

Introduction

The black sky was underpinned with long silver streaks that looked like scaffolding and depth on depth behind it were thousands of stars that all seemed to be moving very slowly as if they were about some vast construction work that involved the whole order of the universe and would take all time to complete. No one was paying attention to the sky.

—Flannery O’Connor, *Wise Blood*¹

Each year around Christmas time, choirs in churches and various concert halls around the globe sing a song derived from one of Revelation’s best known passages, “The reign of the world has become the reign of our Lord and of his Messiah, and he shall reign forever and ever” (Rev. 11:15).² Swirling around in this “Hallelujah” chorus is a convergence of praise, politics, and—submerged beneath the beauty of Handel’s score—cosmic upheaval. Taken out of the choral setting and placed back into its context in the Apocalypse, this statement functions as the pinnacle of John’s³ vision. This text served as my entry point into John’s work as I began to explore the way politics and worship function and relate to each other in the book of Revelation. It communicates in hymn form the overthrow of a kingdom, but also the unmaking of a world, sitting as it does at the climax of a cycle of seven divine judgments upon the created order. But this cycle is not the only of its kind in Revelation. It is part of a wider vision of recapitulative visions of divine judgment on the cosmos. The trumpets cycle can hardly be understood fully apart from the cycle of seals that precedes it (6:1—8:5) and the cycle of bowls (16:1–21; 18:1—19:8) that follows it. Each of these cycles finishes with a liturgical flourish. Therefore, the question

1. Flannery O’Connor, *Wise Blood* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1962), 37.

2. Unless otherwise attributed, all biblical translations are the author’s.

3. The argument of this book does not stand or fall on the question of authorship or date, but a few comments regarding those subjects are appropriate here. I understand the author to be John of Patmos, a prophet among the churches to which he writes in Asia Minor. It is difficult to say whether or not this John can be identified with John the Gospel writer. He does demonstrate some of the same literary mastery and theological interests, but there are significant differences and difficulties as well. Perhaps it is best to not say too much and just suggest that at the very least John of Patmos shared the same theological atmosphere as John the Theologian. I agree with most scholars that the work was written somewhere around the end of the first century CE.

of worship and the political in the Apocalypse would have to deal with the climax of each cycle. As I began to look into the climaxes of each cycle, I came to realize that the question of the political required one to look into the question of the cosmological, for that is really what is at the heart of John's vision in the three cycles of seven: not only the judgment and proper reign of the world, but more radically, the unmaking and making new of the entire world. This means one of John's central concerns is cosmology.

In a recent essay on the cosmological thought of the Apocalypse, Sean McDonough writes, "A careful book-length treatise on the subject is still a *desideratum*."⁴ This study is, unfortunately, not the supplement to that lacuna. This is not due, one can hope, to a specific deficiency in the work presented here. It is rather the case that this study points to the extreme difficulty bordering on impossibility of explicating something approaching "the cosmology of the Apocalypse." John's view of the reality of the universe does not easily lend itself to this kind of inquiry. The world John lives in and the world that John narrates does not have that kind of stability.⁵ As I will argue in this study, John's concern with cosmology is not to parse out the deep structure of a mysterious cosmological reality. Instead, his task is one of portraying the dismantling of the cosmic reality, which in his opinion has become so marred and disfigured by idolatry and overrun by the cosmically construed reign of Caesar that it must be brought to its end. Once it has been deconstructed or unmade, God's creation can then be made new to conform to the divine intent and purpose for creation. Cosmology, therefore, is decidedly political.⁶ John presents for his audience, not a meditation on a sturdy and stable cosmos, but rather a *rhetorical* cosmology.

The rest of this study will be given to explicating what is meant by "rhetorical cosmology," but for the time being I refer to rhetorical cosmology as a discourse that participates in and constructs a particular world system. I

4. Sean M. McDonough, "Revelation: The Climax of Cosmology," in *Cosmology and New Testament Theology*, ed. Jonathan T. Pennington and Sean M. McDonough, Library of New Testament Studies 355 (London and New York: T & T Clark, 2008), 178 n. 1.

5. See Steven J. Friesen, *Imperial Cults and the Apocalypse of John: Reading Revelation in the Ruins* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 163–166.

6. John's vision of creation contains implications not merely for the natural world, but also for the political realm. For him, creation has as much to do with how people live together as it does birds, mountains, rocks, and trees. Ragan Sutterfield pointedly observes, "When we think and talk about creation, we tend to think that there are two distinct things, us and it. We go to a National Park and talk about how wonderful it is to be in creation, but we don't say that in the midst of a crowd on a New York City subway," Ragan Sutterfield, *Farming as a Spiritual Discipline* (Indianapolis: Englewood Review of Books, 2009), Kindle electronic edition, Chapter 1, Location 76.

say both “participates in” and “constructs” because I understand cosmology to be more than just a “symbolic universe” or a “worldview.” The world does not exist because it is subjectively imagined into existence. The cosmic reality is a given entity—it is there regardless of an individual or group’s subjective construction and configuration of it. But rhetorical cosmology is also a discourse that constructs a world system because the material of the world is given to be inhabited in a number of possible ways, given to be governed in one fashion or another. Cosmological discourse also constructs because it creates a public space within which to participate in the cosmos so inhabited or governed. This indicates the intimate relation between cosmology and politics, a connection that will be clarified throughout this study.

As I began to tease out the connections between the theological and political that I was seeing in the cosmological, I could not find anyone who had put them together in the way I was seeing, or who had done so with the requisite attention to the theological and political matters that I see as integral to the climactic conclusions of the Apocalypse’s cycles. Before looking at the theology of the transition from the reign of the world to the reign of God, I needed to investigate the socio-political, rhetorical, and historical issues involved in order to understand the cosmological implications of John’s vision. Here I think it is beneficial to examine some previous scholarship on the cosmology of the Apocalypse, in order to position my own study and justify its existence. Previous approaches to the cosmology of the Apocalypse may be generally gathered into three overarching groups—(1) cosmology as a revelation of the deep structure and inner workings of God’s creation, (2) cosmology as literal or literal-like description of the dissolution of the world, and (3) cosmology as the “symbolic universe” or “worldview” of the text.

Cosmology as revelation of the deep structure and inner-workings of the world can take a few different forms. First, one can assume a continuity between much cosmological thought of earlier apocalyptic literature and what takes place in John’s vision. If this is the case, then John is seeking to explicate the hidden elements of cosmic reality that have either been obscured or are visible only to a chosen few. 1 Enoch 1–5 and 72–82 exhibits this cosmological approach, examining the inner-workings of God’s creation and the heavenly beings in charge of keeping them functioning correctly. Usually included in this understanding of apocalyptic cosmology is a list of things that are revealed to the seer, demonstrating the abundance of information about the world privileged to him (see also Job 38–39).⁷

7. This element of apocalyptic literary thought is discussed in Michael E. Stone, “Lists of Revealed Things in the Apocalyptic Literature,” in *Magnalia Dei: The Mighty Acts of God: Essays on the Bible and*

A slightly different way of this same approach is to understand apocalyptic cosmological thought as “astral prophecy,” a vision of the sky conceived of as a strategy for “obtaining information from the world of God(s).”⁸ Bruce Malina argues that when John looked up to the heavens what he saw was a literal vision in the sky.⁹ The cosmic bodies provided information about divine activity that affected the earth and its inhabitants.¹⁰ The planets and cosmic bodies provided a seer with material to interpret in order to discern the impact of sky phenomena on earthly matters.¹¹ Therefore, this mode of apocalyptic cosmology is not strictly “eschatological.” Rather, it is concerned with “existing, present things . . . What is happening at present? What has caused or is causing present conditions?”¹²

The main problem with this approach is that it does not seem to be what John is doing with cosmological thought. He is not intent of revealing the deep structures of the cosmos so as to somehow reveal the divine plan in all of it. He is, rather, pointing to the work of God as bringing that cosmos to an end. We receive, in fact, a surprising lack of revelation about the world of God and the heavens (when compared to other apocalypses). At most, we receive the set and stage directions, and then move very rapidly to the action. There seems to be less interest in spelling out the mysteries of heaven than there is in showing how the heavens disrupt the worldly order of Rome. The first cosmos is sinful and impure to its depths because it is the cosmos over which Rome has reign and rule. It is the world that Roman cultic and economic discourse has constructed, and it is rotten to the core. Therefore, John does not seek to explicate its deep structures. He seeks to portray its end through the work of the Lamb and the participation of the saints in that work is envisioned as their endurance and resistance.

The second approach to cosmology in the apocalypse is to understand it primarily as a reference to the dissolution of the cosmos. Edward Adams gives

Archaeology in Memory of G. Ernest Wright, ed. Frank Moore Cross, *et al.* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1976), 414–452.

8. Bruce J. Malina, *On the Genre and Message of Revelation: Star Visions and Sky Journeys* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1995), 30.

9. Franz Boll, *Aus der Offenbarung Johannis: Hellenistische Studien zum Weltbild der Apokalypse*, *ΣΤΟΙΧΕΙΑ 1* (Leipzig: Druck und Verlag B. G. Teubner, 1914); Joseph Freundorfer, “Die Apokalypse des Apostels Johannes und die Hellenistische Kosmologie und Astrologie: Eine Auseinandersetzung mit den Hauptergebnissen der Untersuchung Franz Bolls: ‘Aus Der Offenbarung Johannis’,” *Biblische Studien* 23.1 (1929).

10. Malina, *Revelation*, 37.

11. Malina, *Revelation*, 26.

12. Malina, *Revelation*, 45.

the most thorough and careful treatment of this approach to the cosmological thought of the Apocalypse. Adams' work is a response to suggestions by N. T. Wright and others that the language of cosmic upheaval is conventional, first-century language for imagining socio-political change. Adams surveys Old Testament and Jewish literature, as well as sources from Greco-Roman natural philosophy, and concludes that, though it remains on the level of imaginative imagery, language of cosmic upheaval refers to a real cosmic catastrophe. He writes, "these writers use language and imagery of universal catastrophe for envisioning precisely that. Since a full-blown cosmic catastrophe (in which the whole solar system is shaken or totally destroyed) is outside human experience, there is no other way of envisioning it than by figure, analogy and imaginative construal."¹³ Though he resists the label of "literal" for his understanding of cosmic catastrophe, he maintains that the idea of the material dissolution of the cosmos was widespread. Adams argues that the passing of the cosmos is a real event that John envisions, but that it is followed "by the appearance of a new creation, which is understood, albeit symbolically, in quite materialist terms."¹⁴

It is not self-evident why the new creation would only be symbolically material while the dissolution of the first creation is literally material, and Adams never supports this claim. The problems with Adams' argument are not with his assessment of the literature outside of the New Testament, it is rather his assumption that the same things need to be happening within the thought of the New Testament as well.¹⁵ John does not seem to envision a cosmic catastrophe in which everyone is killed, as happens in 4 Ezra 7:29-30, where every person on earth dies and the earth is turned to primeval silence. Even as the cosmic catastrophe is in full force, John sees the idolaters still alive, cursing God, and dwelling amidst the very cosmos that has supposedly been done away with completely (as in Rev. 16:20-21).

The third approach, and by far the most common among recent approaches, is to perceive John's cosmological thought as constructing a "symbolic universe" or "worldview." This is the approach Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza takes when she argues that Revelation "seeks to persuade and motivate

13. Edward Adams, *The Stars Will Fall from Heaven: Cosmic Catastrophe in the New Testament and its World*, Library of New Testament Studies 347 (London & New York: T & T Clark, 2007), 17.

14. Adams, *The Stars Will Fall from Heaven*, 251.

15. See Adams, *The Stars Will Fall from Heaven*, 253: "In light of the comparative evidence [Old Testament, Jewish Apocalyptic and related writings, Greek natural philosophy, Stoic thought], language of cosmic catastrophe such as we find in the New Testament simply cannot be regarded as conventional, first-century language for referring to socio-political change . . . a catastrophe of cosmic dimensions (within an ancient cosmological framework) is genuinely in view."

by constructing a symbolic universe that invites imaginative participation.”¹⁶ David deSilva also takes this approach. Following Clifford Geertz’s definition of religion as a set of symbols that functions to formulate a conception of order and existence, deSilva argues that John presents his Apocalypse as “a symbolic religious communication that engages directly in the construction and maintenance of one worldview over against competing worldviews.”¹⁷ In this view, John’s cosmological language functions to legitimate his own worldview amidst a host of other competing worldviews.

This approach has its merits, especially given its grounding in rhetorical interpretation. Scholars who see John’s cosmology function in this way do so because they are seeking to understand John’s persuasive purposes. Nevertheless, the symbolic universe solution cannot account for the sense in John’s text that he does seem to want to say something true about material reality. His language strains against its limit, but there is a sense in which the cosmic catastrophe on display is more than symbolic, as is the material reality of the new creation. The cosmos John evokes is not solely a construction; it also seems to be a participation in something that is there already. John does expect the world order of Rome to end, not simply as a subjective experience in the minds of his audience, but in a way that those inside and outside his community will experience somehow objectively. Likewise, he does expect himself and his audience to experience the new creation materially. Paul Minear, whose work is difficult to classify within these three categories, argues that John is underappreciated as a “metaphysical theologian.”¹⁸ That is, John was attempting to say something genuine about the reality of space and time, not simply one’s subjective experience of it.¹⁹

16. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *The Book of Revelation: Justice and Judgment*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 187. See also David L. Barr, “The Apocalypse as a Symbolic Transformation of the World: A Literary Analysis,” *Interpretation* 38 (1984): 3950.

17. David A. deSilva, *Seeing Things John’s Way: The Rhetoric of the Book of Revelation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 96.

18. Paul Minear, “The Cosmology of the Apocalypse,” in *Current Issues in New Testament Interpretation: Essays in Honor of Otto A. Piper*, ed. William Klassen and Graydon F. Snyder (New York: Harper, 1962), 33.

19. On the other hand, see Adela Yarbro Collins, basing her analysis on Jungian depth psychology, proposes that cosmic death and destruction may be implied in John’s use of the number seven. According to her, the number seven represents an irreducible number and an unsolvable problem (at least in this life and world). She argues this fits well with “the theme of irreconcilable conflict between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Caesar. The expected persecution cannot be ignored, evaded or overcome in any way except by individual death and cosmic destruction,” Adela Yarbro Collins, *Cosmology and*

Indeed, John's cosmological language above all seeks to say something real and meaningful about the world, materially, physically, and symbolically. What is required, it seems, is a conception that can account for both a construction of a symbolic world and a participation in something that is already "out there."²⁰ When John talks about the destruction of the cosmos he is not talking about some other cosmos besides the one in which the Philadelphians and Laodiceans live. When John presents his vision of the new creation he is not talking about a reality completely severed from the real world of the people of Smyrna and Pergamum. There is both continuity and discontinuity. And yet, his presentation of the world seeks to construct the space in which they live in a certain way in order to move his audience to action. The way he presents his picture of the cosmos is intended to persuade. This requires a conception that allows interpreters to hold these two necessities together.

This, in short, led me to posit and articulate the concept of rhetorical cosmology. By rhetorical cosmology I mean that an individual's or a group's experience of the world is constructed discursively. How one understands the world and how one understands one's function within the world is a matter of discourse. A modern-day example of this idea is how a coal mining company and a farming community might view the same mountain in Kentucky. Both groups have a discourse that shapes their understanding. One might argue that this difference in discourse does not alter the world that is under investigation, but it does have real implications, such as how each group conceives of and makes use of natural resources. For one group, resources can be conceived flatly as raw materials that can be extracted for profit; for the other group, the same resources may be understood as an ecology, a watershed, that supports human life and community only as humans interact with it in ways that limit damage and promote the health of the land. The mining company may talk of the land in terms of capital and industrial progress, and the farming community may talk

Eschatology in Jewish and Christian Apocalypticism, Supplements to the Journal for the Study of Judaism 50 (Leiden, New York, and Köln: Brill, 1996), 138.

20. Though developed independently, this study has subsequently benefited to a great degree from Walter Brueggemann's discussion of the world of praise in *Israel's Praise: Doxology against Idolatry and Ideology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988). While not cited here frequently, readers familiar with that work will see many points of agreement between it and the argument I am presenting here. For example, Brueggemann articulates a need for conceptions that move beyond objectivist and subjectivist modes if our analysis is to successfully understand Israel's praise, 9. He continues later, "It is the act of praise, the corporate, regularized, intentional, verbalized, and enacted act of praise, through which the community of faith creates, orders, shapes, imagines, and patterns the world of God, the world of faith, the world of life, in which we are to act in joy and obedience," 25–26.

of the same land in terms of a heritage and place that can sustain long term local life.²¹

This modern analogy, however, only takes us so far. For the ancient world the relation between discourse and the form and future of the world was even stronger. For the ancients, the way one talked about the world had significance for every facet of life and existence: politics, economy, piety, interpersonal relationships, and so on. More than this, discourse gave shape to the world—it determined center and margin, ruler and dominated, permanent and temporary. Cosmological discourse gave voice to the question of what sustained and shaped the universe. In Asia Minor under Roman rule in the first century, the discourse that sustained and shaped the world was centered around the gods, Caesar, and Imperial Rome. This discourse originated and was maintained by the imperial cult. Cultic ritual, sacrifice, and the related economic exchange were integral for sustaining the order of the cosmos, an order administrated by the gods and Caesar. The relationship between the people and the gods was maintained and nurtured in order to give the cosmos stability and wholeness. The sacrificial and economic system functioned like a social contract: the gods sustained the world and the people sacrificed. The continuity of this arrangement functioned to keep the world in this stable condition. Any disturbance of this balance would introduce a sense of anomie or disorientation. Cosmic disturbances meant that something had gone awry with the arrangement between the people and the gods.²² This situation would require diagnosis and repair so that the anger of the gods would not continue to burn and cause further damage to the cosmic fabric.

It is here that John's deployment of rhetorical cosmology comes into focus. I argue that John's discourse about the world is not intended to reveal the secret and mysterious inner workings of the cosmos, but rather that John intends to pit his own cosmological discourse in opposition to this cultic discourse concerning the world. John does this to intentionally disrupt the Roman world order and bring it to an end. In portraying the dismantling of the Roman cosmos, John clears the way to bear witness to God's creative work in making "all things new" (21:5). The end of Roman cosmological discourse and the entrance of John's Christological cosmic discourse is intended to bring about repentance—he hopes that the nations will turn from idolatry and the practices

21. See Wendell Berry, "Compromise Hell!" in *The Way of Ignorance* (Berkeley: Shoemaker & Hoard, 2005), 23; Wendell Berry, "The Landscaping of Hell: Strip-Mine Morality in East Kentucky," in *The Long-Legged House* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1965), 17–36.

22. This is the logic of prodigies in the ancient world, about which much more will be said later in this study, see David E. Aune, *Revelation 6–16*, WBC 52B (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 416419.

that sustain wicked Rome, and turn to worship of the true God whose coming reign is conceived of as beneficial and healing for the nations (22:2).

Chapter 1 begins the work of explicating this rhetorical cosmology by investigating how apocalyptic literature and discourse makes meaning. Here I investigate the rhetoric of apocalypse, in conversation with a host of scholars, but with ears particularly attuned to the work of socio-rhetorical interpretation (SRI). SRI provides the tools to discuss the way apocalyptic rhetoric functions to persuade as well as how it participates in, constructs, and talks about the world of space and time. In this chapter, I develop an account of apocalyptic discourse as rhetorical cosmology.

John's ultimate purpose in presenting his apocalypse to his audience is to encourage them to abandon practices that cooperate with and participate in the idolatry of Rome. His rhetorical cosmology is geared to shake them out of the world sustained by false worship and place them in the world of the coming God. The introduction of the entrance of God and, along with God, the new creation brings an end to the Roman cosmic system. John envisions this happening through a series of cosmic catastrophes brought about by divine wrath. God's entrance effects the dismantling of the cosmos as Rome construes it. The breakdown of the world meant that the gods were no longer maintaining good care of the world, and with the failure to maintain the world on the part of the gods, the people were no longer obligated to sacrifice to them. The breakdown of the Roman governed and sustained cosmos means a breakdown of the reign of Rome itself and its hold on the world. John's imagery of the dismantling of the cosmos is intended for exactly this purpose, to warn of God's impending judgment on the world system of Rome and to instill hope for God's new creation. This is the subject of chapter 2 of this study and sets up the exegetical work that follows.

The next four chapters set out to interpret the climactic seventh element of each of the three cycles in the Apocalypse. The cycles depict God's judgment upon the cosmological reality and discourse of Rome and the entrance of the new creation. The climactic seventh element perceives the final end of the Roman cosmic schema and the ultimate arrival of God's new creative work. This vision is rhetorical in that it presents its imagery to call hearers to action—John envisions that his audience can participate in some way in the divine work of unmaking and making new. John's call is for the continuing endurance and witness of the saints, a vocation that he envisions as having two dimensions. First, the saints are called to non-participation and non-cooperation with the idolatry of mainstream culture in Asia Minor. This includes not only non-participation in the various imperial cults devoted to

worship of the emperor and other Roman gods, but also self-extraction from the economy which served to buttress the cosmological discourse of the cult. For John, participation in the cult or in the cultic economy was to live in a world system that stood under the judgment of God and the Lamb, because it already had been conquered by the Lamb's crucifixion. If the saints heed John's call to extricate themselves from the cosmological discourse of the cultic economy, they will participate in bringing it to its end by helping introducing a sense of anomie into the culture. The saints' endurance is given to participate in the divine work of dismantling the cosmos, thus breaking the sacrificial contract between the Roman people and their gods, and making repentance possible.

The saints can also participate in God's work of new creation. Just as their non-participation functioned negatively to bring the Roman cosmological reality to an end, so their worship of the one who sits on the throne and the Lamb can participate in ushering in the reign of God. The saints' praise narrates the coming new-creative work of God, offering the positive content in the midst of their endurance-as-negation. Praise is also an act of witness in the Apocalypse because it holds out the possibility of another world, another way of constructing and participating in the cosmic order. This alternative cosmos, held out in the midst of a quickly deteriorating cosmic reality, makes repentance possible. Thus John's rhetorical strategy is to convince his audience to take up, or to continue to take up, this two-fold vocation of non-participation and true worship. I have designated these two concepts as silence and praise for reasons that will become obvious over the course of the work.

The conclusion sets out the results of the work and spells out some of the implications of my argument. I will briefly suggest some ways this understanding of John's Apocalypse can intersect with the concepts of worship and political theology in the book. I will also lay out some future trajectories for putting my conception of rhetorical cosmology into conversation with recent treatments of "apocalyptic" political theology. Though the "parousia" of a full investigation of the political aspect of John's worship must be delayed, the topic remains a secondary interest in this study. It is my conviction that any account of an apocalyptic theological politics must not be content to settle for a reduction to a particular program or platform among a variety of options within the political marketplace. John does not offer his apocalypse as "the best way forward," nor is he interested in pragmatic compromise in order to solve the problems facing the present. Rather, what he is after in his political vision is no less than a redescription of the entire created order. Any account of a politics related to the vision found in the Apocalypse must begin and end with the Christological unmaking and making new of the cosmos. Therefore, this

study might be conceived of as an exercise in addressing the political thought of the Apocalypse while, as Flannery O'Connor puts it, "paying attention to the sky." With John as our example we must seek to hold the political and cosmic together in a single vision.