and its gathering into God's kingdom are said, with the final appeal, "Let grace come and let this world pass away. Hosanna to the God of David. If anyone is holy, let him come; if anyone is not, let him repent. Maranatha (Our Lord, come). Amen." It closes with the curious observation, "But permit the prophets to give thanks (*eucharistein*) however they wish."

Nearly every aspect of this service is paralleled in the Apocalypse, but the concentration of elements in the closing scene is remarkable. There are no less than seven specific points of correlation with the final scene in the Apocalypse: (a) both mention David; (b) both say only some are worthy to participate; (c) both compare the outsiders to "dogs"; (d) both promise a drink of life; (e) both invite some to come; (f) both invite the Lord to come; (g) both close with Amen.²⁶ Without denying that there are notable

25. Explicit Eucharistic themes can be found at 2:7 (contrast 2:14), 17 (see John 6); 3:20; 7:16, 17; 11:17; 19:9, 17; 21:6; 22:1, 10–20. Implicit references include 5:9; 7:2, 14; 12:11; 14:10, 15, 18, 20; 16:6, 19; and 17:2.

26. Numerous other correlations can be made with other parts of the Apocalypse as well: "We give you thanks" (*Did.* 9:1; *Rev.* 11:17); "to you be glory unto the ages" (*Did.* 9:2; *Rev.*

differences, perhaps even different ideas of the Eucharist, I think it most likely that an early Christian who heard the ending of the Apocalypse performed aloud would have associated it with the Eucharist. If so, this setting has definite hermeneutical implications.

(2) *Implications of a Eucharistic Setting.* I suggest that the oral characteristics of the Apocalypse and its oral setting, wherein the lector speaks for the Risen Christ who comes to his community, prepared the audience to receive the Christ at the common table, the proleptic messianic banquet. Further, this enactment of the Apocalypse as a finite province of meaning was itself an experience of the Kingdom of God.

The central theme of the Apocalypse, a focus of all three scrolls, is the proper worship of God. In the letter scroll it involved avoiding idol-meat (2:14), in the liturgy scroll adoration of God was the central element, and in the little scroll it was the contest between worship of the beast and worship of God. This was portrayed most poignantly in a small scene which shows a messenger flying in midheaven with an eternal gospel and proclaiming: "Fear God and give him glory, because the hour of his judgment came, and worship the one having made the heaven and the earth with its sea and fountains of water" (14:7). In fact a moment's reflection will reveal that the true nature of worship is the service of God, the reestablishment of divine order, as portrayed in Revelation 4.

There is a remarkably appropriate passage, written to one of these same churches a couple of decades later:

Seek, then, to come together more frequently to give thanks [*eucharistian*] and glory to God. For when you gather together frequently the powers of Satan are destroyed, and his mischief is brought to nothing, by the concord of your faith. There is nothing better than peace, by which every war in heaven and earth is abolished (Ignatius, *Ephesians* 13:1-2).

In just this way the real struggle enacted in the Apocalypse is the contest between the worship of God or the worship of Satan. The Dragon has

7:12, etc.); Jesus as the agent of revelation (*Did.* 9:3; *Rev.* 1:1); plea for gathering of the church (*Did.* 9:4; *Rev.* 7:1-10; 21:9-10); God said to "tabernacle" with humanity (*Did.* 10:2; *Rev.* 21:3; 13:6); God addressed as "Almighty" (*pantokrator*: *Did.* 10:3; *Rev.* 1:8; 21:22, etc.); God said to "create all things" (*Did.* 10:3; *Rev.* 4:11); the call to repentance (*Did.* 10:6; *Rev.* 2-3). The Eucharistic service in the *Didache* also includes two themes that pervade the Apocalypse: the plea to deliver the church from all evil and perfect it in love (*Did.* 10:5), and the prayer "May grace come and may this world pass away" (*Did.* 10:6). This association of the Eucharist with the passing away of this world and the gathering of the church into the Kingdom is to be stressed. Finally, the curious closing note about permitting "the prophets to give thanks however they wish" highlights both the freedom of the prophet to create novel Eucharistic celebrations and the close connection of the prophet with the Eucharist.

attacked the Woman, but she has brought forth a son who will crush the Dragon—even as the promise was made to Eve.²⁷

✦ Yet since the contest is one of true worship, the oral enactment of the Apocalypse is a central element in the struggle, for it does more than describe the coming of God's kingdom (the narrative of the end), and it does more than portray that kingdom through worship (the liturgical materials); it brings the kingdom (it is the liturgy).

Targum
conclusion

As a story the Apocalypse has the power to take us in, to transport us into a new world. As an enacted story the Apocalypse has the power to bring into existence that reality which it portrays, to transform the finite province of meaning into the paramount reality of those who worship. It becomes a charter story that establishes a new world in which God triumphs over evil through the death of Jesus and the suffering of his followers. Because the Kingdom of God is his true worship, the very enactment of the Apocalypse establishes that kingdom in this world.

The orality of the Apocalypse is an essential element in its interpretation, for its oral presentation within the liturgy mediates the coming of Jesus to his congregation in salvation and judgment enabling them to carry on the divine service, that is, the realization of God's rule in their midst.

27. Revelation 12 seems to be built on the Eve story, which was used in a similar way by the Rabbis. The Targum on Genesis 3:15 speaks of crushing the head of the dragon by keeping the Law. For John the answer is to worship God through Christ.