

these corporate figures, and by the reference to individuals such as "Jezebel," "the one who is filthy," and "the one who is righteous," is the issue of the identity of God's community. The reader is encouraged to ask, not only what God has done, is doing, and will do, not only what is the nature of reality here, and in the heavens, but also, *who* are the people of God—in differentiation from Babylon, in connection with the angelic hosts, in connection with the cosmos, in connection with angels. And the answer suggested is twofold: the community of God is called both to humility and to God-endowed greatness. Readers of our time may have difficulty not only with the choice of imagery, but with the unveiling itself. The femaleness of the figures may be discomfiting to us, in the end, not because of its "chauvinist" implications, but because of its power to picture human frailty and promise. Could it be that the extremes of lowliness and authority, the realism and the aspirations, of the Apocalypse constitute a liquor too strong for our palates, too disturbing to our constitutions?

6

Doing Violence

MORAL ISSUES IN READING JOHN'S APOCALYPSE

David L. Barr

It will be a long time before we know how much violence will flow out of the terrorist attack that destroyed the World Trade Center, damaged the Pentagon, and murdered thousands of individuals, mostly U.S. citizens, but including citizens of eighty other countries. The violence of that attack has traumatized the nation and horrified the world. Calls for retaliation—even war—are common. I cannot predict what will happen, but I will hazard two guesses, based on history.

First, there will likely be much more violence as the United States seeks redress for this evil. And while this violence will be intended for those who committed this crime, it is likely that many innocent people will be caught up in it. And this will lead to further violence, as some seek to avenge that injustice. Such is the cycle of violence. Violence begets violence.

Second, some will use the events of September 11, 2001, to interpret the Book of Revelation, claiming that September 11 corresponds to one or the other of the disasters predicted there. They will be wrong. At least every single prediction of the future based on identifying aspects of Revelation with historical events so far has been wrong—and there have been hundreds of them.¹ But they will be wrong in a more basic sense, for it is wrong to read John's story as if it were about divinely sanctioned violence.

This chapter is based on a paper read at the Society of Biblical Literature meeting in 1997 and published as David L. Barr, "Towards an Ethical Reading of the Apocalypse: Reflections on John's Use of Power, Violence, and Misogyny," in *Society of Biblical Literature Seminar Papers* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997).

¹ See the historical summary in Arthur Wainwright, *Mysterious Apocalypse: Interpreting the Book of Revelation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), esp. 49–103.

This chapter will examine the Apocalypse ethically, first challenging the ethics of many elements of the story, then asking after the ethical stance of the story itself, and finally suggesting the value of an ethical critique for reading the story. In summary, I argue that the use of coercive power is always wrong and is judged to be wrong by the Apocalypse itself. In fact, in John's story what most distinguishes the rule of God from that of the devil is that the latter uses coercive force. Of course, it is common to read Revelation as if evil is overcome only through violence, by unleashing the power of God.

The Ethical Problem of Coercion

There is much in the Apocalypse that lends itself to a theory of divine violence. The extremity of the destruction of the whore of Babylon should shock every reader: "[T]hey will make her desolate and naked; they will devour her flesh and burn her up with fire" (17:16). The warrior appears from heaven with a blood-dipped robe and slays the army of the beast, seemingly after the battle is over, leaving them on the battlefield so that "all the birds were gorged with their flesh" (19:21). He treads the winepress of God's wrath (19:15), from which comes blood "as high as a horse's bridle for a distance of 1600 stadia" (14:20). He, or God, consigns all not found enrolled in the book of life to the lake of fire (20:14). Commenting on the eternal torment of the worshippers of the beast, and this in the presence of the Lamb, one writer has remarked:

Had such a statement been written about the beast, commentators would no doubt have described it as the epitome of malice, vindictiveness and evil.²

The ultimate value in this story seems to be power, power exercised ruthlessly. One even has the sense that God is willing to engage in torture in an effort to induce humanity to repent. Notice how John describes the final torments:

The fourth angel poured his bowl on the sun, and it was allowed to scorch them with fire; they were scorched by the fierce heat, but they cursed the name of God, who had authority over these plagues, and they did not repent and give him glory. The fifth angel poured his bowl on the throne of the beast, and its kingdom was plunged into darkness; people gnawed their tongues in agony, and cursed the God of heaven because of their pains and sores, and they did not repent of their deeds. (16:8–11; see also 9:21)

Suffering does not lead to repentance, so it seems inevitably to lead to destruction. This is the deplorable logic of the Inquisition, but the moral problem goes even deeper. For if God triumphs over evil only because

² Steve Moyise, "Does the Lion Lie Down with the Lamb?" in *Studies in the Book of Revelation* (ed. Steve Moyise; T & T Clark, 2001).

God has more power than evil, then power—not love or goodness or truth—is the ultimate value of the universe. Human free will counts for nothing if obedience is finally to be coerced by force.

Stephen Moore puts his finger on the moral issue: "If the slaughter of the 'ungodly' should be permissible at the Parousia, then why not before?"³ Indeed, it is a short step from the literary justification of violence, to the political justification of violence, to the use of violence against the enemy. Yet here some doubts must arise, for nearly all commentators recognize the rejection of violence by the Apocalypse:

If you are to be taken captive, into captivity you go; if you kill with the sword, with the sword you must be killed. Here is a call for the endurance and faith of the saints. (13:10)

John does not call for violence but for endurance (Greek: *hypomonē*, which I think will easily bear the more active sense of *consistent resistance* that Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza assigns it.)⁴ Our reading of the Apocalypse must account for both elements: the use of violent images and the rejection of violent action. Before exploring violence more carefully, we need to consider a related issue, for the story raises a further moral issue by portraying the deferral of divine action.

The Ethical Problem of Delay

There is much suffering in the world. Innocent people are killed by terrorists. Children die of malnutrition because government leaders divert money to the leaders' own use. Much of the world's population is forced to live in extreme poverty. Many have asked how God can allow this suffering, and the usual answer involves two parts. First, suffering is caused by humans, not by God, for humans have free will. And second, God will someday bring all such suffering to an end. We have seen that the portrayal of divine violence calls the question of human free will into question, but there is an additional moral issue.

For if God has the power to end suffering and evil, and intends one day to use that power, by what logic can God allow innocent suffering to continue? A police officer, a judge, even a social worker would be held liable in such a case. Imagine you know that a certain child is being abused, imagine you have the legal power to remove the child from the home, but you refuse to act. Are you not then responsible for whatever happens to that child?

John seems to recognize this issue in the telling of the story, for just this question is raised by the martyrs whose lives have been poured out on the altar:

³ Stephen D. Moore, "Revolting Revelations," in *The Personal Voice in Biblical Interpretation* (London: Routledge, 1999), 192.

⁴ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Revelation: Vision of a Just World* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 51.

"Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long will it be before you judge and avenge our blood on the inhabitants of the earth?" (6:10)

That such an issue is raised within the story suggests that the author is not unaware of these moral concerns. We can begin to analyze John's ethical stance by examining the way he portrays the divine answer to this question.

John's Ethical Stance: No Delay, No Coercion

The divine response to the martyrs is first to give them a white robe (signifying their victory) and then to tell them that they have to

rest a little longer, until the number would be complete both of their fellow servants and of their brothers and sisters, who were soon to be killed as they themselves had been killed. (6:11)

If we probe the possible meaning of this portrayal, two aspects of John's ethics become clear. First, the answer has to do with the quantity of the martyrs. Now it would be silly to imagine that John portrays God as having some magic number, acting only when that number is reached. No, there is a logic at work, and it is the logic of the accumulation of evil.

Every society can bear up under small amounts of social disorder, but when the disorder reaches a sufficient amount, disastrous consequences ensue. To take a trivial example, as long as only 2 or 3 percent of the students on campus park illegally, parking can be regulated. But if half the students were to do so, chaos would result. The system would break down. Before we pursue this logic further, we need to consider a second aspect of John's ethics: victory does not obviate the need for suffering. Just the opposite: victory comes through suffering.

The crucial scene for portraying victory through suffering occurs in chapter 5. In that scene John is perplexed that no one can be found to open the sealed scroll; he is so distressed that he cries:

Then one of the elders said to me, "Do not weep. See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals." Then I saw . . . among the elders a Lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth. (5:5-6)

There could not be a more stark symbolic contrast between the figure announced by the angel and the character actually seen by John: conquering lion/slaughtered lamb. Now on one level this is a portrayal of early Christian experience: they had heard that the Messiah would come with justice and vengeance, but what they actually saw in Jesus was quite the contrary: one who suffered. And it is precisely this suffering that makes him worthy to open the scroll.

It is quite surprising that it is this Lamb who gathers the 144,000 holy warriors on Mount Zion (14:1); it is the Lamb on whom the armies of evil make war (17:14); it is even the Lamb who marries and rules after the war

(19:7; 22:3). In this story, evil is conquered by the death of the Lamb, not by the exercise of divine power.

Even when the story seems to portray divine violence, the opposite (innocent suffering) is said to be the real force at work. This is seen clearly in the miniature scene in chapter 12, in which we are told the story of a war in heaven:

And war broke out in heaven; Michael and his angels fought against the dragon. The dragon and his angels fought back, but they were defeated, and there was no longer any place for them in heaven. (12:7-8)

This is the traditional language of holy war; but the language, story, and moral situation are inverted by John's coda:

But they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they did not cling to life even in the face of death. (12:11)

Again we find a radical symbolic inversion: images of power are replaced by images of suffering. Similar inversions occur at every point in the story—even in the climactic scene in which the heavenly warrior kills all his enemies, for his conquest is by means of a sword that comes from his mouth, not by the power of his arm (19:21). Thus the victory over evil is procured not by physical violence but by verbal power. Surely this story is built on the mythology of holy war (and that itself may be ethically problematic), but just as surely John consistently demythologizes the war—or perhaps more accurately, remythologizes the warrior with the image of the suffering savior so that the death of the warrior and not some later battle is the crucial event. At every juncture in this story where good triumphs over evil a close examination shows that the victory is finally attributed to the death of Jesus.⁵

This then leads us back to the first point about the delay. Why is postponement necessary? By what logic must retribution await further suffering? The logic of judgment is articulated by the angel of the waters when the third bowl causes the earth's water to turn to blood:

"Because they shed the blood of saints and prophets, you have given them blood to drink. It is what they deserve!" (16:6)

Notice both the appropriateness, the justice, of the retribution (blood because of blood) and also the inevitability of the retribution. The best analogy to this thinking can be found in our own impending ecological crisis. Because we have polluted our rivers we will have polluted water to drink. Retribution does not require some divine, tyrannical power over us; nor can any amount of divine mercy save us from it. This is the same logic of justice that undergirded Amos's visions of Israel's destruction, which

⁵ For a consistent reading of Revelation as narrative, see David L. Barr, *Tales of the End: A Narrative Commentary on the Book of Revelation* (The Storytellers Bible 1; Santa Rosa, Calif.: Polebridge Press, 1998).

would come as a result of social injustice. Amos first saw a vision of locusts, but when he prayed God stopped the locusts. Amos then saw a vision of fire, but when he prayed God stopped the fire. Amos then saw a vision of a crooked wall, and Amos could not pray for relief. For crooked walls—and unjust societies—fall. (See Amos 7:1–9.)

So in our story the martyrs have to wait till their “number would be complete” (6:11). This is not because God waits in some dispassionate indifference to the suffering of the innocent, but because in John’s story God acts *through* the process of suffering. There comes a time in every oppression when the amount of coercion needed to maintain a system will itself destroy the system, as we ourselves have seen in Russia and South Africa. So the great whore has become drunk with the blood of the saints (17:6); Rome’s very act of killing becomes her own death. Such is John’s vision. In this story evil is overcome by suffering love, not by superior power, and the apparent delay in judgment of the wicked is not due to divine indifference but to John’s basic understanding that human acts cause human downfall. Still, we must face the reality of John’s violent language.

While it is possible to appreciate the meaning of John’s violent language, the language itself remains a problem. There is too much violence. There is violence against mythic characters, violence against humans allied with these characters, and verbal violence against other community members. There is also a subversion of violence, especially in connection with the Lamb, as seen above. This subversion is not complete, however, and we are left with the question of what to do with this surplus of violence.

The Ethical Problem of John’s Language

Divine violence is portrayed as coming in four ways: in cosmic upheavals, war, harvest scenes, and judgment scenes. Numerically, the cosmic upheavals—earthquakes, hail, fire, and water—predominate. Both the seven trumpets (8:7ff.) and the seven bowls (16:2ff.) embody this violence, which is directed at physical earth (trees, grass, water) and general human victims (with only a couple of references to differentiate between the wicked and the righteous, as in the sealing of the servants of God in 7:2–3; 9:4).

More powerful if less numerous are scenes of war. Already intimated in 2:16 (where Jesus is said to be ready to come and war against a faction of the church at Pergamum), war dominates the last half of the book. In every case, the dragon starts the war and even prevails in one case (the two witnesses [11:7, and see 13:15]), but ultimately loses the war to the Lamb or the heavenly warrior. Little actual violence is portrayed in these scenes, for no battle scene is ever dramatized.

The real problem stems from the scenes of judgment that follow battles. For example, in the battle scene in which the rider on the white horse (whose name is “the Word of God”) conquers all by the sword in his mouth, we are told:

[T]he beast was captured, and with it the false prophet who had performed in its presence the signs by which he deceived those who had received the mark of the beast and those who worshiped its image. These two were thrown alive into the lake of fire that burns with sulfur. And the rest were killed by the sword of the rider on the horse, the sword that came from his mouth; and all the birds were gorged with their flesh. (19:20–21)

One might justify the punishments of the leaders as stemming from their crimes of war, but what of the rest? Is it right to kill combatants after the war is over? In the same way, the dragon’s later destruction in the lake of fire (20:10) seems defensible, but what of the rest? For after all the fighting, the dead are assembled before one seated on a great white throne, to be judged by what is recorded in the divine record books. Then,

anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire. (20:15)

This same problem attaches to two other scenes of judgment built on the symbol of the harvest, first of the grain (14:15) and then of the wine (14:20). The two scenes are introduced with a wine-making symbol that is perhaps the most disturbing portrayal of divine violence in the book, involving as it does the participation of the Lamb:

Then another angel, a third, followed them, crying with a loud voice, “Those who worship the beast and its image, and receive a mark on their foreheads or on their hands, they will also drink the wine of God’s wrath, poured unmixed into the cup of his anger, and they will be tormented with fire and sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever. There is no rest day or night for those who worship the beast and its image and for anyone who receives the mark of its name.” (14:9–11)

That such torture can be envisioned is horrible; that the Lamb can be envisioned as a spectator to it is beyond horror.⁶ And one must raise here the specter of coercion. Humanity seems left in the impossible situation that the beast will kill all those who do not worship it (13:15), and God will kill and torture all those who do. It seems a fine line between killing to induce worship and killing because of worship.

This problem with a surplus of violence can also be found in the portrayal of the destruction of Rome under the image of a prostitute. The ethics of this scene have been most thoroughly challenged by Tina Pippin.⁷ And while I disagree with the way she resolves the problem, I thor-

⁶ Chris Frilingos, “Making Males in an Unmade World: A Manly Paradise in the Book of Revelation” (unpublished paper, 2000), to be published in revised form as “Sexing the Lamb,” in *Semeia*.

⁷ Tina Pippin, *Death and Desire: The Rhetoric of Gender in the Apocalypse of John* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1992). See also idem, *Apocalyptic Bodies: The Biblical End of the World in Text and Image* (London: Routledge, 1999).

oughly agree with the problem she sees.⁸ The story of the destruction of the whore of Babylon is told in Rev 17 and interpreted in chapters 18 and 19. After a dramatic scene of the woman clothed in scarlet riding on a great beast and accompanied by ten kings, John is told:

[T]hey and the beast will hate the whore; they will make her desolate and naked; they will devour her flesh and burn her up with fire. (17:16)

Pippin interprets this scene thus:

The object of desire is made the object of death. The Whore/Goddess/Queen/Babylon is murdered (a sexual murder) and eaten and burned. This grotesquely exaggerated vision of death and desire accentuates the hatred of the imperial power—and of women. This story of death and desire is the most vividly misogynist passage in the New Testament. The Apocalypse is cathartic on many levels, but in terms of an ideology of gender, both women characters in the narrative and women readers are victimized.⁹

Pippin is absolutely right to confront the way women are portrayed in this text. Contemporary men can justify their mistreatment of women by such ancient texts; contemporary women draw self-images from such stories. No one can be allowed to feel that what happens to John's whore in this story could ever be justified for any woman. It is dangerous that John used a human image here. We must challenge the text at this point (as we must challenge its comfort with violence generally). Still, careful reading is called for.

Thus in the scene of the destruction of the whore of Babylon that Pippin highlights, it is human brutality that is portrayed. The ten kings and the beast destroy her. Even so, this is because "God has put it into their hearts to carry out [God's] purpose" (17:17). Thus in some way God must be held accountable for all the violence in the world, even human violence, for God is responsible for creation. But this is surely morally different than imagining divine violence. In fact, John signals this dialectical tension by immediately adding, "The woman you saw is the great city that rules over the kings of the earth" (17:18). Those who seek to dominate others will themselves be devoured by the process; it is, John says, what God has ordained. While the image of violence is problematic for me, the understanding of violence is not. As Pippin herself observed:

Having studied the evils of Roman imperial policy in the colonies, I find the violent destruction of Babylon very cathartic. But when I looked into the face of Babylon, I saw a woman.¹⁰

And this is the moral dilemma I find in the Apocalypse: I rejoice at its vi-

⁸ I treated this disagreement at some length in the original version of this essay (see n. 1).

⁹ Pippin, *Death and Desire*, 58.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 80

sion of the overthrow of evil, the elimination of oppression, the destruction of the destroyers of the earth; yet I cannot accept the images and actions that are used to portray this overthrow. While much of this portrayal is traditional—earthquake, war, harvest, final judgment—the degree of violence, involving eternal torture and the participation of the Lamb, at least as spectator, raises acute moral concerns. Rather than resolving these issues, the final section of this essay attempts to understand them more fully by placing them in their contexts, both the context of Roman Asia Minor and the context of John's story.

The Setting of John's Language

We have seen that it is no longer possible to explain John's language as the emotional outburst of a persecuted minority; it seems unlikely that the community faced any systematic Roman persecution.¹¹ John is concerned that his readers learn to identify Rome with evil; he must teach them how wicked Rome is because they are all too easily tempted to compromise with that evil. So rather than deal with the actual historical situation, I want to explore John's perception of that situation.

John makes two paradoxical assertions in his story. He asserts both that God rules this world (11:15) and that this world is still ruled by evil (17:18). Consider, for example, the little cameo scene in which there is a war in heaven and Satan is defeated. This is a cause for both rejoicing and for lamenting, for now Satan is loosed on the earth (12:7–12).

Perhaps we can see this situation more clearly if we return to one of John's opening sentences by which he introduces himself to the audience:

I, John, your brother and partner in the affliction and reign and consistent resistance in Jesus, came to be on the island called Patmos on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. (1:9, my translation)

First, notice that John expresses his solidarity with the audience in the strongest possible familial terms: brother and partner. In fact, the idea of partnership in Roman law derived from the need for brothers to inherit jointly their father's estate; thus, a partner is a virtual brother, but one with a shared investment. The surprise comes from how John describes the partnership; he uses three terms that do not fit readily together.

The first I have translated "affliction" (*thlipsis*). *Thlipsis* belongs to the language domain of trouble and suffering; it generally means "that which causes pain" (see 2:22).¹² It is regularly used to refer to the period of tribulation imagined to come at the end of the age (e.g., Matt 24:21). The sec-

¹¹ See chapters 2, 3, and 4 in this volume.

¹² Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, eds., *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains* (2d ed.; New York: United Bible Societies, 1989).

ond term I have translated "reign" (*basileia*, pronounced baa-sa-LAY-a). *Basileia*, by contrast, belongs to the domain of power and rule—nearly the antithesis of *thlipsis*. Then to this oxymoronic pair, John adds a third, which I translated "consistent resistance" (*hypomonē*, pronounced hoop-MON-ay). This term is usually translated "endurance"; it signifies the ability to bear up under difficult circumstances.¹³ It is for John, I think, the active quality of standing up to evil; it is one of the works of the faithful (2:19).

Now the pairing of *hypomonē* and *thlipsis* makes perfectly good sense, but what of *basileia*? Only an apocalypse can show life as simultaneously *thlipsis* and *basileia*, for an apocalypse allows the audience to look behind the veil of ordinary experience (an unredeemed world, *thlipsis*) and see the true order of life (God's rule, *basileia*). John's audience is imagined to live in two worlds, corresponding to the basic dualism of John's world. But this is not a dualism of spirit and flesh or even of secular and spiritual, for the way to live in both is *hypomonē*. Or perhaps it is more accurate to say that life in the *basileia* provides power to live the resistance to evil (*hypomonē*) that is necessary in the time of *thlipsis*. (See 2:2-3; 3:10; 13:10; 14:12.)

I do not mean the actual audience (a historical question) but the "listener" in the story. We are all accustomed to thinking about the narrator, the voice through which an author tells a story, but what of the one to whom the story is told? Scholars have invented a name for this aspect of the story: the narratee.¹⁴

I see John's story moving at three basic narrative levels, each with its own narrator and narratee. The three levels of narration are the telling of the whole work by a public reader (1:3); the telling of the stories of the visions by John on Patmos (1:9); and the telling of things by characters in these stories (for example, the voice addresses the souls under the altar in 6:11). To whom does the narrator speak at each level; who are the narratees?

At the outermost level the narrator is the reader and the narratee is the audience gathered to hear the reading (1:3). This narratee corresponds most closely to the implied audience of the work, but we know almost nothing about this audience. The story leaves this narratee largely undefined, except to imagine them gathered to hear this work read.

The second-level narratee, however, is carefully defined, for that is the listener to whom John narrates his vision of the risen Christ. This narratee is explicitly named as the seven churches and extensively characterized in the messages to the churches (chs. 2-3). This narratee is a complex group, both rich and poor, both zealous and lax, both loving and cold. They are carefully distinguished from the people John calls Jezebel and

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1978), 146-51.

Balaam, precisely because they are folk who might be tempted to follow such accommodating leaders.¹⁵

At the third narrative level, the narratees are the people addressed in the stories told to these second-level narratees—that is, the saints and martyrs who struggle to conquer the beast (see 6:10, 15:2, and the constant references to saints and servants). They are characterized as suffering and oppressed. These saints and martyrs are the focal points of the story, and both the second- and first-level narratees are encouraged to identify with them, leading one narrative critic to assert that ideal audience takes on the role of the martyr.¹⁶ This is something of a poetical exaggeration, but it is clear that by telling the story through the point of view of those abused by Roman power, the discourse persuades the audience to resist such power.

So whatever the historical reality when viewed objectively, John tells this story to show Rome as the embodiment of evil. John portrayed a community at war, fighting for their very lives. This is not the actual experience of the community (narrative-level one) but the experience of the heavenly counterparts to the community (narrative-level three). John seeks to give the historical community the resources to fight that battle by portraying the utter conquest of evil. He portrays this conquest in vivid, bloody, even immoral extreme. These are dangerous images, for they can support the idea of a righteous violence, a redemptive violence.

What must be always kept in mind, however, is that these images of the conquest of evil, however immoral they may appear, always correspond to the innocent suffering of Jesus and of those who hold the testimony of Jesus. John consciously discourages the use of violence and calls rather for faith and consistent resistance (13:10). John's vision is not an easy solution, nor is it easy to accept. Events like September 11 and suicide bombings call out for retaliation, violence begetting violence in an endless round. John's vision peers behind the violence of this world, offering a glimpse of the cosmic war between good and evil, a war only won through suffering.

The purpose of the Apocalypse is to tell again of the vile things that Rome has done and is doing. It was Roman power, after all, that crucified Jesus; it is Roman power that constitutes the totalitarian state in which the audience now lives. If, as the saying goes, politics makes strange bedfellows, John wanted his audience to know just whom they were getting in bed with. John's Apocalypse is a revelation of the true nature of Roman

¹⁵ I do not regard Jezebel and Balaam as part of the intended narratee because John's characterization of them is through insult and name-calling, devices designed to make them appear as outsiders. See Adela Yarbro Collins, "Vilification and Self-Definition in the Book of Revelation," *HTR* 79 (1986): 308-20.

¹⁶ See the excellent, if technical, discussion of the reader as martyr in chapter 4 of Michael A. Harris, "The Literary Function of the Hymns in the Apocalypse" (Ph.D. diss., Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1989), 227-301.

power and Roman culture. Seeing Rome in this light could lead to despair, but it is a measure of John's achievement that he has created a story that both reveals the mistake of accommodating to Rome and provides a rationale for resistance. In this story the prayers, the patience, the persistent resistance of the saints overthrow the powers of evil and bring God's kingdom into reality.

7

Undercurrents and Paradoxes

THE APOCALYPSE TO JOHN IN PROCESS HERMENEUTIC

Ronald L. Farmer

The drama of the Apocalypse, set forth in what to modern readers is bizarre symbolism, can be characterized as a clash of powers. The Dragon (Satan), working through his henchman the Beast (the Roman government), wages war against the people of God. The power the Beast exercises is coercive, controlling, and unilateral. That God overcomes the Beast and the Dragon is clear. Also clear is that John exhorts his readers to overcome or conquer in the same manner that Jesus conquered. What is not so clear is the nature of this divine/human overcoming power.

The issues at stake can be brought into focus by reflecting upon D. H. Lawrence's assessment of the Apocalypse as a betrayal of the Christian ideas of grace and love. He felt that there were two kinds of Christianity: one focused on Jesus and the command to love even our enemies, and the other focused on the Apocalypse and its portrayal of vengeance on and power over our enemies. Thus for Lawrence, Revelation is the "Judas" of the New Testament because its portrayal of God's overcoming power—God as an absolute and brutally vengeful despot—betrays Jesus and his call to love.¹ But is this the only, or even the best, way to read the Apocalypse? This chapter will read the Apocalypse using a *process hermeneutic*; both terms need to be defined.

A Process Hermeneutic

Hermeneutics (the word comes from a Greek word meaning "interpretation") is the study of how people create meaning. Although the discipline of hermeneutics is concerned with how people discern/impose meaning in all of their experiences, the present chapter focuses on one very important activity: how people derive meaning from a written text.

¹ D. H. Lawrence, *Apocalypse* (n.p.: Penguin Books, 1974), 14–15.