

The Cosmic Conflict: Revelation's Undercurrent

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The book of Revelation is like no other in the New Testament. It impacts all of the senses of the reader in a manner that the Epistles and the Gospels do not. The sights, sounds, odors, voices, and thunderings mix with a jarring juxtaposition of images and Old Testament references to create a continuous assault on the mind. A tremendous artistic effect works upon those who read or hear its contents. However, despite the effort and thought that went into the composition of the book, interpreters frequently disagree as to what is the main theme of the work.

Critical commentaries tend to see the Roman Empire as the primary force behind John's imagery and his narrative tapestry as a well-drawn parody of Roman rule.¹ Other commentaries place the emphasis on God's

¹ See Leonard Thompson, *The Book of Revelation: Apocalypse and Empire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990); Richard Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy: Studies on the Book of Revelation* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1992), 384-5; David E. Aune, *Revelation 6-16* (Nashville, TN: T. Nelson, 1998), 729; David E. Aune, "The Influence of Roman Imperial Court Ceremonial on the Apocalypse of John," *BR* 28, (1983): 5-26; David E. Aune, "The Form and Function of the Proclamations to the Seven Churches (Revelation 2-3)" *NTS* 36, no. 2 (1990), 182-204; Michael Naylor, "The Roman Imperial Cult and Revelation," *CBR* 8.2, (2010), 207-239; Steven J. Friesen, *Imperial Cults and the Apocalypse of John: Reading Revelation in the Ruins* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); Hans-Josef Klauck, "Do they Never Come Back? Nero Redivivus and the Apocalypse of John" *CBQ* 63, (2001), 683-698; G. B. Caird, *The Revelation of Saint John BNTC* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966) 164; J. Ramsey Michaels, *Revelation* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011), 22, summarizes this situation stating that modern historical scholarship assumes that Revelation's main theme is "the author's social world." Barbara R. Rossing, *The Choice between Two Cities: Whore, Bride, and Empire in the Apocalypse* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1999) 6-14 surveys a variety of

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sovereignty as Revelation's over arching interpretive framework.² This perspective tends to focus on how God's rule is manifest throughout the storyline. Unquestionably Revelation interacts with its historical setting and the original reader would see in the oppressive power of Rome an attempt to overturn God's rule.³ Likewise, modern readers are reassured that God does eventually reign supreme in the universe. However, these interpretations generally overlook or under emphasize an important motif within Revelation. Too frequently the role that the cosmic conflict plays in the narrative as a whole, and its position as a dominant motif is under exposed.⁴

A variety of scholars have attempted to redress this situation, by exploring more fully the extended nature that the war in heaven theme exerts on the narrative.⁵ Recent attempts to do this include Antoninus King

different approaches to this issue.

² William Hendriksen, *More Than Conquerors: An Interpretation of the Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1982), 7 and Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 2002), 31 both stress God's sovereignty. Osborne writes, "Even the actions of the forces of evil are controlled by God. Everything they do comes only by permission from God." G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 320, writes, "Although God's realm is separated from the earthly, he is nevertheless in control over earth's affairs."

³ There are many sources that portray the rule of Domitian as repressive and tyrannical. See Tacitus, *Agricola* (98); Pliny the Younger, *Panegyric* (100); *Letters* (105-109); Dio Crysostom, *Discourse* (110). Recent scholarship has questioned the extent of Domitian's persecution. See Thompson, *The Book of Revelation*, 101-115, for an extended discussion. Thompson, (*The Book of Revelation*, 175), concludes that the text is not necessarily addressing a crisis for the church, contending the apocalyptic theme reveals nothing of the actual political situation. Rather it reveals the perspective of the writer (and readers) toward society as a whole. See also Peter Antonysamy Abir, *The Cosmic Conflict of the Church: An Exegetico-Theological Study of Revelation 12, 7-12* (Frankfurt am Main; New York: Peter Lang, 1995), 10-12; Adela Yarbro Collins, *Crisis and Catharsis: The Power of the Apocalypse* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984), 84-107; Philip A. Harland, "Honouring the Emperor Or Assailing the Beast: Participation in Civic Life among Associations (Jewish, Christian and Other) in Asia Minor and the Apocalypse of John," *JSNT* 22, (2000), 99-121 (103).

⁴ Laszlo Gallusz, *The Throne Motif in the Book of Revelation* (London: Bloomsbury, T&T Clark 2014) 12-17, discusses a methodological process by which a literary motif can be identified. Two key criteria are frequency of mention and the appearance of the theme in unlikely contexts. The cosmic conflict fulfills both the criteria within Revelation's narrative.

⁵ Adela Yarbro Collins, *The Combat Myth in the Book of Revelation* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2001. Yarbro Collins' 1976 published dissertation demonstrates the structural priority of one of the main war images in Revelation, 12.1-17. Abir's, *The Cosmic*

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Wai Siew's *The War between the Two Beasts and the Two Witnesses: A Chiastic Reading of Revelation 11.1-14.5*,⁶ Sigve Tonstad's *Saving God's Reputation*,⁷ Benjamin Steed Stubblefield's "The Function of the Church in Warfare in the Book of Revelation,"⁸ and to a lesser extent Laszlo Gallusz's *The Throne Motif in the Book of Revelation*.⁹

This article is an attempt to build on those efforts and pursue the trajectory that has been set in motion. If the cosmic conflict is to be seen as the undercurrent of the entire book of Revelation, then there should be evidence of this throughout the storyline, and not only in those chapters that explicitly describe the conflict.¹⁰ Narrative criticism¹¹ can help uncover the contribution that the characters give to the storyline, as well as discerning some of the verbal threads¹² that John uses to tie the war in heaven theme to his entire work. In an attempt to uncover the foundation of Revelation's narrative and the role the conflict theme plays in forming that substructure, I will explore both Satan's role as *character* in the narrative, and *verbal threads* that John uses to create his narrative tapestry.

Conflict of the Church: An Exegetico-Theological Study of Revelation 12, 7-12 also suggests that Revelation 12 has a guiding influence on the entire narrative.

⁶ Antoninus King Wai Siew, *The War between the Two Beasts and the Two Witnesses. A Chiastic Reading of Revelation 11.1-14.5*, (London; New York: T&T Clark, 2005).

⁷ Sigve Tonstad, *Saving God's Reputation*, LNTS, 337 (London; New York: T & T Clark, 2006).

⁸ Benjamin Steen Stubblefield, "The Function of the Church in Warfare in the Book of Revelation" (unpublished PhD diss., Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2012).

⁹ Gallusz, *The Throne Motif*, pp. 318-19. Gregory Boyd has attempted to address the reality of the cosmic conflict in a broader theological sense, but does not engage with the book of Revelation. See Gregory Boyd, *God at War* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1997).

¹⁰ For greater detail, see Steven Grabiner, *Revelation's Hymns: Commentary on the Cosmic Conflict* (London: Bloomsbury, T&T Clark 2014), which engages this theme more fully and especially explores the role that the hymnic portions play in the clarifying the issues in the conflict. This article is largely drawn from material in the book.

¹¹ Narrative criticism utilizes literary techniques that have traditionally been applied to fiction. Contrary to the origins of the practices, the term is primarily used by biblical scholars and not by modern literary critics. See James L. Resseguie, *Narrative Criticism of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 17-18; Seymour Benjamin Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989). The term was coined by David Rhoads. See David Rhoads, "Narrative Criticism and the Gospel of Mark," *JAAR* 50, no. 3 (1982), 411-434 (412).

¹² The expression verbal threads is used to describe the literary and thematic links that John uses to weave the tapestry of Revelation's narrative.

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Despite the complex theological and historical aspects of the book, Revelation lends itself to a narrative reading. It is an unusual and strange story, one not frequently encountered elsewhere but a story nonetheless. Revelation's narrative has unique attributes embedded within it, being highly episodic and deep with imagery drawn from the OT and other backgrounds. Nevertheless, it lends itself to a narrative reading with its characters and unfolding of an ongoing storyline.¹³

An important facet of a narrative reading is in clarifying the function that a character has in highlighting the emphasis within the plot. An understanding of how the characters are portrayed helps to unfold the storyline. Characters are described in a multiplicity of ways emphasizing the depth that they possess.¹⁴ Some characters have a single attribute that defines them. Others are simply agents within the story with no dimension to them, while others are full-fledged and realistic.¹⁵ Naturally, in a work of fiction, characters are constructs of the author, merely created to fulfill a role.¹⁶ Nevertheless, the reader learns about them in the same way one

¹³ G. R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* Second ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006), 155. Early narrative critical studies have focused on the Gospels, with Mark being the initial Gospel subjected to this form of study. See David M. Rhoads and Donald Michie, *Mark as Story. An Introduction to the Narrative of a Gospel* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1982); David B. Howell, "Matthew's Inclusive Story: A Study in the Narrative Rhetoric of the First Gospel." *JSNT Sup*, no. 42 (1990); Walter Brueggeman, *David's Truth in Israel's Imagination and Memory* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1985). Revelation also offers a suitable framework for this approach. See James L. Resseguie, *The Revelation of John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009); James L. Resseguie, *Revelation Unsealed. A Narrative Critical Approach to John's Apocalypse*, (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 1998); David L. Barr, *Tales of the End. A Narrative Commentary on the Book of Revelation*, (Santa Rosa: Polebridge Press, 1998). As David L. Barr notes, "Waiting for the End that Never Comes. The Narrative Logic of John's Story" in *Studies in the Book of Revelation*, ed. Steve Moyise (New York. T&T Clark, 2001) 101, that whatever else the "Apocalypse is, it is a story." Dal Lee, *The Narrative Asides in the Book of Revelation*. (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2002), 91. John J. Collins, "Introduction: Towards the Morphology of a Genre," *Semina* 14, 1979, 9, considers that apocalyptic literature is set within a "narrative framework." M. Eugene Boring, *Narrative Christology in the Apocalypse*, *CBQ* 54, Oct (1992) 702-23, also highlights the value of a narrative reading of Revelation.

¹⁴ Round or flat is a common distinction between characters with depth and those with none. Round characters are capable of surprising the reader. E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1985), 67.

¹⁵ Osborne *Hermeneutical Spiral* 159.

¹⁶ Mark Allan Powell, *What is Narrative Criticism?* (Guides to Biblical Scholarship; New Testament Series, Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1990) 55.

learns about characters in a historical narrative, such as the Gospels. The author reveals details about the character by describing them, or through showing their actions, recording their speech (or the words of others), or revealing their thoughts.¹⁷

In Revelation, the main characters are described through sobriquets, titles, and descriptive appellations. God is overwhelmingly described as “the one sitting on the throne” (4.2, 3, 9; 5.1; 7.13; 6.16; 7.10, 15; 19.4; 20.11; 21.5). “Lamb” is the most frequent title for Christ, but “lion” and “son of man” are also used (5.5-8; 14.14). Satan is described as a “serpent” and “dragon,” reflecting the dual nature of persecutor and deceiver (12.9; 20.2).

Satan as Character

Despite the appearance of Satan throughout the narrative, many readings of Revelation view him as effectively powerless, simply a foil to God’s sovereignty, or as a hypostatization of evil.¹⁸ However, if Revelation is to be seen as dealing with the larger biblical theme of God’s way of confronting evil, then Satan’s role demands a closer reading. Tonstad notes that “the rhetorical situation of Revelation is cognizant of an opposing will and agency” in a way that surpasses many interpretations of the book.¹⁹ John portrays this opposing will and agency as one of the defining traits of Satan.

In works of fiction, characters are simply constructs of the author. Their purpose is to fulfill a role in the ongoing story.²⁰ A narrative reading of the Bible, while not diminishing the historicity of the characters, will also ask what role does this character accomplish in the storyline? An author reveals the character through either description, or by showing their actions, speech, or thoughts.²¹ Satan as a character in the narrative is continually described as the chief antagonist. His one aim is to wage what appears to be a futile

¹⁷ Chatman, *Story and Discourse*, 121.

¹⁸ Thompson *The Book of Revelation*, 83.

¹⁹ Tonstad, *Saving God’s Reputation*, 38.

²⁰ Characters can be viewed as part of the overarching backdrop for the story, not to be seen as persons but as part of the setting. The opposite of this view is to see any person mentioned as “character” within the story. One needs to be able to distinguish between characters who play a central role in the plot, and those who simply give dimension to the story. See Mel W. Gnatkowski, “The Implied Reader in the Book of Revelation” (ThD diss, New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, 1988) 64.

²¹ Powell (*Narrative Criticism*, 52) confirms that “showing” is less precise, and that the “reader must work harder” to collect data and evaluate what is being conveyed.

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war against a sovereign God. Characters that are typically identified with a single characteristic, idea, or quality are considered “flat” in narrative critical terms.²² Round (or full fledged) characters have a complexity that is not easily expressed in one sentence.²³ From this perspective Satan would be considered flat and not fully developed, an ancillary figure in the storyline, not a main one, a foil to God’s sovereignty not a real threat.

However, there is a further consideration that must be brought to bear when making a critical judgment on the role of a character. Flat characters typically do not surprise. The “test of a round character is whether it is capable of surprising in a convincing way.”²⁴ Given this added dimension of character development in the narrative, the depth and position of Satan as character calls for reevaluation. There are several points in the plot of Revelation that demand a more nuanced reading in relation to the role Satan plays.²⁵ This is particularly true in Rev. 20.1-3, where Satan is, at first, left alone in his single-minded war against God. The story unfolds with his being bound by a mighty angel and then inexplicably released to once again carry on his unremitting attacks. It is the surprising and difficult to explain *release* that gives the reader pause. The unexpected and hard to understand nature of his renewed attack forces the reader to pay closer attention to the overall weight Satan carries in the storyline.

Why, at the very end of the story, when the conflict appears to have been resolved, must Satan be set free for one more attempt at deception and overthrow of the government of God?²⁶ Suggested answers range over a wide territory in search of clarity. The scope of solutions includes the faulty nature of the text (Charles), John’s loss of interest in his story (Kraft), the depersonalization of Satan (Sweet), a demonstration of God’s sovereignty (MacLeod),²⁷ and merely as a foil to allow the martyred saints to receive

²² Forster, *Aspects*, 67.

²³ Resseguie *Narrative Criticism*, 123. Clearly Satan could be described as singularly malicious, and in this way, flat. See Stubblefield, “Warfare,” 90.

²⁴ Forster, *Aspects*, 78.

²⁵ Stubblefield (“Warfare,” 89) also notes that the amount of space that Satan plays in the narrative, contributes to seeing him as a round character. Although the name only occurs eight times, his presence is felt throughout the narrative.

²⁶ Robert William Klund, “The Plot of Revelation 4-22” (PhD diss., Dallas Theological Seminary, 2002) 196, notes that this provides a shock to the reader, and raises questions as to what will happen to Satan and what will he do.

²⁷ Tonstad, *Saving God’s Reputation*, 44-48. Tonstad begins the major part of his study with Revelation’s ending. His purpose is to help break up “entrenched” readings and allow the cosmic conflict theme, so evident in the last half of the book, to have a dominant role in

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their reward (Fee).²⁸ None of these are convincing, as they ignore the continued role that Satan plays in the narrative. Considering the storyline as a whole, including the larger biblical context, there are three deductions relating to Satan's role to be considered.²⁹

1.) Satan's imprisonment, followed by the startling and surprising release, contributes to filling out his character and demonstrates that he holds a central role in the development of Revelation's plot. This role is drawn from the wider range of the OT. John's description of Satan as that "ancient serpent" (20.2, cf. 12.9) refers the reader back to Gen. 3. This is also on display in ch. 12, where the key elements of the Genesis story are brought to view. The serpent of old, the woman, and the child, all direct the reader to the broad allusion of the fall and entrance of sin into a perfect world.³⁰ Thus the agent and cause of the primordial questions about God's justice and character is on center stage at the final end of the battle. In this way John places the spotlight on Satan, not in a congratulatory way, but in order to highlight his importance to the narrative as a whole.

2.) Satan's solo appearance demonstrates his uniqueness in the unfolding human drama. Beginning with ch. 13, Satan unites with the sea-beast (13.1) and the land-beast (13.11) to facilitate his war against God's rule. This unholy trio continues their work through to ch. 19, where the final battle is initiated. It is important to note that while this battle begins in ch. 19.11, there is only a temporary interruption when two of the three leaders are taken and thrown into the lake of fire (19.20). The battle continues after the 1,000 years when it is finally completed (20.8).³¹ During the ultimate battle Satan at first has the stage to himself. His earthly allies have been destroyed and at this point in the prophecy, the second resurrection has not occurred, and thus he alone continues the fight. This position gives Satan special significance that will not be overlooked by the careful reader.

reading the book as a whole.

²⁸ Gordon D. Fee, *Revelation: A New Covenant Commentary* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011), 282.

²⁹ Tonstad, *Saving God's Reputation*, 48-51.

³⁰ Ranko Stefanovic, *Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Andrews University Press; Berrien Springs, MI, 2009), 387.

³¹ Note the verbal thread woven around the concept of war. Πολεμεω, the verb occurs nine times in Revelation, while πολεμος occurs seven times. See 2.16, 9.7, 9; 11.7; 12.7 (3x), 17; 13.4, 5, 7; 16.14; 17.14; 19.11, 19; 20.8. The war begun in heaven and continued on earth meets its fulfillment after the 1,000 years.

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3.) Satan's persistent role as *deceiver* is integral to the ongoing story, and this characteristic is founded upon the larger biblical narrative. Satan is bound in order to prohibit him from carrying on this work of deception (20.3), which is what he proceeds to do immediately upon gaining freedom from his prison (20.8).³² The last mention of the devil, before he is thrown into the lake of fire refers to his deceptive traits (20.10). This should be seen in the light of the backdrop of the Genesis narrative as well. There, the ancient serpent fomented a deception that led the woman to distrust God's provisions. Her response to God's query as to what she had done, is that "the serpent deceived me and I ate" (Gen. 3.13). Satan's words and innuendos act as a destabilizing force in the Edenic world. John picks up this larger theme and incorporates it into his storyline.

These three strands weave a picture that demonstrates the force of Satan's character in the storyline. He is at work to deceive humanity about the nature of the truth of God. It is from these strands that "Revelation weaves a compelling theodicy."³³ The denunciations deployed against God demand a compelling response. Satan is not a flat character in the narrative, but plays a principal role in bringing accusations against God's government. This conclusion is supported by other narrational clues as well. In particular, the background activity of Satan in Rev. 13 under his description as the dragon, adds to the development of his character.

The chapter is replete with images that demonstrate the dragon's intention of fulfilling a "God-like" role. Each of these must be seen against the framework of his ongoing attacks against God. As Rev.13 opens, the dragon stands by sea,³⁴ apparently seeking reinforcements.³⁵ He is intent on carrying out his warfare against the seed (*σπέρματος*) of the woman and thus continuing the battle that has begun in Eden.³⁶ To that end he turns to

³² This is the trait he displays in Revelation 12.9 as well, being described as the one who deceives the whole world.

³³ Tonstad, *Saving God's Reputation*, 53.

³⁴ The opening phrase of the chapter is problematic and is at times identified as Rev. 12.18. The statement of the dragon standing on the seashore points both to the previous verses that describe his role in the war, and the following verses which contain the arrival of his associates in the battle. The imagery is of the dragon standing or waiting by the sea for the emergence of the beast. See Aune, *Revelation 6-16*, 732. While there is textual evidence for the KJV reading, "And I stood upon the sand of the sea..." the reading "it stood..." indicating the dragon, is to be preferred. See Smalley, *The Revelation*, 303.

³⁵ The image is of the dragon scanning the sea, awaiting his two unholy allies in the battle. See Blount, *Revelation*, 243.

³⁶ Caird, *The Book of Revelation*, 159.

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the sea, the symbol of chaos and hostility to call an ally who will work with him in the battle. A third ally, the beast arising from the earth, joins them. These three powers form a trinity of evil,³⁷ in which the dragon takes the status of God. The narrative has Satan disappear from the action, though his presence is still manifested. The following observations buttress this understanding.

1.) The beast resembles the dragon in significant ways. Both have seven heads and ten horns and are wearing diadems (12.3; 13.1). In the narrative only Satan, the sea-beast and Christ have diadems. The location of diadems is significant as well. The dragon bears the diadems upon his heads, while the sea-beast bears them on his horns (12.3; 13.1). This indicates that the dragon is the ruling authority in the triumvirate. In this way, the narrative depicts Satan as a counterpoint to God.³⁸

2.) The dragon gives his throne to the sea-beast (13.2). The throne is a significant image in the storyline. It is most frequently used to represent God's rule and government.³⁹ One of the main points in the conflict is underscored when Satan claims his own throne and then transfers it to the beast. As Christ joins the Father on his throne (3.21), the beast joins the dragon in sharing the throne, stressing the nature of the counterfeit and the attempts at overthrowing the rule of God. The action raises the issue: Is God worthy to rule or should another take his place?

3.) John places the spotlight on the dragon's activity that is manifested through the beast. The dragon, though cast out of heaven, still empowers his agents. This emphasizes the fact that "he is still actively executing his schemes,"⁴⁰ although from behind the scenes. That the beast and the Lamb both receive a deadly wound⁴¹ is frequently noted as the "most striking"

³⁷ Beasley-Murray, *The Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co. 1986), 207.

³⁸ Ibid. This discussion is not meant to undermine the historic fulfillments of these prophetic powers, but to complement their identity and to show that behind all earthly governments is a satanic force waging war against God and his people.

³⁹ See Gallusz' *The Throne Motif* for a comprehensive exploration of the throne within the narrative.

⁴⁰ Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 687.

⁴¹ Resseguie, *The Revelation*, 183. John uses the verbal connection of ὡς ἐσφαγμένον to tie together the two images (5.6,9,12 and 13.3). Unfortunately, many commentators then weaken the overall force of the imagery by relating it back to Nero's death. See Bauckham, *Climax of Prophecy*, 438f.

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aspect of the parody⁴² that John employs. The implication behind the imagery is that the Lamb has experienced a resurrection by the power of the God. The sea-beast likewise experiences such a resurrection by the power of the dragon.

4.) The rhetorical questions “who is like the beast?” and “who can fight against it?” (13.4) are textual markers that point out the intensity of the conflict. These questions echo Exodus 15.11, which asks the question, “Who is like you among the gods, O Lord?” The questions as posed in their relation to the sea-beast are framed as a challenge to God. The beast, with the dragon receiving deferred worship (13.4), now attempts to replace God. As Craig Koester perceptively comments “The outcome of the Lamb’s work is that the world worships God the Creator (5.10, 13), but the outcome of the Beast’s work is that the world worships Satan the destroyer (13.4).”⁴³

5.) A less frequently recognized portrayal of Satan’s role is highlighted by John’s use of the verb *to give* (δίδωμι). The passive form is frequently used in Revelation to describe a divine passive, communicating God’s activity behind the scenes. For example, the four angels were *given* permission to harm the earth and sea (7.2); much incense was *given* to the angel by the altar (8.2); the woman was *given* wings to flee from the persecution of the dragon (12.14); the bride is *given* fine linen (19.8) and the redeemed are *given* authority to rule (20.4).

Within Rev. 13 the verb appears in a cluster of verses, all of which describe the activity of the dragon and the beast. It is found in 13.5 (2x), 7 (2x), 14, and 15. Commentators generally view the meaning of ἐδόθη in this context as limiting the activity of the beast and thus indicating God’s sovereignty.⁴⁴ While God’s dominion is universal, and the storyline ultimately ends with his throne the sole point of focus while earth and

⁴² I use the term parody here as defined by Joe E. Lunceford, *Parody and Counterimaging in the Apocalypse* (Wipf & Stock: Eugene, Oregon), 2009, xi. He defines parody as the use of a term in the sphere of evil that imitates the positive expression in the sphere of good. I stress the *imitative* aspect, as it is clear that the beast attempts to imitate the reality in order to deceive. That it is not a clumsy, ridiculous imitation is evident from the worldwide reception of the beast. The beast’s success in appearing to be a divine power argues against John simply attempting to mock the efforts to overthrow God.

⁴³ Craig R. Koester, *Revelation and the End of all Things* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 127.

⁴⁴ So, Beasley-Murray *Revelation*, 213; Resseguie *The Revelation*, 185; Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 695. Aune (*Revelation 6-16*, 743) defines the passive as “a circumlocution for direct mention of God as subject of the action of the verb.”

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heaven flee (20.11), this reading misses an important consideration. The narrative continues to demonstrate the work of the dragon in attempting to replace God's government. John underlines this by using the active form of $\delta\acute{\iota}\delta\omega\mu\iota$ twice before introducing the passive forms.

The dragon is the one who *gave* ($\xi\delta\omega\kappa\epsilon\nu$) power, authority, and his throne to the beast. He obtains ultimate worship because he gave authority to the beast (13.2, 4). As the beast also *receives* a mouth that speaks blasphemy (13.5a) and *receives* authority to act for forty-two months, the most natural reading is that the dragon *gives* these to his surrogate, the beast. As God gives the woman a place to flee for a time, times, and half of time (12.14), the beast is given authority to persecute for the equivalent time period (13.5). This is commonly seen as a divine restriction on the beast's activities.⁴⁵ However, a closer reading suggests that this is part of the texture of John's development of the role of Satan. Instead of indicating a divine passive, the usage of $\epsilon\delta\acute{o}\theta\eta$ here signals Satan's role in giving the sea-beast and the land-beast their position in the controversy, as part of his attempt to gain jurisdiction over God's kingdom.⁴⁶

These textual markers highlight that Satan's character is more than simply a foil to be played against God's sovereignty. Satan's role in the narrative is consistent but it is also dynamic and not static. The importance of Satan as a character in the narrative lends support to the contention that Revelation is better read in the light of conflict theme with the resultant theodical concerns. John's picture of Satan is drawn from a wealth of OT images that, when woven together, raise issues of great importance.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ This "reminds John's audience that even the Antichrist is a pawn in God's greater design," Craig S. Keener, *Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000), 340. All that the beast does is within "the grand strategy of God," Caird *The Revelation*, 167. However, Fee (*Revelation*, 182, 186) sees the connection between the passive and the first use of the active and claims that power comes from Satan, and that he is the true force behind the beast. This is properly balanced with the idea this activity is allowed by God.

⁴⁶ See also 6.2, 4, 8, 11; 9.1, 3, 5; 11.1, 2; 16.8. While commentators generally see a divine passive at work at large in Revelation, consideration should be given to Satan's action behind the scenes in other passages as well. This would be particularly true in relation to the actions under the trumpets.

⁴⁷ Stubblefield ("Warfare," 88-92) recognizes the complexity of Satan's character and cites narrative space, trait variety, the ability to surprise, and the rich OT background as reasons for his conclusion.

Verbal Threads

It is widely recognized that chapters four and five play an extremely important role in the unfolding of John's storyline. Together these chapters form the "theological fountainhead and anchor point" for the entire book.⁴⁸ The thematic and literary unity between these two chapters is well demonstrated.⁴⁹ There are several threads that unite the chapters, among which are the position of the elders, the living creatures, and the angelic beings. The strong connection between the hymnic portions (4.11; 5.12) that include the ascription of worth, and the reception of key attributes by the object of the hymns, play a decidedly important role in supporting this reading.

As the fulcrum of Revelation⁵⁰ the images found here introduce not only the opening of the seals in ch. 6, but also the rest of the visions that comprise the body of Revelation.⁵¹ This paradigmatic section influences one's interpretation of the entire storyline. A common construal is that this first throne vision communicates God's sovereignty and his reign throughout the universe. Aune states these chapters "anchor each series of events in the sovereignty of God, who controls events that transpire upon earth."⁵² Robert Klund argues that the opening vision depicts God's sovereign reign over all creation.⁵³ Beale takes the purpose of these chapters as the demonstration that God and Christ are sovereign.⁵⁴ He argues "*the hymns make explicit the main point of the vision and of the whole chapter:*

⁴⁸ Eugene M. Boring, *Revelation* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1989), 102. Larry W. Hurtado, "Revelation 4-5 in the Light of Jewish Apocalyptic Analogies," *JSNT* 25 (1985), 105-24 sees this as a major turning point in the text.

⁴⁹ Dean Davis, *The Heavenly Court Judgment of Revelation 4-5* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1992), 16-19; Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 311-16; R. H. Charles, *Revelation I* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1913) xxvi; H. B. Swete, (*The Apocalypse of St John: The Greek Text with Introduction Notes and Indices* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1999 reprint), xli; Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1998) 47; Russell S. Morton, *One Upon The Throne and the Lamb: A Tradition Historical/Theological Analysis of Revelation 4-5* (New York: Peter Lang, 2007), 68.

⁵⁰ Beasley-Murray, *Revelation*, 25, 108.

⁵¹ Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 313.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ Klund, "Plot of Revelation," 85.

⁵⁴ Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 311. See also Osborne, *Revelation*, 237.

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*God is to be glorified because of his holiness and sovereignty.*⁵⁵ Many readings of Revelation's plot proceed from this perspective, that God's sovereignty is the foundation of the document and everything unfolds from this vantage point. God's dominion is clearly in view, but it needs to be remembered that it is a rule contested by the attempts of Satan to undermine God's authority. While there is no explicit mention of his rebellion in this passage, there are thematic hints that connect this passage to the war in heaven leitmotif.

A close reading of the narrative does indeed uncover numerous literary connections that encourage the reader to allow the heavenly conflict to form the framework of interpretation. First, there are the *thematic connections* that link chs 4 and 5 with chs 12 and 13, and the resulting impact these pivotal chapters have on the following storyline.⁵⁶ Fekkes notes the many links that comprise a literary connection between the two units and concludes, "Rev. 12 and 13 are apparently to be understood as the antithetic parallel to chs 4-5."⁵⁷ He bases this conclusion on a number of conceptual associations among the four chapters.

The counterpoints of the dragon, the sea-beast, and the earth-beast as imitators or a false triumvirate to be compared with the One on the throne, the Lamb, and the seven-fold spirit are well noted.⁵⁸ In addition to this, is the strong verbal thread *slain* (5.6; 13.3) connecting the two sections. Both

⁵⁵ Ibid., 332 emphasis original. Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 310; Boring, *Revelation*, 103; Brian K. Blount, *Revelation: A Commentary* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009) 94, each see the praise in the hymns as a reflection of the angelic exaltation over the emperor. For a fuller discussion of the hymns from the perspective of the comic conflict, see Grabiner, *Revelation's Hymns*.

⁵⁶ A. Yarbro Collins, (*The Combat Myth*, 40-42) underscores the importance of the parallel between the function of the visions (chs. 4 and 5 and ch. 12) serving as a backdrop for what follows. There is a counterpart between the Lamb's worthiness in ch. 5 and his victory in ch. 12. Gerhard A. Krodel, *Revelation*, Augsburg Commentary on the New Testament (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1989), 66, cites the comparative themes between the two sections as evidence of the literary skill with which Revelation was written. Thompson (*Revelation*, 40) calls the imagery of ch. 13 the "polar opposite" to the imagery in chs 4 and 5.

⁵⁷ Jan Fekkes, *Isaiah and Prophetic Traditions in the Book of Revelation: Visionary Antecedents and their Development* (Sheffield, England: JSOT Press, 1994) 83 note 50. Jürgen Roloff, *The Revelation of John* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993), 16 also recognizes the literary ties among these chapters.

⁵⁸ Osborne, *Revelation*, 591; Roloff, *Revelation* 190; Stephen S. Smalley, *The Revelation to John: A Commentary on the Greek Text of the Apocalypse* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 409.

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the Lamb and the sea-beast are slain but still live, implying a resurrection⁵⁹ that calls forth the universal acclaim that is given to both the Lamb and the beast (5.12, 13; 13.3). The text contains a close identification of the beast with the dragon (13.4), which is a reflection of the intimate relation between the Christ and God. The Lamb receives the scroll from the One on the throne, and therefore receives power (5.7, 12). The sea-beast receives power and a place on the throne of the dragon (13.2).

Fekkes also underlines that both sections focus on the presentation of an agent (5.5,6; 13.1). Both agents receive authority to function and participate on the throne of their benefactor (5.6; 13.2). Finally a hymn (13.4b) is used to strengthen the contrast between Christ and the sea-beast.⁶⁰ The hymn posits a contrast between the two characters and the sources of their authority. This short hymn is in correspondence to the larger hymnic section in ch. 5.⁶¹ The acclamations of the hymns in chs 4 and 5, find a “distorted counterpart” in the scenes in ch. 13. Connecting these two sections helps define the “composition of the book,”⁶² and thrusts the

⁵⁹ A widespread interpretation understands the text that describes the beast’s survival of its deadly wound to refer to Nero’s death and rumors of his expected resurrection, or perhaps to the fact that he did not really die and would mount an attempt to retake Rome. See Roloff, *Revelation* 156-157; Thompson, *The Book of Revelation*, 13-14; Martin Kiddle and M. K. Ross, *The Revelation of St. John* (London: Hodder, 1963), 244-45; Bauckham, *Climax of Prophecy* 407-30; Aune, *Revelation 6-16*, 737-40; Yarbrow Collins, *Combat Myth*, 176-177; John J. Collins, *The Sibylline Oracles of Egyptian Judaism*, Society of Bib Lit Diss series 13 (Missoula, MT: Scholars, 1974) 80-87. Also Tacitus *Histories* 1.2, 2.8-9; Suetonius *Nero* 47-50; Dio Cassius 63.9.3, 66.19.3. This interpretation with its stress on Nero, has been called a “modern scholarly construction” in Jan Willem van Henten, “Nero Redivivus Demolished: The Coherence of the Nero Traditions in the Sibylline Oracles,” *JSP* 11, no. 21 (2000) 3-17 (3). Van Henten sees no evidence for this interpretation, particularly in regard to the Sibylline Oracles. Resseguie (*The Revelation*, 184) contends that this interpretation fails to fit the import of Revelation’s narrative. Resseguie (*Revelation Unsealed* 56) raises the questions, “In what way is Nero the consummate opponent of Christ? How does Nero share the power, authority and throne of the dragon” seeing he is deposed and dead? The strength of the imagery points toward the controversy theme in Revelation, rather than the putative return of Nero.

⁶⁰ Fekkes, *Isaiah and Prophetic Traditions*, 83.

⁶¹ David R. Carnegie, “Worthy is the Lamb: The Hymns in Revelation,” in *Christ the Lord*, ed. Harold Hamlyn Rowdon, (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1982), 257-281 (256), notes that the hymn in 13.4b has connections with the pericopes in chs 4 and 5. He also considers whether the hymn in 13.4b reflects on the imperial cult and poses the question as to whether or not the hymns are intended to counter this. He recognizes that it is “precarious” to conclude from similar terminology in Martial and Statius that some reflection on the imperial cult is John’s intent.

⁶² Roloff, *Revelation*, 155.

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heavenly conflict in the front for interpretation. As Fekkes points out, the issue facing the readers of Revelation is not merely political nor is it only a local situation that is under consideration. Rather it is “spiritual, suprahistorical, and part of the ongoing struggle between God and Satan, and their followers.”⁶³

Secondly, the *image of the throne* places the conflict theme in the foreground. An important and multivalent image, the throne conveys the concept of the heavenly court⁶⁴ and the underlying assaults on God’s rule of the universe. These attacks are the result of Satan’s determined slander over the way God’s rules. While earthly emperors may lay claim to obedience and fealty on the part of their subjects, the image of the throne points to a greater conflict. The prophet’s concern is not God’s sovereignty over Rome, but his ultimate sovereignty over a universe infected with rebellion. This conclusion is strengthened by the dramatic use of the throne throughout the narrative.

The narrative ends with the throne distinctly identified as belonging to God and the Lamb (22.1,3.) In a world free of sin and without any curse, their united rule extends into eternity. This highlights once again the connection between God and Christ, underscoring that what the Lamb does, God does.⁶⁵ Their sharing of the throne represents the unity of action between them. The throne imagery not only conveys the truth that the throne is disputed territory, but points to the way in which that territory is secured. The accusations and slander of the dragon are overcome through the sacrifice of the Lamb.⁶⁶

The throne, and the One sitting upon it, becomes the only remaining image in the final judgment and John forcibly makes it the sole object of attention. “Then I saw a great white throne and Him who sat upon it, from whose presence earth and heaven fled away and no place was found for them” (20.11). This movement underlines the vindication of the One sitting on the throne as the “fabric of the universe dissolves as if to leave no

⁶³ Fekkes, *Isaiah and Prophetic Traditions*, 83.

⁶⁴ Aune’s influential article on the role of the imperial court on the background for this scene highlights God’s role as ruler within the divine court. The author’s dependence on the imperial court imagery is debatable, yet the imagery of the throne and its connection to the divine council is well grounded. See Aune, “Imperial Court Ceremonial,” 18,19.

⁶⁵ Guthrie, “The Lamb,” 66.

⁶⁶ Richard Bauckham, *Theology of the Book of Revelation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) 63, highlights that what Christ is said to accomplish, God does as well.

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competing point of reference.”⁶⁷ It is at the end of the narrative that the throne stands in isolation, finally free from any competing influences and in unchallenged supremacy.⁶⁸ Thus the central role that the throne plays in the opening chapters also directs the perceptive reader to the spiritual battle that comprises Revelation’s undercurrent.

John also uses a verbal thread that makes clear that one of his main concerns is the question: Who will ultimately rule? In addition to the importance of the image of throne, is the posture of the one upon it. The phrase describing God as the one “sitting on the throne” (καθήμενος) is a key theological term in the storyline. Barbara Rossing highlights that this expression underscores an opposing imagery that runs throughout Revelation. Babylon is pictured (17.1, 3) as “sitting” upon the beast and upon many waters. This description of Babylon (ἡ καθημένην) is John’s main appellation for this power that is opposed to God’s rule (see 17.1, 3, 9, 15). This part of the narrative culminates with Babylon’s boast of being enthroned as queen (κάθηναι βασίλισσα 18.7).⁶⁹

Babylon’s attempt at rulership is displayed as a deliberate contrast to the throne room scene in chapters 4 and 5. There are several verbal connections between the passages. Among these are the transportation “in the spirit” and the invitation “come. . . I will show you” (4.1-2; 17.1,3). In both scenes, jewels are mentioned as accompanying the one seated (4.3; 17.4). Through the contrasts John is making it clear that the threat to God’s sovereignty is a central motif within the book.⁷⁰ While God is upon a throne (ἐπὶ τὸν θρόνον) Babylon is upon a beast (ἐπὶ θηρίον), which is clearly a satanic figure, if not a representation of Satan himself.

A third narrative consideration that contributes to an understanding of the plot is the *tension within the heavenly council* evidenced in ch. 5. This tension arises in relation to the seven-sealed scroll (5.1) and the search for someone who is worthy to open it (5.2, 3). The scope of those involved, extending to every part of creation accentuates the point that the issue confronting the divine council is of incalculably great importance.⁷¹

While this is clearly a moment of consequence in the council, not all of the details are transparent in their meaning. In particular, the scroll has

⁶⁷ Tonstad, *Saving God’s Reputation*, 118.

⁶⁸ Smalley, *The Revelation*, 249.

⁶⁹ Rossing, *Two Cities*, 66.

⁷⁰ Rossing, *Two Cities*, 68.

⁷¹ Davis, *Heavenly Court*, 167.

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generated much discussion as to its origin, contents, and function.⁷² Alan S. Bandy, while not venturing to specifically identify the scroll, does examine its function within the narrative. Noting the OT parallels (Ezek. 2.9-10; Dan. 12.4) of the scroll's lamentation, mourning, and woe he deduces that the scroll has a connection with divine judgment. The description of the scroll being sealed supports his reasoning.⁷³ He concludes that it must be some form of legal document that is "only accessible to the authorized recipient."⁷⁴ It is the search for that recipient that raises the tension within the divine council.

The next scene ("and I saw" 5.2) focuses John's attention on a strong angel who functions as a herald for the divine council. With a loud voice the angel places a question before the entire universe: "Who is worthy to open the book and to break its seals?" (5.2b). John's emphasis on the absence of anyone within the entire universe as being worthy compounds the sense of crisis. "And no one in heaven or on the earth or under the earth was able to open the book or to look into it." John's personal expression of anguish at the inability of anyone worthy to open the book serves to increase the discomfort for the reader.

The verbal thread "worthy" occurs seven times in Revelation. The first and last uses describe polar opposites. In 3.4, the faithful in Sardis are worthy to walk with Christ. In 16.6, the unrighteous are worthy to drink blood for their part in the martyrdom of the saints. The remaining five occurrences are found in this section (4.11; 5.2, 4, 9, 12, 16.) Gottfried Schimanowski sees the expression as representing the leitmotiv of the

⁷² Helpful overviews are found in Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 344-346; Tonstad, *Saving God's Reputation*, 125-128; Prigent, *Apocalypse*, 242-245; Osborne, *Revelation*, 249-250; Smalley, *The Revelation*, 127-128; Stefanovic *Revelation*, 205-206. A fuller treatment can be found in Morton, *Once Upon The Throne*, 138-149. Aune divides possible interpretations into two broad categories; those relating the eschatological events unfolded in the remainder of Revelation and those interpretations that relate the scroll to a broader significance, such as a book of destiny, the book of life, a record of humanities sins etc. The thesis for this study, could harmonize with many of the interpretations suggested, as long as the cosmic conflict remains in the central position that it holds within Revelation itself. Uniting the rebellion theme with a specific interpretation, J. A. Seiss, *The Apocalypse* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1957) sees the scroll as the title deed to creation forfeited by sin in Genesis, 112.

⁷³ Bandy, *Lawsuit*, 193.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 194.

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passage.⁷⁵ The verbal connection between the first and second references, demonstrate that the worthiness of the One sitting on the throne is paramount to the heavenly council. God's worthiness is connected to the worthiness of the one who can open the scroll. As Boring observes, the "figures of God and Christ flow into each other."⁷⁶ Seen from this perspective, Tonstad is correct in his conclusion that God's worthiness, proclaimed in the first hymn, "stands or falls with the . . . perceived worthiness of the Lamb (5.6)."⁷⁷

In sum, the thematic links between the diptych and chs 12 and 13; the dominance of the throne imagery; and the narrative tension all point the careful reader to the larger conflict theme that undergirds the masterpiece that John constructs. Yarbro Collins' observation that "the problem facing the heavenly council is the rebellion of Satan which is paralleled by rebellion on earth" is well supported by a close reading of the larger narrative.⁷⁸

This brief exploration into the narrative world of Revelation has highlighted two important considerations that must be taken into account as one attempts to discern John's overarching concern in writing the book. The position that Satan has a character in the book is fuller and rounder than generally considered. He is not simply a hapless foil to God's activity, continually stumbling from one failure to another. While not minimizing his defeat, he is portrayed as a persistently deceptive antagonist, committed to overthrowing God's rule. His overthrow was accomplished only by heaven's most dramatic means, the slain Lamb (5.6). The undercurrent of the storyline is the war that Satan tirelessly pursues, and the means God employs to bring about his defeat.

The narrative details serve to reinforce this observation. The verbal threads that tie the two main chapters that focus on the war in heaven (chs 12-13), with the paradigmatic opening chapters (chs 4-5), direct the careful

⁷⁵ Gottfried Schimanowski, "Connecting Heaven and Earth: The Function of the Hymns in Revelation 4-5" in *In Heavenly Realms and Earthly Realities in Late Antique Religions*, edited by R. S. Boustian and Annette Yoshiko Reed, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 67-84 (73). He also explores the origin of the expression, recognizing the traditional understanding that it derives from a dependence on ruler proclamations. He disagrees, arguing for the primacy of the *Hekhalot* literature, although recognizing that these texts are late, 73-74.

⁷⁶ Boring, "Narrative Christology," 709.

⁷⁷ Tonstad, *Saving God's Reputation*, 125.

⁷⁸ Yarbro Collins, *Apocalypse*, 39.

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reader to allow the cosmic conflict to influence her interaction with the entire book. The other verbal threads, including the image of the throne, and the consternation of the heavenly council point the reader to detect that beneath the surface of Revelation, is an undercurrent of conflict and turmoil swirling around God's right to rule. If this conclusion can be sustained through further study, it would contribute to seeing every phase of the story as seeking to answer the question: Who is really worthy to rule the universe? The answer to that question is clearly found in the image of the slain Lamb.

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