

A Superb Teacher.**The Characteristics of the Author of the Book of Revelation****Simon CHOW****Professor of New Testament****Lutheran Theological Seminary, Hong Kong****(Translated by Melissa CHENG)****I. The Author of the Book of Revelation**

The author of the book of Revelation calls himself John. The early church was divided in their opinion as to the identity of John, since it was a very common name in the first century AD. Justin Martyr (*Dialogue with Tyrpho* 81), Tertullian (*Against Marcion* 3.14.24) and Hippolytus (*On the Anti-Christ* 25.26) all concluded that the author was the Apostle John. According to Eusebius (*The History of the Church* 7.21.19), Dionysius of Alexandria (ca 190-264) accepted the authority of Revelation but did not think John the Apostle was the author. Furthermore, he said that his predecessors also questioned John's authorship. They even proposed that the real author was one by the name of Cerinthus, a heretic of the church. Until now, other than knowing his self-proclaimed name as John, we still know precious little about the author of the book of Revelation.

It is difficult, if not impossible, to retrace and find the identity of the real author; however, that does not mean we have no channels of familiarizing ourselves with him, the most obvious being via the document itself. Like a mirror, a document reflects the personality and character of an author. For example, if a reader is given an anonymous Chinese script, though anonymity remains, the reader can still know something about the author, that is, that he or she understands and can write in Chinese, possibly being Chinese by ethnicity. As he reads, if the reader comes across many grammatical errors, or if the content is very pessimistic, then the reader can further deduce the writer's level of education and his or her life setting, respectively. The author whom we can thus derive from the text, we call the implied author.¹ The purpose of this article is to discover the features of the implied author through an

¹ The characteristics of the implied author and the real author might not be completely the same, nor completely different, see Anderson, J.C., *Matthew's Narrative Web, Over, and Over and Over Again* (JSNTSup 91; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994), pp.28-30. Besides obvious indication, I will hence refer to the implied author in the rest of the article.

analysis of the text. The focus of the study is the literary world of the book of Revelation. However, since literature is imbued within a historical context, the historical context within which Revelation was written will also be discussed for a more comprehensive understanding.²

II. The Characteristics of The Author of the book of Revelation

An overview of the book of Revelation reveals seven major characteristics of the author:

A. Profound Scholarship

John never directly quoted the Old Testament. However, in the 404 verses of the 22 chapters in Revelation, John indirectly alluded to the Old Testament over 570 times.³ John was not only familiar with the Old Testament, Scripture indwelt in him. As a prisoner on Patmos, John could not have brought the Scriptures with him to his prison cell, nor would there have been any access to Scriptures on the island either. Despite these restrictions, the Scripture remained alive to John, and their applicability found expression in his visions. Let us take Revelation 17 and 18 as examples:

1. In these two chapters, John uses the great whore and Babylon to describe the great city which has dominion over the kings of the earth. The readers who are familiar with the Old Testament would know that the reference is from Jer 50, 51, describing the destruction of Babylon. The following two points are proof:
 - a. Jeremiah says in chapter 51, verses 7-8, “Babylon was a golden cup in the Lord’s hand, making all the earth drunken, the nations drank of her wine, and so the nations went mad. Suddenly Babylon has fallen and is shattered; wail for her!” On the other hand, John says that the woman (Babylon) holds “in her hand a golden cup full of abominations and the impurities of her fornication”...; “For all the nations have drunk the wine of her impure passions”...; and “So shall the plagues come in a single day... and she shall be burned with fire” (17:4; 18:3, 8).
 - b. Jeremiah, in chapter 51, verses 60-64, writes the words of Babylon’s destruction and then he orders Seraiah to take it to Babylon. After reading these words in Babylon, Seraiah ties the scroll to a rock and throws it into the river Euphrates saying, “thus shall Babylon sink, to rise no more, because of the disasters that I am bringing on her.” In the same way, when John is describing Babylon in Rev. 18:21, he uses the same imagery: “Then a mighty angel took up a

² Revelation was written during Domitian’s reign *circa* 90 AD. Roberts considers the literary study and the historical study of the text not to be mutually exclusive disciplines, see Roberts, J.J.M. “Historical-Critical Method, Theology, and Contemporary Exegesis,” in Kraftchick, S.J., Myers, C.D. & Ollenburger, B.C. (eds.), *Biblical Theology. Problems and Perspectives* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), pp.137-140.

³ Moyise, S., *The Old Testament in the Book of Revelation* (JSNTSup 115; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), p.16.

stone like a great millstone, and threw it into the sea, saying, ‘So shall Babylon the great city be thrown down with violence, and shall be found no more.’”

2. John’s description of Babylon’s destruction is also similar to Ezekiel’s description of Tyre’s destruction. In Ezek. 27:29-30, 36, Ezekiel talks about merchants, seafarers and sailors crying over Tyre. Likewise, John speaks of merchants, seafarers and sailors crying over Babylon (18:11, 15-19). Ezek. 27:12-25 states that many people from all nations will do business with Tyre, bringing their various produce with them for trade. John, then, also says that Babylon buys a lot of products, including the trade of humans, from all over the world. The types of produce amounted to 28 items (18:12-13).⁴
3. In addition to the Old Testament, John was very familiar with the contemporary apocalyptic literature.⁵ For instance, Revelation says that the angel from heaven ties up Satan and throws him in the abyss (20:1-3), and then into the lake of fire, for eternal torment (20:10). In 1 Enoch, written 200 years before Revelation, chapter 10, verses 4-6 say, “The Lord said to Raphael, ‘Bind Azazel’s hand and foot (and) throw him into the darkness!’ And he made a hole in the desert which was in Duda’el and cast him there; he threw on top of him rugged and sharp rocks. And he covered his face in order that he may not see light; and in order that he may be sent into the fire on the great day of judgment.”⁶ A comparison of these two passages reflects their similarity.

As demonstrated, there is a close link between Revelation and the Old Testament and other Jewish writings, revealing the profundity of John’s scholarship. It also reveals John’s able communication and teaching abilities, because he can use the existing knowledge of the readers to remind them what the prophets had prophesied before, and to add new meaning to it. In this way of restating the old while bringing out the new using one and the same point, John enhances the persuasiveness of his message.

B. Tight Structure

In the past, there were scholars who considered Revelation very confusing, with repetitions and inconsistencies.⁷ Nowadays, scholars might still vary in their opinion in this respect, but there is consensus that Revelation is tightly arranged nevertheless. We do not intend to discuss the structure of Revelation in detail, but will use the following two examples as illustration.⁸

⁴ Bauckham, R., *The Climax of Prophecy* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1993), chapter 10.

⁵ Revelation is also part of the apocalyptic genre.

⁶ Translation taken from Isaac, E. “(Ethiopic Apocalypse of) Enoch. A New Translation and Introduction,” in Charlesworth, J.H., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* 1 (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1983), p.17.

⁷ See Garrow, A.J.P., *Revelation* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), pp.6-13.

⁸ For more information, see the discussion of Beale, G.K., *The Book of Revelation* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Eerdmans; Carlisle: Paternoster, 1999), pp.108-151.

1. Though the content of Revelation might be puzzling upon first reading, the reader will have developed a deep impression of the number “7” even at that early stage. There are many groups of sevens. For example, in the first three chapters, John mentions seven churches, then seven seals, then seven trumpets, and seven stars, seven sets of thunders, seven angels, and seven bowls, etc. Besides these direct references to seven, there are indirect mention of groups of sevens as well. For example there are seven blessings (1:3; 14:13; 16:15; 19:9; 20:6; 22:7,14), seven mentions of Jesus as “the first and the last” (1:8,17; 21:6; 22:13), and seven items of praises for the Lamb (5:12). Thus, the concept of seven is an important thread in the structure of Revelation. The explicit mention is obvious, and the implicit urges the reader to go and search for them.
2. The thoughtful construction of Revelation can also be seen in chapters 2 and 3, the letters to the churches, in the following ways:
 - a. From geography, Ephesus was closest to Patmos. John starts from there and addresses the churches in a geographically clockwise manner.
 - b. From the style used, the seven letters have a similar format. All the seven oracles⁹ begin with the introduction of the announcer and the addressee, then follow words of praise, scolding, warning, and finally exhortation and promise. Stereotype phrases, such as “the words of... *(tade legei)*; “to him who conquers *(tōi nikōnti dōsō)* ; “He who has ears, let him hear what the Spirit says to the church” (*ho echōn hōus akousato ti to pneuma legei tais ecclēsiais*), appear throughout.
 - c. From the content and the situation of the churches, the third, the fourth and the fifth churches have similar situations, with good and bad qualities. Pergamum is under persecution, with martyred believers, but they remain faithful. However, they are deceived by the false prophets. Thyatira’s church is deceived by Jezebel, but there remain those who have kept the truth (2:24). Sardis’ church has a reputation of being alive, but is in fact dead, and their deeds are not perfect; but there are those whose garments remain unsoiled. The second and the sixth churches are the best – Smyrna and Philadelphia are not reprimanded at all. The first and seventh churches are in the most perilous condition. Ephesus has lost her first love, and the lampstand is soon to be removed, which means that the church would be removed as well (see 1:20b). Laodicea’s condition is even worse. They are self-content in front of people, yet they

⁹ Even though the seven letters are called letters, they are in fact oracles, because they are not written in the format of a letter.

do not know how poor they are in front of God. They have nothing. There is not a single word of praise for this church.¹⁰

3. The above discussion not only reveals the tight and meticulous structure of the writing, but it reveals something about the function of such a structure. A good structure helps the reader with memorization. From the viewpoint of communication, if the reader can remember what the author has said, this is obviously a compliment to the author's effective conveyance of information.¹¹ The word "*anaginoskein*" (read aloud), in Rev. 1:3, indicates that Revelation was read during worship service. The listener would not have had the book of Revelation in his hands – he would only listen – therefore any aid in memorization was crucial. John encourages this by a tight structure as well as through repetition, giving depth and augmenting comprehension to the impression already committed to memory.¹²

C. Pastoral Passion

As we know from history, the early preachers of the church practiced itinerancy. They did not have a home; taking Jesus as an example (Acts 10:38), they carried the gospel far and wide, believing that Jesus' second return was imminent. Peter and Paul are our prime examples (Acts 9:32; 13:1-3) of such preachers. Paul kept connection with his churches through his letters. Itinerant preaching climaxed at the beginning of the second century.¹³ John wrote letters to Asia Minor's seven churches. Rev. 2-3 indicate that John was also an itinerant preacher.¹⁴ He had pastored seven churches, and not only did he know the situation in those churches well, he also had authority when speaking with them, revealing an intimate relationship with the churches.¹⁵ John is different from the other writers of apocalyptic writing in his rejection of using other historically and culturally famous names to promote his own credibility. Rev. 1:9 and 22:8 imply that the readers all know John. John openly declares the writing is prophecy, and that those who hear and obey will be blessed (1:3; 22:7). He even warns that nothing can be added to or taken away from the prophecies (22:18-19). From this we can see that he has great authority in the

¹⁰ Beale 1999, p.226.

¹¹ Jewish Rabbinic teaching is by rote memory, see Gerhardsson, B., *Memory and Manuscript: Oral Tradition and Written Transmission in Rabbinic Judaism and Early Christianity* (Combined edition with a new preface; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Livonia: Dove, 1998), p.64.

¹² With regard to the importance of repetition in Revelation, see Resseguie, J.L., *Revelation Unsealed. A Narrative Critical Approach to John's Apocalypse* (Biblical Interpretation Series 32; Leiden/ Boston/ Köln: Brill, 1998), p.12.

¹³ See *Didache* chapter 11.

¹⁴ Talbert, C.H., *The Apocalypse. A Reading of the Revelation of John* (Louisville: Westminster, 1994), p.3; Beale 1999, p.36.

¹⁵ Ramsay, W.M., *The Letters to the Seven Churches* (Updated edition; Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994), p.128 thinks that the seven churches represent the whole church.

seven churches. When compared to the authority found in Ignatius' and Clement's letters to the churches, John's Revelation carries much more weight.¹⁶

Revelation was written in 90 A.D., while Domitian was emperor, during a time of internal and external struggles. Domitian enforced emperor worship much more fiercely than the past emperors.¹⁷ John calls Rome Babylon and the Great Whore (17:5, 18) and says that she was drunk with the blood of the saints and witnesses of Jesus. (17:6). Therefore we can see that the Church was under great persecution from Rome. Rev. 2:13, and 6:9,10 tell us that many of the believers were already martyred. John himself was exiled to Patmos (1:9). There was also slander from the Jews (2:9; 3:9), who questioned the status of the believers' kingdom identity. The believers were hard-pressed by outsiders during this time.¹⁸ However, the internal struggles were even more worrisome. Inside the church there were a lot of false prophets, deceiving the believers and causing them to go astray (2:14-15, 20-23). There were very few faithful believers left (3:4).¹⁹ The more discouraging is that the church had lost its witness, to the extent that the lampstand was to be removed (2:5); the believers had a name but no truth (3:1), they were neither hot nor cold, without fervour in service, yet feeling smug about themselves, thinking that they were rich beyond want (3:15-17).

Bearing the burden of the church's extreme trials, even though he was physically on Patmos, John's spirit was with the church. When people believe that the power of the empire is unshakeable, and the whole world has followed the beast (13:3), John prophesies that Rome will be destroyed, and that that day is drawing near. In the twinkling of an eye, Rome will be in ruins, and all her riches will be destroyed (18:8, 10, 17, 19). John says that Christ holds the key of David, and that believers will live in the Heavenly Jerusalem (3:7-13). The focus of these words must be a response to the Jews' slander of the believers, accusing believers of not being God's people. It also shows how much John wants the reader to know how precious is the identity of the believers in Christ.²⁰ As to the grief over the many already martyred, John comforts the people with the reminder that the day of the Lord's coming is near. They only have to wait a little while longer to reign with Christ (5:10; 6:9-11; 20:4-6). In the letters to the seven churches, John reprimands those who apostatized, warning that if they do not repent, they would be under God's punishment. As for those who are deceived, the tepid ones, having the name but

¹⁶ Ibid., pp.54-55.

¹⁷ Aune, D., Revelation 1-5 (WBC 52A; Dallas: Word, 1997), pp.lxiii-lxiv.

¹⁸ Even though Thompson, L.L., *The Book of Revelation. Apocalypse and Empire* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990) might be correct that Domitian had not demanded an empire wide persecution, the suffering of the Christians was still great, and John was predicting an even greater time of persecution, see Beale 1999, pp.28-29.

¹⁹ Räisänen, H., "The Clash Between Christian Styles of Life in the Book of Revelation," ST (49), pp.151-166 in Hellholm, D., Moxnes, H. and Karlsen Seim, T.(eds.), *Mighty Minorities? Minorities in Early Christianity – Positions and Strategies* (Oslo...: Scandinavian University Press = ST 49, 1995), pp.151-154.

²⁰ Garrow 1997, pp.120-121.

no worth, and the ones who do not know death is coming, John reiterates the truth, and reveals at the same time the true identity and plan of Satan. In Rev. 18:4, John says “Come out of her, my people, lest you take part in her sins, lest you share in her place.” John’s pastoral concern for the church can be seen throughout.

John encourages the disciples to persevere until the end. In the face of danger, John urges them not to turn back, because a church which turns back has lost her witness, and the church with no witness is no church at all. The church’s mission is to prophesy to many peoples and nations and tongues and kings of the world (10:11). Chapter 11 describes gentiles trampling on God’s holy place, creating mindless havoc; yet there remains a protection for the disciples in the Temple, and there is a limit to the days of evil. The days of evil (42 months) are juxtaposed by an equivalent number of days of protection from God (1260 days). In addition, the church will definitely win, because the devil has already been vanquished. The Lamb has already been offered, and the blood of the brothers has already been shed, and even the devil knows his time is near the end (12:7-12), hence the believers will soon reign with God. Perseverance and faithfulness are encouraged by this reminder of victorious truth.

Revelation is filled with apologetics, condemnation of evil, differentiation of good and evil, warnings, and words of encouragement. These are the expressions of a pastor’s burden for his churches. John is a pastor at heart, with a pastor’s love, concern and burning passion to see his church arise from the ashes. It is no wonder one scholar remarks, “Revelation was not simply to impart information about the future, but to inspire an active response from its hearers.”²¹

D. Prophetic Vision

When Revelation was being written, Rome’s power seemed as mighty as the sun. Nero’s deeds and death brought confusion to the empire, who witnessed three rapid changes of reign in one year (68-69 A.D.). Eventually, under the rule of Vespasian (69-79 A.D.) and his son Titus (79-81 A.D.), the empire regained stability. On the military front, with the exception of the Parthians in the north, there was peace. In addition, the economy took an upturn, and citizens had access to luxuries from all over the world (18:12). Praise for Rome’s good governance was on the lips of all people. Smyrna, Pergamum, Ephesus, in their desire to acquire good names and imperial favour, promoted emperor worship, and the building of temples. Rev. 13:13 comments that the “whole earth followed the beast with wonder”. The Church’s believers were not immune to this influence. Under the leadership of false prophets and through false apostles’ imploring, many believers decided to follow the guilds and pay respects to idols

²¹ Ibid, p.118.

for the sake of business (2:14-15, 20-23). They compromised with evil yet remained unashamed (3:17-18).²²

John not only skilfully presents the word of the Old Testament prophets, he also claims his words are prophetic (1:3; 22: 7, 10, 18, 19). John is a successor of the tradition of the Old Testament prophets. With excellent spiritual acumen, he discerns the future by analyzing the present situation. When everyone is saying “Peace, peace”, John sees that “there was no peace” (Jer. 6:14). John says repeatedly that he is “moved by the Spirit” (1:10, 4:2, 17:3, 21:10). At the end of each letter to the seven churches, he concludes in the same way, “he who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches”. This shows us that he is very confident of the messages in the letters.

John describes the dragon and the two beasts as Satan and his legions’ work. In Rev. 12, John speaks with prophetic wisdom condemning the dragon, the ancient snake, also known as Satan, the devil. This dragon has seven heads and ten horns, with seven crowns. His tail can wipe down one third of the stars in the heavens. These are all signs of his power and authority on earth. This dragon persecutes the Woman “clothed with the sun” and her child. He also fights with the other children of the Woman (12:4, 7).²³ Just as the serpent in the ancient times deceived Adam and Eve, similarly the dragon deceives the people of the world. Having been cast down from the heavens, the dragon combines forces with the earth and the ocean’s beasts to cause evil in the world.

The beast from the sea also has seven heads and ten horns. The horns are adorned with ten crowns. Rev. 13:1-10 indicates that he is the representation of the devil on earth, with the dragon as the master, from whom the beast derives his authority. The beast has the praise of the whole world. It battles with the believers, and is victorious over them (13:7; also see 12:17).

Rev. 17:3 describes an intimate relationship between the sea beast and the great whore who sits on the many waters. In addition, verse 18 of the same chapter indicates that great whore represents the great city which has dominion over the kings of the earth. Therefore, no matter whether the head whose fatal wound received healing represents Nero or not, the sea beast and Rome are invariably closely linked.²⁴ Just when the world is flattering and praising Rome, John has a prophetic view which penetrates through the illusion, seeing the true depravity and evil of the empire and of emperor worship. He denounces this as idolatry, the very act of stealing glory from God, and because of this,

²² Räisänen 1995, pp.154-161.

²³ According to Beasley-Murray, G.R., *The Book of Revelation* (NCBC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1978), pp.197-198; Talbert 1994, p.48, and others’ opinion, the Woman represents the people of God, and the child is the Messiah. The other children are the faithful believers. See Boring, M.E., *Revelation* (Interpretation; Louisville: Knox, 1989), pp.152-153, Resseguie 1998, pp.142-145 for a slightly different explanation.

²⁴ Using the sea beast to represent Nero or Rome is a commonly held opinion, see Resseguie 1998, pp.124-127, for a different view.

Rome will fall (see chapters 12, 13, 18, 19). In John's view, even though Roman authority is vast, and it exerts far-reaching power over the land, it is simply a deceptive act through which the devil pretends to be God. This can be further seen by the contrasting parallels between the sea beast and Christ.

Christ	Sea Beast
1. Shares God's authority, power, kingdom and throne (12:10; 5:13)	1. Shares the dragon's power, authority and throne (13:2)
2. Saves all tribes, languages, people and nations (5:9)	2. Conquers all tribes, people, languages and nations (13:7)
3. Worthy of worship of every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea (5:13)	3. All the people on earth worship the beasts (13:4,12)
4. Had been slaughtered and risen from dead (5:6)	4. Its mortal wound had been healed (13:3)
5. For those who belong to Christ have the name of the Lamb (14:1)	5. For those who belong to the beasts have the name of the beasts (13:16-17)
6. Has seven horns, seven eyes, and many diadems on his head, and with 'King of kings and Lord of lords' on his robe and his thigh (5:6; 19:12, 16)	6. Has seven heads and ten horns, and ten diadems, full of blasphemous names (13:1; 17:3)
7. He is the first and the last, dead and risen and alive forever (1:18)	7. It was, and is not, and is about to ascend from the bottomless pit and go to destruction (17:8, 11)

Not only is the sea beast pretending to be Christ, the beast of the earth also feigns to be a prophet. Rev. 13:11 says that the beast from the earth has two horns like a lamb, but the voice is of the dragon, indicating that in appearance it is like Christ, but its core is of the devil. Its authority is from the sea beast, working for and under it. This beast of the earth is also one of the three deceivers pretending to be God, imitating the three in one character of God. The beast on earth symbolizes the false prophets (16:13; 19:20; 20:10). It is the representative of the dragon and the sea beast on earth

(13:12-15). The beast of the earth has certain traits similar to the two faithful witnesses in Rev. 11:3-13.²⁵

Prophets	Earth Beast
1. Prophets (11:10)	1. false prophet (16:13; 19:20; 20:10)
2. They are two lampstands, witnessing God (11:4)	2. Their heads have two horns, and speak for the dragon (13:11)
3. Work miracle to shut the sky and turn water into blood (11:6)	3. Given power by the Sea beast to do miraculous works (13:13)
4. Fire pours from their mouth and consumes their foes (11:5)	4. Making fire come down from heaven to earth (13:13)
5. Had been a torment to the inhabitants of the earth (11:10)	5. Deceived the inhabitants of earth (13:14)
6. They were brought back to life by the breath of life from God (11:11)	6. Gave a breath to the image of the beast so that the image of the beast could even speak and kill (13:15)

In Johns' view, the dragon and the two beasts are the false image of the three in one entity that is actually God's attribute, thus, by pretending, they attempt to rob God's glory and usurp His sovereignty. They deceive the world. Even though their power remains strong during their allotted time, and they seem glorious in the eyes of the beholders, John describes their power as being limited and hollow because they are destined for destruction. Unfortunately, there are believers who have been lured away by the false prophets, to the extent that their clothing have been soiled, and, having drunk Babylon's wine, have fallen asleep in stupor, and have not awakened. John, with prophetic vision, points out the evil of Rome, not only in the role as persecutor of the church, but as the devil's representative, bearing the same hardened heart that will not repent (2:21; 16:10-11). Thus, true believers cannot compromise with Rome. They have to be completely segregated.

E. Solid Theology

Revelation, following the tradition of apocalyptic writings, has a lot of imagery not understood by the modern readers, such as hybrid creatures. For instance, the face of the locusts from the bottomless pit is

²⁵ The above two charts are taken from Resseguie 1998, pp.124-128, with slight changes.

like a man, with hair like a woman, teeth like a lion, it has a tail, and can fly (9:7-10). And the beast from the sea has a face like a leopard, and the feet of a bear, mouth of a lion, but has man's number (13:2, 18). The beast of the earth deals with human affairs, being in charge of buying and selling. Bauckham emphasizes that the explanations of the imagery should not dwell on their face value evaluation, but that they should be approached through theology.²⁶

Revelation brings hope to the persecuted and suffering believers, so that they can remain faithful even in dire situations. The strength lies in John's profound theology, which has an unshakeable faith in God. We will only touch on a few reasons:

1. God sits on His throne.

John describes God on His throne twelve times (4:2, 3, 9; 5:1, 7, 13; 6:16; 7:10, 15; 19:4; 20:11; 21:5). The devil (the dragon) and the beasts also have thrones (13:2; 16:10), but unlike God, the devil and the beasts do not sit on their thrones. The devil knows that his days are limited, therefore he is furiously pursuing the woman and the children. He stands by the sea, and gives over his authority and throne to the sea beast (12:12-13:2). Even the sea beast is very busy, fighting the believers, so that he has no time to sit on the throne.

God sitting on the throne signifies that He is never changing and has sovereign authority over everything. Furthermore, even though He sits enthroned in the heavens, He still is ruling over all the earth. Revelation does not directly tell us of God's acts, but through John's use of the passive voice, we can see that the evil-doers and the evil times are only allowed with God's authorization (13:5). Suffering, sword and famine have all been permitted by God (6:1-8). Rev. 4:3-5 talk about the One sitting on the throne as being like jasper and carnelian, with thunder and lightning radiating from the throne. This represents God's majesty, mystery and glory. However, He is not so high that He is separated from man, because the prayers of the believers can rise up like incense to God's throne (5:8; 8:3-4). Finally the One sitting on the white throne has to judge the world (20:11-15). From this, we can see that John uses the white throne imagery to indicate God's faithfulness, sovereignty and majesty – something on which the believers can completely rely.

2. God is the First and the Last

Revelation records God's own words twice. The first is found in Rev. 1:8, and the second is found in 21:5-8,

²⁶ Bauckham, R., *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp.19-22.

“I am the Alpha and the Omega.”

“And He who sat upon the throne said, ‘Behold, I make all things new.’ Also He said, ‘Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.’ And He said to me, ‘It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give from the fountain of the water of life without payment. He who conquers shall have this heritage, and I will be his God and he shall be my son. But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the polluted, as for murderers, fornicators, sorcerers, idolators, and all liars, their lot shall be in the lake that burns with fire and sulphur, which is the second death.’”

The first passage is recorded before the vision is explained, the second is said at the end, after the New Jerusalem has arrived. The two passages form not only an *inclusio*, but more importantly, they describe God as the God who begins and ends. God’s word has become the beginning of what will be coming to pass, because God is before all things (1:1). Similarly, God’s Word is the concluding word of the old world, before the dawn of the new heaven and new earth. God says, “I have made all things new”(21:5). In this regenerated world, death, tears, pain, suffering will all disappear, and will be replaced by God’s presence. In this regenerated world, the believers will be God’s people forever, because God is the Alpha and Omega.

3 God as Creator and Redeemer

In Rev. 4:1, John is invited by God to the heavens, where he sees Him who sits on the throne, the four living creatures, the 24 elders and the Lamb which was slain. Rev. 4:1-5:14 describe the heavenly worship which functions secondarily as equipping the believers for future persecution. No matter how chaotic this world becomes, God still holds sovereign power because He is the Creator of the heaven and the earth and all that is in it (4:11). No matter how tragic the predicament is, or how severe the persecution, the believers’ suffering is not in vain. John fervently believes and proclaims that God is the Redeemer. God’s Lamb has already been slain, and the blood of the Lamb has purchased the people of the world, the believers, and they shall reign with God on earth (5:9-10). The suffering even unto death of the believers is an imitation of the redemptive action of the Lamb. Therefore John says, “And they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death.” (12:11) God as Creator and Redeemer is not a figurative or abstract image. God is the origin and source of life. Because of this, John says he heard “every creature in

heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all therein, saying, ‘To Him who sits upon the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honour and glory and might forever and ever!’” (5:13)

F. Sincere Worship

Of all the writers of the New Testament, the one who speaks most and most richly about worship is John. The heavenly worship in Rev. 4:1-5:14 is familiar to most readers. The four living creatures’ exclamation of “Holy, holy, holy” and, later in chapter 19, the “hallelujah” proclamations might be the source of the church’s liturgy.²⁷ Worship passages include 4:8-5:14; 7:9-12; 8:3-5; 11:15-19; 14:1-5; 15:2-4; and 19:1-10.²⁸ These passages have the following features:

1. Worship, judgment and catastrophic descriptions are all interconnected. For example, after the heavenly worship (4:8-5:14), the Lamb opens the six seals of God’s wrath (6:1-17). After the saints’ prayers have risen to God’s throne (8:3-5), there are the disasters announced by the seven trumpets. After the seals and the trumpets (11:14), the heavenly temple opens and the ark is revealed. The 24 elders are shown to be kneeling in worship. After the victorious believers have sung the song of Moses by the crystal sea (15:2-4), there were the disasters from the seven bowls. The beast’s world is in judgement, and the proclamation of Babylon splitting into three (16:1-21). The worship scene in Rev. 19:1-10 is the preview of the destruction of the dragon and the two beasts. After that is the final judgment (19:11-20:15). In each worship passage, the people lift up God’s Name and praise His omnipotence, giving Him glory for the work of redemption. In one sense, this is the John’s conviction, in another sense, this is his reminder for the readers that sovereignty belongs to God and that everything is under His control. So even though the readers are under persecution, they do not have to fear because God’s judgment of the evil one is coming soon.
2. The above observation can be confirmed from another perspective. One of the important items of worship is the singing of hymns. Not only the four living creatures and the 24 elders, but also angels, creatures on earth and under the earth will all sing to God. Schüssler Fiorenza is right in saying that the hymns have the function of explaining the significance of the visions.²⁹ Rev. 5:9-14 is a very good example. It tells us why the Lamb has the authority to open the seven seals, because He was once slain, purchasing people from all nations with His blood. Because the seals are

²⁷ In the whole New Testament, the word “hallelujah” is only found in Rev. 19. For the opinion that the content of worship in Revelation originated from John, see Guthrie, D. “Aspects of Worship in the Book of Revelation,” in Wilkins, M.J. and Paige, Y. (eds.), *Worship, Theology and Ministry in the Early Church* (JSNTSup 87; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1992), pp.71-73.

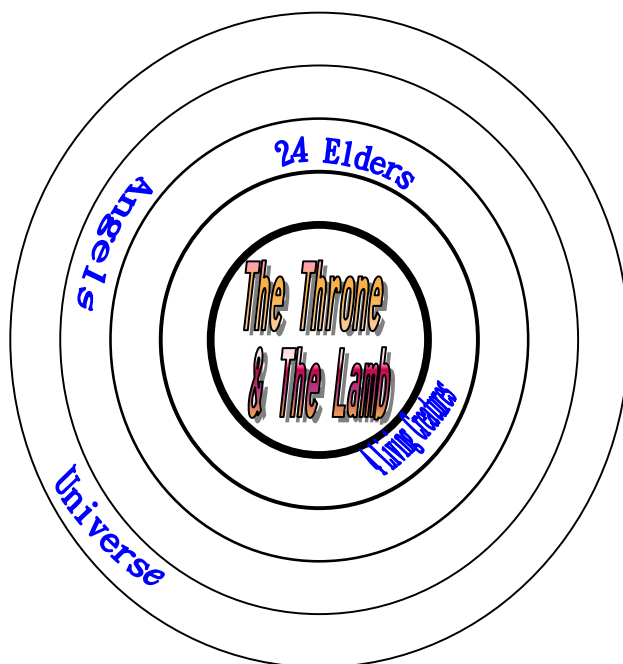
²⁸ Thompson 1990, chapter 4 has a longer list of the passages related to worship in Revelation.

²⁹ Schüssler Fiorenza, E., *The Book of Revelation. Justice and Judgment* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), pp.171-172.

opened by the Lamb, the content therein is also under the authority of the Lamb. Hence the people with the seal of the Lamb on their foreheads should not be afraid nor should they lose hope, because the Lamb is in control of all events.

3. The worship passages not only explain the vision and prepare the readers for persecution but also teach them what real worship is. In the book of Revelation, the author clearly states that worship is an innate part of human nature. If people do not worship the real God, they will worship false gods (13:8). According to John, the devil pretends to be god, with his body full of blasphemous names (17:3), trying to steal God's glory. His miraculous work is also deceptive (13:14; 20:8, 10), but his defeat is guaranteed. Finally, in the judgment, the ones who did business with the devil, or the ones bearing on their foreheads the sign of the devil, whether they are kings, or merchants or sailors, will all have to wail for the destruction of the beast (18:9-20). In contrast, the true believers will sing a new song (5:9; 14:4) and they will be filled with joy, because they worship the true God and are victorious in the end (19:1-8). Twice, John kneels before the angel in worship, but the angel stops him because only the One enthroned and the Lamb are worthy of worship (19:10; 22:8-9).

Rev. 4-5 depicts very clearly that only the true God and the Lamb are worthy of worship. This worship vision has God and the Lamb as its central focus. Surrounding them are the four living creatures, then the 24 elders, then the thousands of angels, and finally the creatures of the world, as is shown clearly by the chart below.



In this way, we can see that not only are God and the Lamb the centre of worship, but also the function that worship has, namely, to unify the whole universe.³⁰ Thus, we can see the importance John puts on worship, and the sincerity with which worship is conducted.

G. Assured Hope

The whole book of Revelation reveals that John expects the future to be very beautiful, because of the new heaven, new earth, and the new Jerusalem. To John the present suffering is only the sign which necessarily precedes this new creation. John, in line with the Apocalyptic heritage, also indicates that before the light dawns, there will be the darkest evil of fulminant wickedness. When he speaks of the seven signs, seals and bowls, the sixth item is the worst, and then the seventh is God's intervention, where thunder, lightning, loud noises, earthquake and hail announce the change in order.

John states that the suffering of the believers is limited as well. For example, Smyrna needs to persevere for 10 days (2:10). The souls who have been killed only need to wait for a little longer (6:11). The two prophets who suffered unto death will sit once again on the clouds after three days (11:12), and the ones who are in suffering right now, the saints, because they already have the sign of God on their forehead, will avoid the disaster (7:1-3). When the evil ones trample the Holy City, and the dragon attacks the chosen for 42 months, God will grant the same amount of time – 1260 days – of protection. (11:12-13; 12:16) In fact, the work of the devil on earth is only limited to a very short time (12:12; 20:3) and its legions will also be destroyed “within a single day...in one hour” (18:8, 17, 19).

John is a caring pastor. He does not curse the apostates but hopes that they will repent. He repeats three or four times that God has left time for them to repent (2:5, 16, 21-22; 3:3, 19; 14:6, 7; 18:4). He knows that they have been deceived by the devil. Some people, fearful of impending disasters, are driven to repentance (11:13), but there are some hard-hearted ones who refuse to repent (9:20-21; 16:8, 9, 21). Finally these from the latter group have a battle in Armageddon, and they are thrown into the lake of fire along with the false gods (16:12-14, 16; 19:19-21). This is also the ending for the devil.

John can have surpassing hope for the future because he believes that through Christ's death, Satan has already been vanquished. At Golgotha, the Lamb has received the highest victory. Believers only have to follow Christ's footsteps and they will be victorious (12:11-12a). In Revelation, John likes alluding to the book of Exodus. The disasters depicted in Revelation are akin to the ten plagues (8:7-12; 16:2-6 / Exod. 7:14-15; Exod. 8:5-15; Exod. 9:8-10:29). Today's Pharaoh (beast) and Egypt (Babylon)

³⁰ Resseguie 1998, p.205.

will also be destroyed because of their hard heartedness. And the faithful believers will sing new songs to praise God's work (*ergon*) as being great and wonderful, and to praise his road (*hodos*) as being true (*alēthinos*) and just (*dikaios*) (15:2-4//Exod. 15:1-21). They are like the new Israelites, and are heading towards the promised land. This is what John describes as the new heaven, the new earth and the new Jerusalem.

John predicts that there is to be a Messianic millennium. His purpose is not to point to the exact time of the arrival of the kingdom, nor to describe its duration.³¹ However, its timely arrival is certain, so with conviction he says, "If anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his share in the tree of life and in the Holy City, which are described in this book." (22:19). This statement finds confirmation with Christ's words, "Surely I am coming soon." (22:20)

John employs the bride and the new Jerusalem to describe the new heaven and new earth. Rev. 19:7-8 say that the bride is "to be clothed with fine linen, bright and pure" and "the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints." So the Holy City, the bride and the new Jerusalem are not only a geographical place, but they also describe a blessed state and the ever-blessed saints.³² In that "place", God and the believer have a blessed and harmonious relationship, recovering the original perfect state of the Garden of Eden. The tears, curse, pain and death that are the result of the sin of Adam and Eve will all be wiped away in that new place. The tree of life and the river of life that had been lost now reappear. This is a renewed state. The believers are safely protected in the mighty and beautiful fortress, because "nothing unclean shall enter it, nor anyone who practices abomination of falsehood." (21:27) This is very different from the state of the old Jerusalem. The most conspicuous difference is that there is no Temple, because God and the Lamb live there, and they are the living Temple (21:22). The believers can directly see God face to face and live with God. The New Jerusalem is the last and final home of the believer, and is the most complete perfect state. John is filled with hope for this new state, because all "those who wash their robes" – those who are dressed in white – may enter the city (22:14). Only those who are faithfully witnessing until the end may dress in white (6:9-11; 7:9-17), with John himself being an example of this kind of believer (1:9).

III. Conclusion

John lived in a time of the century's great change, a time when the church was facing great persecution. He subsumes the essence of profound knowledge, astute thinking, passionate worship and unflinching

³¹ See Chow, S., *He Who Has Ears Let Him Hear. Revelation and Exegesis* (Hong Kong: TaoSheng, 2002), in Chinese, pp.87-88.

³² Gundry, R.H., "The New Jerusalem. People as Place, not Place for People," *NovT* (29, 1987), pp.254-264; Watson, D.F., "New Jerusalem," *ABD* 4 (1992), p.1095.

perseverance. Other than being a theologian, a witness, a prophet and a pastor, he is also a teacher. He effectively passes on what he has seen and heard to the believers, his flock, with power and conviction. He is certainly worthy of the respect of a superb teacher.³³

³³ This article was originally included in Dr. Andrew K. H. Hsiao's 75th birthday festschrift (*Theology & Life* 2001, issue no. 24, in Chinese), and is slightly modified here. Dr. Hsiao was a well-respected famous Chinese scholar in the theological circle and he was also my teacher and then a colleague. To learn from him was a happy and honoured privilege. His teaching and his vision command our respect. Therefore to me, he is also a superb teacher. Dr. Hsiao has emulated well the example left by John, and this author, of course, cannot compare with his teacher, and cannot be called a superb teacher, but since I am already a teacher, I would like to learn from these my predecessors, to the benefit of my students.