

# The Book of Revelation as a Breviary of Hope

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## Abstract

The New Testament texts collectively bear witness to the apocalyptic and eschatological orientation of the early Christian movement, which saw in the death and resurrection of Jesus the decisive intervention of God in history and the inauguration of a new age. As the capstone of the canon, Revelation is perhaps the clearest example of apocalyptic eschatology, even while it appears to be quite different from other New Testament texts. In this article I offer an analysis of Revelation as a text of hope, written to late first century Christian communities in need of hope as a basis for their beliefs and actions while facing an increasingly ambiguous and threatening social, political, and religious situation. My argument will proceed with an exploration of hope as a concept, noting its multifaceted nature and various definitions, moving to an analysis of the place of hope within Christian theology. The main body of the article is concerned with an exploration of the role of hope within Revelation, beginning with an examination of its language, genre, context, and purpose, and concluding with an examination of its content and narrative flow, noting how these aspects of the text coalesce into a theology of hope. Ultimately, I conclude that Revelation was written for the purpose of creating and sustaining hope in its readers (reading from the perspective of an oppressed minority group) and was intended to be circulated and reread in church communities as a continuous witness to hope in the face of an uncertain future.

**Key Words:** Hope, Revelation, Apocalypse, Eschatology.



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## Introduction

The Book of Revelation is known for many things, not least its strong language, unsettling imagery, and how different it seems to be from the other New Testament texts. When this book comes to mind, the author<sup>1</sup> is not typically characterised as primarily conveying a message of hope, and the Greek word for hope (*ἐλπίς*; *elpis*) does not actually appear in the text. However, in what follows I intend to argue that the instillation of hope in his readers is among the most fundamental reasons why John wrote the book, so much so that the entirety of the text can be characterised by hope and read through the lens of a theology of hope. This would especially have been the case for its audience of Christ-followers whose beliefs would have been influenced by apocalyptic eschatology and the various social and political upheavals of the first-century Roman Empire.<sup>2</sup> John's readers would have understood this text as dominated by a hopeful impulse and as defined with faith-filled expectation as its overall meta-framework.

My argument also rests on the assumption that Revelation, despite being something of a genre mosaic that combines various types of writing, is basically a liturgical text that was sent to actual churches and intended to be read repeatedly in worship gatherings (hence the designation as a "breviary").<sup>3</sup> Also, rather than being at the margins of the Christian canon, I intend to show that John's eschatology (that is, his understanding of "last things") is in line with the rest of the New Testament and not an unusual variance in the beliefs of the early churches regarding either theology in general or the future in particular. Early Christian theology had a strongly eschatological orientation, as evidenced from the earliest canonical New Testament document (presumably 1

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this article I will refer to the author as "John" because this is how he identifies himself (Rev. 1:1, 4, 9; 22:8). I make no further assumptions about which John this is, except to say (along with most scholars) that this was his actual name and not intended to be a pseudonym or pseudepigraphal device. The precise identity of who here is "John the Seer" is not important to the basic thesis being argued, but we can at least say that he was a Jewish-Christian prophet. For a thorough explanation of the various positions on authorship, see David Aune, *Revelation 1-5* (WBC; Dallas: Word, 1997): xvii-iv.

<sup>2</sup> That Revelation is a first-century text is almost unanimously supported in modern interpretation. I will offer a more detailed discussion of its date and context below, but for a concise treatment of dating, see Buist Fanning, *Revelation* (ZECNT; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2020): 28-33.

<sup>3</sup> Helpfully noted by Peter Leithart, *Revelation 1-11* (ITC; London: T&T Clark, 2018): 45; similarly, Ugo Vanni, "Liturgical Dialogue as a Literary Form in the Book of Revelation," *New Testament Studies* 37 (1991): 348-372. The seven churches of Rev. 2:1-3:21 were actual communities in Asia Minor specified by John as addressees, and commentators agree that this text was intended to be circulated among them and read repeatedly in their gatherings. The language of the introductory verses, which unite lector and hearers, suggest this intention. For example, the text initially addresses hearers with a benediction (1:1-3), and a shared proclamation (1:4-7), which the author communicates in a context of worship on a day when early communities gathered (1:10). The second and third chapters combine encouragement and rebuke, which follow liturgical patterns of a call to worship and an exhortation to confession, and the fourth chapter has the author in a heavenly worship setting. Finally, the text ends with a call for hearers to respond (22:6-21). This interactive structure indicates the intention for liturgical participation.

Thessalonians) onward.<sup>4</sup> Christian eschatology concerns itself with time (the future, influenced as it is by the past, necessarily bears on the present), and the New Testament as a whole witnesses that the substance of early Christian eschatology was hope.<sup>5</sup> Thus, hope is fundamental to the early Christian theological landscape, with Revelation as something of a canonical capstone. To argue this more fully, however, it is necessary first to explore how hope itself can be defined.

### Hope as a (Variegated) Concept

What is precisely meant by “hope” is perhaps more easily felt emotionally or recognised intuitively than it is defined conceptually. One recent explanation calls it “an ambiguous phenomenon” with “many associations . . . [y]et its core is simple: hope denotes a desire (we hope for something) and it involves a probability (the chances of attainment of the desire have to be something between zero and one).”<sup>6</sup> While hope does involve a desire, it may be better paired with the idea of expectancy more so than probability. Given that hope is generally a subjective idea and probability presumes some level of objectivity in its implication of possibilities, a hopeful person may be better understood as having desire with expectancy, an expectancy carrying some level of substantiation based on *a priori* assumptions.<sup>7</sup> With this basic understanding, we turn to a more detailed exploration of nuances in the expression of hope.

#### *An Aspectual Geography*

Hope necessarily requires a purpose for its exercise; no one can hope without having some reason for hoping. Hope likewise has an effect on the person participating in its exercise which is self-

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<sup>4</sup> cf. 1 Thess. 4:13-5:11; Mk. 13:24-27; Rom. 8:18-25; 2 Pet. 3:1-13. See Martin Webber and Jacobus Kok, “Early Christian Thinking on Hope,” in *Historical and Multidisciplinary Perspectives on Hope*, ed. Steven van den Heuvel (New York: Springer, 2020): 25-46. I refer to “Christian” theology and “early Christianity” for convenience to refer to the views of first-century Christ followers, but I do not intend to suggest that Christian beliefs were monolithic or entirely unified at this point, nor do I dispute that John’s community may represent only one iteration of various “early Christianities” or Jewish-Christian expressions of theology.

<sup>5</sup> cf. Ac. 26:6-8; 1 Cor. 15:19; Col. 1:5; 1 Thess. 4:13; Tit. 2:13; Heb. 10:24-25; 1 Pet. 1:13.

<sup>6</sup> Steven van den Heuvel, “Preface,” in *Perspectives*, v.

<sup>7</sup> As formulated by Stanley Toussaint, “The Doctrine of the Future and the Concept of Hope,” in *Eschatology: Biblical, Historical and Practical Approaches*, eds. D. Jeffrey Bingham and Glenn Kreider (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2016): 54. Avoiding the idea of probability is not meant to indicate that hope cannot be based on what is factual, but only that hope does not absolutely require factuality to be genuine. Rather, an attribute of a genuinely hopeful person is the person’s persistence in hope despite having reasons not to hope, or having the object of hope be basically improbable and transcending the bounds imposed by probability. For a wide-ranging discussion of basic definitions of hope from Aquinas to the modern day, see Nicholas Smith, “From the Concept of Hope to the Principle of Hope,” in Janet Horigan and Ed Wiltse (eds.), *Hope against Hope: Philosophies, Cultures and Politics of Possibility and Doubt* (Leiden: Brill, 2010): 3-22.

sustaining. It is for this reason that David Elliot can write that “hope changes our perspective on suffering, discouragement, injustice, tragedy, and death. By making clear that our present situation is not permanent . . . hope precludes undue dejection and despair.”<sup>8</sup> The prospect of circumstantial change (or in an eschatological framework, ultimate reconciliation) allows for the possibility of finding meaning and motivation regardless of the present situation, whether this is one of suffering, marginalisation, loss, absence, insecurity, or even certain death. Since hope concerns the possible or not-yet-actual, it is a practice in liminality, a “living in the middle.”<sup>9</sup>

Just as eschatology is necessarily linked to time, hope must involve time in that it is experienced within time and anticipates future time.<sup>10</sup> It does not ignore past time but it is supra-present, in that while exercised in the present, it looks beyond the present and its antecedents in such a way that the present is affected by the not-yet-actual future.<sup>11</sup> Hope therefore always involves time and implies the transcendence of time-bound experience, and within a text like Revelation, at least four different levels of time interact in the expression of hope: the present within the text-world, the future within the text-world, the present in the reader’s world, and the future within the reader’s world. Hope is most evident in the interaction between the reader’s present and the text-world’s future. In the case of Revelation, I will suggest that John intended the interaction between these two experiences of time to create and sustain hope.

From a philosophical perspective, James K. A. Smith contends that intentionality, constitution, and horizontality are all essential characteristics of hope. Hope is intentional because there is always something to which it is directed, it is constituted in that there is a meaning that allows one to exercise hope, and it is horizontal in that it is forward-focused in its future orientation.<sup>12</sup> On this threefold characterisation, Smith concludes that any notion of hope implies five constituent elements: one who hopes, an object of hope, the action of hope, a ground for that hope, and the fulfilment of that hope.<sup>13</sup> These three characteristics and five elements are helpful tools to

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<sup>8</sup> David Elliot, “Hope in Theology,” in *Perspectives*, 119.

<sup>9</sup> David Hohne, *The Last Things* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2019): 13.

<sup>10</sup> I define “time” in a basically Aristotelian way, namely as a measurement of change. It is the continuum of existence to which we conform and a construct that acts on us. See Ursula Coope, *Time for Aristotle: Physics IV.10-14* (OAS; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), esp. 99-112.

<sup>11</sup> Ronald Michener, “Post-Kantian to Postmodern Considerations of (Theological) Hope,” in *Perspectives*, 77-78.

<sup>12</sup> James K. A. Smith, “Determined Hope: A Phenomenology of Christian Expectation,” in *The Future of Hope: Christian Tradition amid Modernity and Postmodernity*, eds. Miroslav Volf and William Katerburg, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004): 206-208. Smith is ultimately indebted to Edmund Husserl’s concepts and vocabulary in this framework. Pamela McCarroll, in *The End of Hope—The Beginning: Narratives of Hope in the Face of Death and Trauma* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014), defines hope along similar lines, saying that it is “the experience of opening the horizons of meaning and participation in relationship to time, other human and nonhuman beings, and/or the transcendent” (48).

<sup>13</sup> Smith, “Determined Hope,” 207-209.

understand the nature of hope, and a supporting framework for approaching what hope means within Revelation as a text.

If this is the nature of hope, its exercise consists of more than an attitude, and therefore it would be wrong to associate hope with the idea of optimism.<sup>14</sup> Hope is more similar to confidence than to a general positivity and should be understood as more active than passive. If similar to confidence, it is “a confidence that one’s project will prevail . . . [an] active commitment to the desirability and realisability of a certain end.”<sup>15</sup> Seeing hope as active leads to Terry Eagleton’s suggestion that it has a “performative” aspect, in that the exercise of hope may work to bring about the desired fulfilment thereof, and in that case it “is not simply an anticipation of the future but an active force in its constitution.”<sup>16</sup> Hope is more dispositional than it is experiential, just as there is a difference between showing patience and being patient.<sup>17</sup> Therefore, it would also be too simple to claim that hope is an emotion.<sup>18</sup> Hope may have properties shared with emotions (such as having an intentional object and functioning as a motivation for action), and may also have degrees as emotions do, but these do not make the two properly similar.<sup>19</sup> “Hope that” may represent a different degree than “hope in,” and certainly if God is the object of one’s hope there is a difference in degree from, say, hoping for health during a bout of sickness.<sup>20</sup> A higher degree of hope, such as that which I argue John intends to fortify in his readers, would necessarily require faith in God as its object.

Beyond its nature and exercise, I would argue with Pamela McCarroll that hope is a fundamental aspect of human experience and without it survival itself, or at least the actualisation of coherence, is not possible.<sup>21</sup> It must be nourished throughout one’s life, and can persist even without apparent ground for its existence.<sup>22</sup> Hope is also most clearly manifested in circumstances of bereavement and/or oppression, so much so that we could argue that “hope is impossible without engagement

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<sup>14</sup> Recently argued by Terry Eagleton, *Hope without Optimism* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2015). An optimist assumes that things will work out well, but one hoping may do so without necessarily assuming this.

<sup>15</sup> Eagleton, *Hope*, 41. Anthony Kelly understands hope similarly, writing that “hope in all its registers implies a trustful and confident movement toward the future. It is trustful, for it is relying on something or someone for the help that is needed. There is confidence, too: whatever the evils that threaten, hope anticipates an escape or release into a fuller dimension of life. It is always about a movement forward” (*Eschatology and Hope* [Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2006]: 1).

<sup>16</sup> Eagleton, *Hope*, 84. For a similar “active” idea of hope and its phenomenology, see Smith, “Concept,” 11.

<sup>17</sup> Eagleton, 57. Or, as he also puts it, “someone who is sober only once in his life cannot lay claim to the virtue of temperance.”

<sup>18</sup> Probably most famously asserted by David Hume, *A Treatise on Human Nature*, 2.3.9.

<sup>19</sup> J.P. Day, “Hope,” *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 6.2 (1969): 89-91.

<sup>20</sup> Day, “Hope,” 94-97.

<sup>21</sup> McCarroll, *End*, 21.

<sup>22</sup> McCarroll,, 21.

with despair and the negations of life.”<sup>23</sup> Perhaps the most well-known Christian thinker to view hope from this perspective is Jacques Ellul, who argues that “hope comes alive only in the dreary silence of God, in our loneliness before a closed heaven, in our abandonment.”<sup>24</sup> Anthony Kelly agrees, arguing that “genuine hope is always ‘against hope’ . . . hope is at home in world of the unpredictable where no human logic or expectation is in control.”<sup>25</sup> In contexts of overwhelming difficulty, then, we can say that hope is manifested as a response of protest and survival, and one that must be nurtured over time.

From an historical perspective, there are some differences between contemporary conceptualisations of hope and ancient ones, whether Jewish or Greco-Roman. In modern parlance, hope has an inherently positive sense, while in Greek this was not always the case.<sup>26</sup> The Greek term *ἐλπίς* could carry negative connotations, or denote fear or trepidation, and ancient writers acknowledge that this makes speaking of the future more difficult and ambiguous.<sup>27</sup> Generally, hope for Greco-Roman thinkers did not appear to have a particularly religious or eschatological meaning, and for the most part, “human beings were thought to stand without hope before the hostile forces of guilt and death.”<sup>28</sup> Earthly or socio-political hopes, however, were important for Greco-Roman thinkers. Nearer to John’s time, Caesar Augustus was widely considered to be fulfilling old hopes and kindling new ones, especially as related to a period of imperial and economic prosperity and peace.<sup>29</sup>

Jewish rhetoric of hope, as observed in the Hebrew Scriptures and their Septuagint Greek translation (LXX), generally has YHWH as its object. In the LXX *ἐλπίς* occurs most often in the Psalms and in Isaiah, and often represents one of three Hebrew terms: *תִּקְוָה* (*tiqvâ*) connoting expectation; *בטח* (*beṭaḥ*) connoting safety, security (or, when used verbally), trust and confidence; or *חסה* (*ḥāsâ*) connoting taking refuge.<sup>30</sup> Moisés Silva suggests that hope in the Hebrew Scriptures is “a confession of assurance,” and while resembling secular hope, it is broader in content, basis

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<sup>23</sup> McCarroll, 35.

<sup>24</sup> Jacques Ellul, *Hope in a Time of Abandonment* (New York: Seabury Press, 1972): 177. For Ellul, while hope requires abandonment, it must also be “the opposite of resignation” (183).

<sup>25</sup> Kelly, *Eschatology*, 5.

<sup>26</sup> Moisés Silva, “ἐλπίς,” in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis*, Vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014): 183.

<sup>27</sup> For example, cf. Euripides, *Orestes*, 859; Plato, *Laws*, 644d.

<sup>28</sup> Silva, “ἐλπίς,” 183. Paul seems to assume as much in 1 Thess. 4:13, when he differentiates Christians from other people by the fact that they have hope in the face of death. An absence of hope beyond death was certainly not absolute, as some Greco-Roman mentions of hope do carry these connotations. For a nuanced discussion, see Rudolf Bultmann, “ἐλπίς, ἐλπίζω, ἀπ-, προελπίζω,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol. 2, ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. Geoffrey Bromily (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964): 521.

<sup>29</sup> Bultmann, “ἐλπίς,” 521.

<sup>30</sup> Silva, “ἐλπίς,” 183; Bultmann, 522. Taking refuge involved a sense of patient waiting and yearning for deliverance.

and effect, since it tends to stretch far beyond personal or individual hopes, but embraces the glorification of YHWH, his sovereign rule over the earth, and the full conversion of Israel and the nations.<sup>31</sup> What sustains hope in the Hebrew Scriptures is God's *ḥesed* (*hesed*), his covenant faithfulness, leading to a trust in his commitment to his people.<sup>32</sup>

Later Second Temple Judaism closer to John's lifetime had a more eschatological focus, even while being characterised by a variety of eschatological expectations. As Israel was increasingly subjugated to imperial powers, eschatological hopes were focused on national restoration, and, among certain Jewish subgroups, on the coming of a royal Messiah figure.<sup>33</sup> On how this differs from Hellenistic ideas, Bultmann notes that

this hope is not a consoling dream of the imagination which causes us to forget our present troubles, nor are we warned of its uncertainty, as in the Greek world. The life of the righteous is grounded in hope. To have hope, to have a future, is a sign that things are well with us. This hope is naturally directed to God. It is naturally referred to most frequently when man is in trouble and hopes that God will deliver and help him. This hope is thus trust.<sup>34</sup>

The hope for God's deliverance in the broader future shaped the community's relationship to its own future, which affects the community's interpretation of its past and present.<sup>35</sup> This is a necessary background for a reading of Revelation because John was a Jewish writer who was highly influenced by the Hebrew Scriptures, alluding to more texts with more frequency than any other New Testament writer.<sup>36</sup> With these initial observations in place, we will now examine how hope is to be understood from a Christian perspective and its place in early Christian thinking before moving toward a more detailed analysis of its role in Revelation.

## Hope in Christian Theology

The idea of hope in the earliest Christian writings is deeply indebted to the Hebrew Scriptures.<sup>37</sup> Specific terminology for hope occurs most in Paul's writings,<sup>38</sup> but the centrality of hope is so

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<sup>31</sup> Silva, 184.

<sup>32</sup> Werner Jeanrond, *Reasons to Hope* (London: T&T Clark, 2020): 6.

<sup>33</sup> Silva, "ἐλπίς," 185. Bultmann, "ἐλπίς," 524. We see this more clearly in light of the Qumran documents, which focused hope on God's salvific intervention in the world. At least for some of the readers of the Qumran texts, the commencement of the Messianic age would lead to the judgment of God's enemies and, through this, the oppressors of the Jewish people. These promises were seen as given communally to the people of Israel, that the future of the people belonged to God.

<sup>34</sup> Bultmann, 522.

<sup>35</sup> For more on how a community's present is shaped by its future hopes, see McCarroll, *End*, 39.

<sup>36</sup> G.K. Beale, *John's Use of the Old Testament in Revelation* (LNTS; London: T&T Clark, 2015): 60-128.

<sup>37</sup> Bultmann flatly states, "the NT concept of hope is essentially determined by the OT" ("ἐλπίς," 530).

<sup>38</sup> Specific rhetoric of hope occurs thirty-six times in the Pauline corpus, and nineteen times in verbal form.

fundamental that the Christian message itself is described in 1 Peter 1:3 as rebirth to “a living hope,” and God is described in Romans 15:13 as “the God of hope.” The New Testament rhetoric of hope never carries a sense of ambiguity or fear, but entirely the expectation of good, through the lens of an understanding of what was previously future having become present for believers in Jesus Christ.<sup>39</sup> The hope to which the New Testament witnesses is always focused on God and/or Christ as object, with the Jewish idea of the universal rule of God in the background. Hope looks forward, as will be shown, to the salvific intervention of God as depicted in Revelation. Early Christian hope embraced a threefold foundation of the expectation of God’s faithfulness to his promises, covenant trust in God’s ability to actualise that future, and the patience of waiting in present circumstances.<sup>40</sup> Hope is so important in the New Testament because it was considered to have been substantiated in the divine act of salvation accomplished by Jesus in the past, which then informed the attitude of believers to what God was continuing to accomplish in the present, and also intending to accomplish with finality in the future.

Theologically, to understand the centrality of hope in early Christianity, one must understand early Christian eschatology. Christian hope is fundamentally eschatological because early Christianity itself is thoroughly eschatological.<sup>41</sup> Eschatology concerns last things; it deals with “with what happens at the end of time and beyond time: death and the end of the world, resurrection and new creation, God’s judgment as deliverance into eternal life or, alternatively, deliverance into eternal condemnation. This arrangement proposes and temporal perspective, that future is the horizon of eschatology.”<sup>42</sup> Much if not all Christian theology grew out of eschatological expectation, namely the hope for a consummated future initiated in the advent of Jesus who

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<sup>39</sup> Silva, “ἐλπίς,” 186.

<sup>40</sup> Bultmann, “ἐλπίς,” 531.

<sup>41</sup> Karl Barth famously remarked that “if Christianity be not altogether thoroughgoing eschatology, there remains in it no relationship whatever with Christ” (*The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns [6th ed., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933]: 314). More recently, John Phelan asserts that “far from being at the periphery of the faith, it is no exaggeration to say that eschatology is the heart of Christianity” (*Essential Eschatology: Our Present and Future Hope* [Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2013]: 11). Here I speak of “eschatology” not to indicate that there was only one “Christian eschatology” or eschatological perspective, but I am referring to an eschatological orientation that characterised groups of first-century Christ followers and can be detected in their documents.

<sup>42</sup> Gerhard Sauter, *What Dare We Hope? Reconsidering Eschatology* (Atlanta: Trinity Press, 1999): 2.



preached repentance and the presence of God's kingdom,<sup>43</sup> which was uniquely manifested in him and advanced through his death and resurrection.<sup>44</sup>

The most influential work on the relationship between hope and Christian eschatology has come from Jürgen Moltmann.<sup>45</sup> For Moltmann, eschatology itself is hope. As such it

embraces both the object hoped for and also the hope inspired by it. From first to last, and not merely in the epilogue, Christianity is eschatology, is hope, forward looking and forward moving, and therefore also revolutionizing and transforming the present. The eschatological is not one element of Christianity, but it is the medium of Christian faith as such, the key in which everything in it is set, the glow that suffuses everything here in the dawn of an expected new day. For Christian faith lives from the raising of the crucified Christ, and strains after the promises of the universal future of Christ . . . . Hence eschatology cannot really be only a part of Christian doctrine. Rather, the eschatological outlook is characteristic of all Christian proclamation, of every Christian existence and of the whole church.<sup>46</sup>

If the very foundation of a Christian understanding of God is based in hope, Moltmann contends that the future is an essential part of God's nature and theology itself must be "reconstructed in the light of its future goal."<sup>47</sup> Any praxis flowing from this basis entails present action to be informed by an idea of and awareness of the (eschatological) future.<sup>48</sup>

A core aspect of Moltmann's understanding of hope is the Jewish-Christian proclamation of a promise-making and promise-keeping God, whose promises are a key aspect of his self-revelation.<sup>49</sup> A "promise" is defined by Moltmann as "a declaration which announces the coming

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<sup>43</sup> In Christopher Rowland's words, the kingdom of God "probably refers to a future age of glory, when the divine will would be revealed in human affairs . . . Jesus is presented as the agent of inauguration of the coming divine kingdom" ("Eschatology," 59). God's kingship of course entails his sovereign lordship and influence over the affairs of creation. For more on the concept of God's kingdom, see Nicholas Perrin, *The Kingdom of God: A Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2019).

<sup>44</sup> Sauter, *Hope*, 36.

<sup>45</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and the Implications of a Christian Eschatology* (New York: Harper and Row, 1967 [1964]). Important evaluations of Moltmann's contributions include M. Douglas Meeks, *Origins of the Theology of Hope* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1974); Timothy Harvie, *Jürgen Moltmann's Ethics of Hope: Eschatological Possibilities for Moral Action* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2009); Poul , *Leaning into the Future: The Kingdom of God in the Theology of Jürgen Moltmann and the Book of Revelation* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co., 2011)

<sup>46</sup> Moltmann, *Hope*, 16.

<sup>47</sup> Moltmann, 16.

<sup>48</sup> Moltmann, 17.

<sup>49</sup> Moltmann, 102. Promises were so key to Judaism that Moltmann even called Judaism "a religion of expectation." Indeed, many of the Hebrew prophetic texts anticipated a "Day of YHWH" which entailed a future intervention that would bring both justice and deliverance (cf. Isa. 2:12; Am. 5:18; Zeph. 1:7). Various New Testament passages indicate that the early Christians adapted this idea (cf. 1 Cor. 1:8; Phil. 1:6; 1 Jn. 4:17).

of a reality that does not yet exist," which leads the recipient(s) to set themselves toward a future fulfilment, focused not on possibilities inherent in the present but on what is possible to the God of the promise.<sup>50</sup> Trusting this promise re-informs the recipients' sense of history, which trends toward fulfilment of the promise. This promise is not yet congruous with present reality, but "stands in contradiction to the reality open to experience now and heretofore," creating "an interval of tension" between reception and fulfilment, which depends on God.<sup>51</sup> On this basis Moltmann can define Christian hope as "nothing else than the expectation of those things which faith has believed to have been truly promised by God."<sup>52</sup>

In the context of the New Testament, the resurrection of Jesus is the decisive event that forms the basis of eschatological hope, because as a supernatural event it intersects natural history and points forward toward the age to come, or in Moltmann's words, "it discloses an eschatological future."<sup>53</sup> Therefore, the substance of Christian hope for the future is multi-directional in that it looks back to and derives from the specific event of the resurrection, an essentially proleptic event which manifests the future reign of God and transforms present possibilities for action.<sup>54</sup> As a result, much of the New Testament is concerned with the interpretation of the event of the resurrection, its bearing on the present experience of believers, and the overwhelming expectation of final fulfilment in the return (or Parousia) of Jesus, which fully actualises the promise of God's final intervention.<sup>55</sup>

Jesus's first followers taught that his basic message of the already-but-not-yet inaugurated kingdom of God (concisely summarised in Mark 1:15) was eschatological. His discipleship efforts were understood as the formation of an "eschatological community, a community of the last and ultimate days."<sup>56</sup> This community assumed that they would experience resurrection from death as

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<sup>50</sup> Moltmann, 103.

<sup>51</sup> Moltmann, 104.

<sup>52</sup> Moltmann, 20. Hope for Moltmann anticipates the revelation of what faith has accepted. On the relation between these concepts he writes that "faith has the priority, but hope the primacy. Without faith's knowledge of Christ, hope becomes a utopia and remains hanging in the air. But without hope, faith falls to pieces."

<sup>53</sup> Moltmann, 181.

<sup>54</sup> In this way "hope acts ... as to bring to the limitations of the present some anticipation of what it ultimately envisions" (Kelly, *Eschatology*, 6).

<sup>55</sup> Moltmann, 228. As Harvie summarizes, "Christian hope is a future that is promised in the past work of God in history which alters the Christian conception of and engagement with the present" (*Moltmann's Ethics*, 14). The idea of Christ's Parousia is an "overwhelming expectation" because it is attested throughout the New Testament (cf. 1 Cor. 15:23; 1 Thess. 2:19; 2 Thess. 2:1; Jas. 3:7; 2 Pt. 1:16). As described in 1 Cor 11:26, even the most primitive eucharist tradition looks forward to the Parousia as a celebration "until he comes."

<sup>56</sup> Phelan, *Eschatology*, 13.

Jesus did,<sup>57</sup> and that this would follow an expected future return of Jesus.<sup>58</sup> The kingdom of God in Christian teaching is an already-but-not-yet reality because Jesus's initial coming is considered an inauguration but not a consummation of it, so that in the person of Jesus the eschatological future arrives in the present, and after Jesus's departure, his community exists in an intermediate, liminal plane.<sup>59</sup> As we will see, Revelation's vision of consummation then illustrates the final end of what was inaugurated in Jesus's initial coming, and it thereby substantiates the hope on which resurrection faith is based.<sup>60</sup>

Christian hope is concerned with both the proximate and ultimate, but eschatology shows why ultimate hope gives life to proximate hope.<sup>61</sup> For example, if in his death Jesus is understood both to deliver a person from the power of sin presently and to promise salvation from the consequences of sin ultimately, then the ultimate hope of this salvation gives life to the proximate hope of freedom from the effects of sin.<sup>62</sup> Or, if God is understood as promising liberation from oppression and victory over evil powers, this ultimate hope gives life to the proximate hope of strength to endure. In this way one maintains a tension between the "already" and the "not yet" of God's intervention in establishing his rule.<sup>63</sup> It is from this perspective that we are prepared to interpret Revelation, since, as Adela Yarbro Collins puts it, "it was the tension between John's vision of the kingdom of God and his environment that moved him to write his apocalypse."<sup>64</sup>

### The Role of Hope in the Book of Revelation

Given the eschatological focus of not only Christian hope but all of Christian theology, we can now understand Revelation and its idea of hope as much nearer to the centre of early Christian

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<sup>57</sup> Mark depicts Jesus assuming a future resurrection in Mk. 12:26-27, and Paul describes it as his ultimate aim in Phil. 3:10-11. Later, Tertullian (155-220 CE) writes pointedly that "the hope of Christians is the resurrection of the dead" (*On the Resurrection of the Flesh*, 1).

<sup>58</sup> For example, Mk. 13:26-27; Mt. 25:31-46.

<sup>59</sup> L.J. van den Brom, "Eschatology and Time: Which Relationship?" in *Christian Hope in Context*, eds. Aadvan von Egmond and Dirk von Keulen (Leiden: Brill, 2001): 151. The eschaton should not be understood as an event "after history," but rather as "beyond history." It eclipses but transcends the historical plane and its attendant experience of time. If time is a measurement of change, the eschaton is then an embodied existence without change.

<sup>60</sup> van den Brom, "Eschatology," 151.

<sup>61</sup> Christiaan Mostert, "Hope as Ultimate and Proximate," in von Egmond and von Keulen, *Christian Hope*, 239.

<sup>62</sup> E.M. Conradie, "Eschatological Dimensions of a 'Theology of Life'," in von Egmond and von Keulen, *Christian Hope*, 170.

<sup>63</sup> Conradie, "Dimensions," 172.

<sup>64</sup> Adela Yarbro Collins, *Crisis and Catharsis: The Power of the Apocalypse* (Louisville: Westminster, 1984): 106.

belief and identity than is often assumed.<sup>65</sup> Even with its arcane imagery and subversive ciphers Revelation has a coherent narrative which employs ideas utilised throughout the rest of the New (and Old) Testament. John depicts God as the Creator enthroned in heaven (1:4), Jesus as the ruler of all earthly authorities (1:5), and Satan as the source of authority for the powers that oppose God and his people (13:4). Situations in the seven churches that comprise John's audience are first addressed and evaluated by Jesus (2:1-3:22). John then has a series of visionary experiences involving seven seals (4:1-8:1), seven trumpets (8:2-11:9), seven signs (12:1-15:2), and seven bowls (15:1-16:21), portending final judgment on the Roman Empire (cast as Babylon) and its representatives, on all God's enemies, and on Satan, all of which engage in war against God and are defeated (17:1-18:24), with God celebrated as just and victorious over evil (19:1-20:15). Finally, the last vision is of a new heaven, a new earth, and a new Jerusalem (21:1-22:5), with a concluding call for the readers to respond (22:6-21).<sup>66</sup>

In what follows I intend to show that hope is the central message of Revelation and the driving force in its narrative. As Poul Guttesson helpfully summarises,

From the outset it sets the present in the context of the urgency of the future and it moves relentlessly toward the eschatological climax of the descent of the New Jerusalem (21:1—22:5). God is depicted as the coming one (1:4, 8; 4:8) and the book expects the arrival of Christ from the beginning (1:7). Obedience and perseverance are encouraged with the promise of future rewards and evil and disobedience come with a warning of punishment. Revelation 11:15–19 is the most succinct statement of the book's eschatological hope and it will form the basis of this exposition of how Revelation sees the future as a "regime change," the time when the powers that now have usurped the position of authority in the world will be defeated, the time when God will occupy the authoritative centre in the earthly realm that is rightfully his.<sup>67</sup>

John intends to show his communities a vision of God as victorious, as guiding history, and as more powerful than any other force that is asserting itself against his readers. This vision is the ground

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<sup>65</sup> Rowland, "Eschatology," 58. Rowland suggests that "to understand the heart of the New Testament is to grapple with the message of hope in the pages of the apocalypse."

<sup>66</sup> As Stephen Smalley puts it, "no scholarly consensus exists about the structural analysis of Revelation" (*The Revelation to John: A Commentary on the Greek Text of the Apocalypse* [Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2012]: 19). Perhaps the one commonality among all commentators is disagreement over how Revelation is to be outlined. Regardless of how it is structured, it is agreed that the book is a coherent narrative and a literary unity. In terms of the sequence, most commentators argue that the visions are not intended to be linear or chronological, but as simultaneous or recapitulatory (cf. Michael Gilbertson, *God and History in the Book of Revelation: New Testament Studies in Dialogue with Pannenberg and Moltmann* [SNTSMS 124; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005]: 111; Brian Blount, *Revelation: A Commentary* [NLT; Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013]: 21).

<sup>67</sup> Guttesson, *Leaning*, 123.

of Christian hope.<sup>68</sup> To lay the groundwork for how John accomplishes this task, which is the presentation of what I would call an *apocalyptic theology of hope*, it will be necessary to elucidate several elements of literary and historical background.

#### *Understanding John's Communicative Medium*

Revelation is an eschatological book oriented toward fulfilment, but its precise expression of hope is mediated through its very particular language and genre. Most interpreters agree that while Revelation is broadly associated with a type of ancient writing common to Second Temple Judaism known as apocalyptic literature, it actually is a literary mosaic which bends and intentionally blends apocalyptic, prophetic, and epistolary genres.<sup>69</sup> Identifying genre is important in our exploration of the role of hope because it provides a framework for readers to create meaning from the text.<sup>70</sup> As a letter, Revelation was written to be read in and circulated through church communities.<sup>71</sup> As a prophecy, Revelation purports to bring its readers “a prophetic word of God, enabling them to discern the divine purpose in their situation and respond to their situation in a way appropriate to this purpose.”<sup>72</sup> As an apocalypse, Revelation corresponds to the oft-cited definition provided by John Collins, as it is revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which what John receives is mediated by an otherworldly being, “disclosing a transcendent reality that is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial insofar as it involves another, supernatural world.”<sup>73</sup> To say that John is writing apocalyptic literature is not so much to designate the form of his work as it is to describe a device that he participates in, one which functions to confirm the authority of the text and its contents as divine disclosure.<sup>74</sup>

The apocalyptic device that Revelation uses is generally in line with other Jewish apocalypses like 2 Baruch and 4 Ezra, in that it is a political form of resistance literature that is the product of a

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<sup>68</sup> Helpfully stated by N.T. Wright, “Revelation and Christian Hope: Political Implications of the Revelation to John,” in *Revelation and the Politics of Apocalyptic Interpretation*, eds. Richard Hays and Stefan Alkier (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2012): 124.

<sup>69</sup> G.K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013): 37; Gordon Fee, *Revelation: A New Covenant Commentary* (NCCS; Cambridge: Lutterworth, 2013): xii; Craig Koester, *Revelation: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AYBC; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015): 104-112; Grant Osborne, *Revelation* (BECNT; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002): 10; Ian Paul, *Revelation: An Introduction and Commentary* (TNTC; Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2018): 30; Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993): 2. Revelation identifies itself as an apocalypse (1:1), as a prophecy (1:3; 22:7, 10, 18-19), and as a letter directed specifically to churches in Asia Minor (2:1-3:22).

<sup>70</sup> Mitchell Reddish, “The Genre of the Book of Revelation,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Book of Revelation*, ed. Craig Koester (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020): 21.

<sup>71</sup> As an ancient letter writer would, John indicates directions for use (1:3) and intended audience (1:11).

<sup>72</sup> Bauckham, *Theology*, 7.

<sup>73</sup> John Collins, “Apocalypse: The Morphology of a Genre,” *Semeia* 14 (1979): 9.

<sup>74</sup> Reddish, “Genre,” 22.

marginalised and oppressed community.<sup>75</sup> The use of visions, symbols and imagery throughout provides readers with a transcendent perspective through their participation in the world of the text, that they might ultimately change their view of themselves and their situation and realign it with a heavenly, eschatological perspective.<sup>76</sup> Apocalyptic is itself a particular kind of eschatology, one that highly emphasises the sovereign lordship of God who guides history to its final goal which he will bring about imminently.<sup>77</sup> A common feature of apocalyptic writings is that they assume that the present situation of the writer and/or the audience is characterised by crisis, suffering, injustice, oppression, victimisation, powerlessness, or hopelessness, such that the only hope would be in God's intervention in saving his people and overcoming evil powers.<sup>78</sup>

This being the case, it becomes clearer why hope emerges as central in an apocalyptic framework. As Jacques Ellul puts it, it is not "that there is hope because one has an apocalyptic concept of history, but rather that there is apocalypse because one lives in hope."<sup>79</sup> As an expression of resistance, apocalyptic ideas can transform poetic or violent expressions into symbols of hope to encourage the victimised.<sup>80</sup> An otherwise chaotic series of crises can be reframed in apocalyptic colours into a metanarrative providing direction, purpose, and ultimately hope.<sup>81</sup> If this is what John accomplishes in Revelation, then a reading of the text must begin with an understanding of his purpose in light of his (and his readers') historical context.

#### *Understanding John's Context and Purpose*

Determining the context of Revelation (and thus the situation of its readers) depends largely on when it was written.<sup>82</sup> The most common view is that John wrote around 95-96 CE, during the reign of Domitian, with a small minority dating the book around the time of the first Jewish-Roman war (66-73 CE).<sup>83</sup> The earlier date would imply that the book has the imminent destruction of

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<sup>75</sup> Robyn Whitaker, "Victim to Victor: The Appeal of Apocalyptic Hope," *Religions* 11 (2020): 1.

<sup>76</sup> Beale, *Revelation*, 38.

<sup>77</sup> M. Eugene Boring, *Revelation* (Interpretation; Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011): 35-37; Bauckham, *Theology*, 8-9.

<sup>78</sup> Boring, *Revelation*, 42.

<sup>79</sup> Ellul, *Hope*, 208.

<sup>80</sup> Whitaker, "Victim," 1.

<sup>81</sup> Joshua Searle, *The Scarlet Woman and the Red Hand: Evangelical Apocalyptic Belief in the Northern Ireland Troubles* (Cambridge: Lutterworth, 2014): 129.

<sup>82</sup> As Beale puts it, questions of "dating could alter the interpretation of the book, since the occasion prompting John to write might be different in each case" (*Revelation*, 4).

<sup>83</sup> For the later date, cf. Heinz Giesen, *Die Offenbarung nach Johannes* (Regensburg: Pustet GmbH & Co., 1997): 25; Ben Witherington, *Revelation* (NCBC; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003): 4-5; Beale, *Revelation*, 4; Osborne, *Revelation*, 8; Fee, *Revelation*, xx; Boring, *Revelation*, 10; Blount, *Revelation*, 8; Paul, *Revelation*, 16. One of the most common arguments for the later date is John's association of Rome with "Babylon," which was frequent in Jewish writings after 70 CE. For the earlier date, cf. Leithart, *Revelation*, 39-40; Smalley, *Revelation*, 3. Still other commentators take a mediating view and assume it was written

Jerusalem in view and Nero's recent persecution of Christians in its background, making it the product of a major crisis.<sup>84</sup> However, the later date involves deciphering the situation of Christians living under the reign of Domitian (and thus a different purpose for John's writing), and this situation is a matter of debate since there is not clear evidence that John's churches were in crisis or that there was significant persecution during this period.<sup>85</sup> What is clear can be divided into three observations. First, by Domitian's time, participation in the imperial cult had become more common than in previous decades, and John assumes that his readers were being compelled to participate in it.<sup>86</sup> Secondly, at least some real (even if sporadic) persecution and oppression was happening, since John mentions some expectation of death (2:10) and that members of his churches had been killed (2:13) and his consistently vicious critique of Rome (which he associates with Satan) makes little sense otherwise.<sup>87</sup> Lastly, John writes out of a concern that believers were becoming complacent and compromising with Roman culture, thereby participating in idolatry and failing to recognise the urgency of God's eschatological intervention and the fundamental incompatibility between the ways of Rome and the claims of God.<sup>88</sup> Regardless of the conclusions one reaches about the book's dating or the readers' situation, John's writing indicates his perception that his churches were currently or imminently expecting to face a major crisis, needed to endure prolonged suffering, and needed to be made aware of God's perspective on their situation so that they could be prepared for the future (both proximate and ultimate).

John's purpose in writing becomes clearer in the light of this historical background. His message is directed to communities living in an ambiguous and perilous situation, a minority group living after the deaths of most of the original leaders, trying to figure out both how to be faithful to God and how to understand God as sovereign, just, and victorious while they witness the increasing power

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developmentally over a period spanning from Nero to Domitian; cf. John Thomas and Frank Macchia, *Revelation* (THNTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016): 19; Francis Moloney, *The Apocalypse of John: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2020): 2.

<sup>84</sup> That Nero instigated the first organized persecution of Christians (and thus the first major crisis in the early church) is not disputed; see the records in Tacitus, *Annals*, 15.44; Suetonius, *Nero*, 16.2.

<sup>85</sup> See the discussions about persecution under Domitian in Boring, *Revelation*, 17.

<sup>86</sup> Beale, *Revelation*, 5. For internal evidence, see Rev. 13:4-8, 15-16; 14:9-11; 15:2; 16:2; 19:20; 20:4. Ian Paul observes that while emperor worship did exist before him, "Domitian did push the language of the imperial cult further than his persecutors," insisting on being called "lord and god" (*Revelation*, 22). Dio Cassius (*Roman History*, 67.14) indicates that Domitian did have people executed for failing to worship the gods of Rome.

<sup>87</sup> Most interpreters assume some presence of violent oppression, even if isolated; cf. Giesen, *Offenbarung*, 25; Beale, *Revelation*, 9-16; Koester, *Revelation*, 72. Even if his Domitian-era churches experienced little persecution, the Neronian persecution would have remained in recent memory. Either way, there is no question that "Revelation advances a thorough-going prophetic critique of Roman power" (Bauckham, *Theology*, 38).

<sup>88</sup> Koester, *Revelation*, 95. John assumes that a truly nonconformist Christianity leads to suffering and persecution, because it would be disloyalty to the idolatrous Roman programme.

and threat of the Roman Empire encroaching upon them. John answers with an interpretation of their present situation in light of the supernatural realm and the eschatological future, one which emphasises the already-but-not-yet victory of God working its way out in his communities' experience even while forces of evil continue to exist and even prosper.<sup>89</sup> What I propose is that his principal intention in this effort is *hope*, and the struggle that drives the text to view the present through the lens of Christ's role in the conclusion of history, which has already been inaugurated and will culminate in the full establishment of his kingdom and the destruction of evil empires. The hope underlying the text is not only for consolation but resistance, so that John's readers can stand in hope against opposition on the basis of their trust in God's promise to put an end to all evil.<sup>90</sup> John intended his text to empower his readers in hope, actualising Jesus's victory in their own lives, trusting that through faithfulness and endurance they would join in God's reign and their (and God's) enemies would face justice.<sup>91</sup> In their gatherings, John's communities were meant to read and re-read this text, entering into its symbolic world, and to shape their belief and behaviour by this hope. In reading the text this way we can concur with Jacques Ellul that "the Apocalypse is the great book of Christian hope."<sup>92</sup>

#### *Johannine Hope in Narrative Analysis*

I will now proceed by examining the place of hope within the main sections of Revelation, separating the text into four narrative divisions which designate key structural and thematic sequences. Revelation has many more subdivisions and is an extremely complex work of literary craftsmanship, but four larger movements within it can be identified. The first is a series of letters to seven churches (chs. 1-3), which follow a pattern of commendation and/or critique related to their present situations, exhortations to repentance and/or endurance, and a final promise. The second is a series of visions of seven seals opened, seven trumpets blown, and seven bowls poured out (chs. 4-16), which represent God's final wrath and judgment on his enemies. The third is an announcement of the fall and defeat of earthly and spiritual evil represented by Babylon/the prostitute (Rome), the beast (the Emperor), and the dragon (Satan), culminating in final judgment (chs. 17-20). The fourth is an ultimate vision of a new heaven and new earth, with a new city of Jerusalem as its centrepiece, where God will be present with his people forever (chs. 21-22). In their own way, all four sections are meant to instil hope in readers and, when viewed together, contribute to the overall message of hope to which the whole text witnesses.

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<sup>89</sup> Francis Moloney, "The Book of Revelation: Hope in Dark Times," *Religions* 10 (2019): 12.

<sup>90</sup> As Gilbertson puts it, John "seeks to persuade and compel readers to a certain Christian praxis, one of resistance and hope" (*God and History*, 140).

<sup>91</sup> Beale, *Revelation*, 171.

<sup>92</sup> Jacques Ellul, *Apocalypse: The Book of Revelation* (New York: Seabury Press, 1977): 56.



### 1. The Hope of God's Promise in the Letters to the Seven Churches

The early chapters of Revelation set a tone for how the rest is to be read, which is from a place of urgency given the perceived proximity of the events (the chronological nearness of the events is specified in 1:1, 3, and reiterated in 22:6, 10), and specifically of the coming of Jesus (1:7, reiterated at the end in 22:7, 12, 20), all of which is read through the lens of the text's own claims to authority (1:2 claims eyewitness testimony, reiterated in 22:8; 1:3 prescribes blessings for reading and application, reiterated at the end in 22:7; the truth and inalterability of the words are claimed in 22:6, 18-19). The will of Jesus for the churches is taken to be authoritative because he is identified as sovereign over past and future, the first and last, who was, and is, and will be, alpha and omega (1:4, 8, 17, reiterated at the end in 22:13). As previously noted, this emphasis on total lordship is common to apocalyptic texts and provides a foundation on which the readers may set their hope, especially in the face of an uncertain future.

Lest the recipients of Revelation assume that the book's message speaks only to the future, the churches addressed in the seven letters are evaluated based on their present spiritual state. Despite the differences in how each is addressed, the element of hope comes in with the refrain at the end of each letter, which has a specific promise. It is in the context of the promise-fulfilment structure that the readers find hope in the present, that they might be sustained with an understanding of the goal of their endurance, which is to "conquer." To those who overcome and conquer, paradisaic life (2:7), avoidance of judgment and destruction (2:11), supernatural gifts and honours (2:17), authority over nations (2:27), ultimate purification and salvation (3:5), belonging to God and his eschatological order (3:14), and sitting with God on his throne (3:21) are all promised. In John's perspective, what is key to his message of hope is the idea of patient endurance (*ὑπομονή*, *hypomonē*), and for this he is indebted to the Hebrew prophets. As Rudolf Bultmann observes, "the fact that *ἐλπίζ* is not found in (Revelation) can cause astonishment only if we fail to see that it is here included in the concept of *ὑπομονή*," noting that "where the Jewish emphasis is strong, the element of waiting for the eschatological future is prominent."<sup>93</sup> John's vision addresses the readers' present, reframes it in light of ultimate fulfilment, and thereby instils hope to endure, wait on God's deliverance, and be victorious with him.<sup>94</sup>

From the context we can assume the churches' situation as fraught with conflict, threats, and ambiguity. Internal challenges included false prophets, false teachers identified as "Nicolaitans," or followers of Balaam, and the threat of a certain prophetic figure John associates with Jezebel.<sup>95</sup>

<sup>93</sup> Bultmann, "ἐλπίζ," 532. *ὑπομονή* is frequent early on, appearing five times in chs. 1-3 (1:9; 2:2, 3, 19; 3:10).

<sup>94</sup> As Rowland writes, "the demands for present obedience are evident in the letters to the churches which introduce the vision of hope and in the concluding admonitions. The promise of a part in the new Jerusalem is linked with present behavior" ("Eschatology," 64).

<sup>95</sup> Leithart, *Revelation*, 142.

Beyond this, some communities seem to suffer from an “atmospheric malaise,” which has led them to turn from their former commitments or to embrace compromise or ambivalence.<sup>96</sup> Externally, there is pressure from Roman authorities as well as conflict with Jewish communities, as seen from the inflammatory language of 2:9 and 3:9. After addressing these concerns, the hope-focused promises at the end of each message, to the “one who conquers,” look ahead “to the final blessings that will be given at the end of the age” and thus direct the reader toward the unfolding events of the rest of the text as a basis for their present action, which is meant to be oriented toward resistance and endurance.<sup>97</sup>

## 2. *The Hope of God's Justice in the Visions of Judgment*

The strong language and vivid intensity of the judgment scenes can distract modern readers from the fact that they are basically an extended commentary on the events attending the Parousia, the central hope of the earliest Christians. John intended to communicate unmistakably that no wrongdoing would escape judgment, and no cry for justice on behalf of the oppressed would be unanswered. It is not simply that earthly and spiritual evil will be judged, but Jesus himself is the judge, and therefore his (likely oppressed) people could have hope for recompense to their enemies along with vindication for themselves. Conradie puts it well, noting that

God's judgment need not be an expression of fear. In fact, it describes the content of Christian hope. The hope of the earth's victims (including its plants and animals) is that present forces of destruction will be exposed and halted by a just verdict. Only then can justice be served. Only then healing can take place. Only then the alienation between humanity and the earth can be put 'right' in the presence of God. By contrast, the earth's powerful may well fear judgment . . . .History can only be redeemed if it passes through God's judgment.<sup>98</sup>

Since John writes to communities without power or privilege, images of judgment on the powerful would likely have been received positively. John's first readers would probably have seen very few (if any) of their oppressors get “what they deserve” (16:6b), so their hope for justice would be a trust maintained despite present experience, which may have shown little likelihood of change.<sup>99</sup> John's readers would never have been able to ensure their own just treatment or that evil would be answered. Only God had the ability to provide assurance of that.

Hope imbues even judgment if the judgment scenes are a means to reframe the readers' situation by contextualising it within God's purpose of “overcoming all opposition to his rule and establishing

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<sup>96</sup> Leithart, *Revelation*, 142.

<sup>97</sup> Koester, *Revelation*, 237.

<sup>98</sup> Conradie, “Dimensions,” 179.

<sup>99</sup> Again, Conradie's assessment is apt, as he writes, “faced with the awareness that injustice and untimely death may have the final word in this life, Christian hope expresses a trust in a God who transcends these dimensions of finitude” (“Dimensions,” 201).

his kingdom in the world.”<sup>100</sup> John’s initial vision of heaven (4:1-11) shows that realm to be one where God’s sovereign rule is already acknowledged, and the narrative progression moves toward the reality of heaven being similarly actualised on earth. This vision introduces God as enthroned above all other power, but personally involved enough that he has heard the prayers of John’s readers (5:8; 8:3). In John’s view, the ultimate opposition to God and his rule, the quintessential symbol of oppression, violence, and abusive of power, is Rome.<sup>101</sup> Rome (with its destruction of Jerusalem likely in recent memory) is empowered by Satan, and God’s victory over Satan will mean the judgment and undoing of the empire. This victory is never portrayed as questionable; John’s conviction is that the victory has already been won and is simply being worked out.<sup>102</sup> If God’s victory is not only expected but already actualised and being worked out, therein lies the foundation for unshakeable hope.

This victory is not only God’s victory, but John’s communities conquer with him (5:5) and will reign with him (5:10), drastically reversing their present experience of powerlessness. The subsequent series of seals, trumpets and bowls are not only images, but highlight particular themes. The seals being broken, and the ensuing calamities amplify the continuing emphasis on God’s control over events, whether related to the rise and fall of kingdoms or the fate of individual lives, as shown through the frequent passive language of events being “permitted” to happen, or certain entities being “given authority” temporarily. As the seals are opened, we see elements of hope in God’s justice for martyrs who have died (6:9-11), the equalising universality of salvation in the presence of all types of people irrespective of differences (7:9-10), and the reminder that in God’s shepherding presence there is shelter, without any pain or need (7:15-17). As the trumpets are blown, the ensuing plagues remind readers of judgment for those who pervert justice and go unpunished (8:6-11:19), with the reminder that the reign of evil is a temporary allowance (13:5), and knowing their end allows believers to endure (14:12). Lastly, the bowls being poured out finalises this judgment, as Rome and all those associated with empire are judged (16:1-21). Since the readers’ situation is likely one where God’s justice seems delayed and evil powers unrestrained, judgment could be the foundation for hopeful endurance.

### 3. *The Hope of God’s Final Victory over Satan and Evil*

The function of chapters 19-20 is the announcement of God’s victory, with the entire population of the heavenly realm proclaiming with finality the defeat of evil, and permanence of judgment. Those associated with “the beast” (Roman authority) are depicted coming against Jesus in a final battle and are destroyed with little effort and subsequently condemned (19:19-21), while just prior, the faithful are invited to “the marriage supper of the lamb,” where their union with Jesus

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<sup>100</sup> Bauckham, *Theology*, 31.

<sup>101</sup> Bauckham, 31-35.

<sup>102</sup> Bauckham, 73.

will be celebrated. The last to be judged and condemned is Satan himself, the source and manifestation of evil (20:10).<sup>103</sup> Given that throughout the text Satan is cast as the source of evil, his ultimate condemnation is key to the book's message of hope. If only the earthly powers are judged, this is insufficient because that which empowered them has not been eliminated. Ultimately, the final vision of hope which comes in the last chapters, the new reality ushered in after God's victory, must be one without Satan. If God only judged evil but did not ensure its complete incapacitation, John's vision of hope would be incomplete.

Along with Satan's complete defeat is also the destruction of death itself (20:14), so that the vision that follows is one where death (considered an outcome of sin and a curse in Gen. 2:17), is neither present nor possible. The death of death is an idea we also find in other texts, such as 1 Cor. 15:26 which considers death as the "last enemy to be destroyed" by God. The hope of new life in this context is the hope of unending life, without loss, and without the effects of time. This new life comes after God's final judgment, a basic Jewish-Christian conviction<sup>104</sup> and one that is affected principally by one's present conduct (20:12), providing yet another reminder to John's readers of the importance of their response to the book's message.

#### 4. *The Hope of the Final Renewal and Consummation of Everything*

The last two chapters are the crescendo of hope to which the rest of the preceding chapters point. This ultimate vision is not one of God's people leaving the world for a disembodied ethereal existence, but it is of heaven coming to earth and both being renewed, and God's presence manifested fully within this renewed cosmos as the destiny of the book's believing readers.<sup>105</sup> In the vision of a new heaven and new earth John is borrowing from Isaiah 65:17-18 (and of Isaiah 60-66 broadly), linking his expectation of the coming age with those of the Jewish prophets who expected God's deliverance from foreign powers.<sup>106</sup> Most interpreters see this image not as a destruction and recreation of the cosmos but a renewal and transformation of that which already exists.<sup>107</sup> In referring to all things being made "new" (21:5) there is clearly a transformation in mind,

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<sup>103</sup> As Barbara Rossing writes, "The defeat of oppression and evil culminates when Satan himself is tied up and imprisoned in the underworld, completing the expulsion from heaven begun in chapter 12. Satan symbolizes all the forces of evil in the world" ("Revelation," in *Fortress Commentary on the Bible: The New Testament*, eds. Margaret Aymer, et al. [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014]: 756).

<sup>104</sup> The idea of final judgment is pervasive in early Christianity; cf. Mt. 25:31-46; Ac. 24:25; 2 Cor. 5:10; 1 Jn. 4:17.

<sup>105</sup> Phelan, *Eschatology*, 27; Rowland, "Eschatology," 70.

<sup>106</sup> The association of the Parousia with the collapse of the cosmic order and of a final renewal was relatively normative in early eschatology and can be found elsewhere in the New Testament, as in Romans 8:19-21 or Matthew 19:28 and 24:29. It was an expectation found in other Jewish apocalypses, as in 1 Enoch 45:4 and 91:16.

<sup>107</sup> Margaret Adam, *Our Only Hope: More Than We Can Ask or Imagine* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2013): 27; Beale, *Revelation*, 1040.

but this is more about newness of quality rather than a discarding of the old or the presence of something never before existing.<sup>108</sup> This is an embodied existence, having both continuity and discontinuity with the former, but characterised by completion and fulfilment.<sup>109</sup>

For John there is no utopian promise to be found in Roman glory, but his audience is to put their hope in God's renewal and consummation of all things. The finale is therefore not God's victory but what comes after God's victory, which makes the readers' present experience pale in comparison. The created order is not abandoned but rather fully returned to its proper sovereign, whose rule is now falsely supplanted by others and whose presence is not yet fully manifested.<sup>110</sup> The city of God on the new earth is the new Jerusalem, which would have been a powerful image of hope to readers likely recently affected by the destruction of the earthly Jerusalem by Rome, an event which in itself was a symbol of shattered hope. Readers imagining a new Jerusalem while they could see the ruins of the "old" Jerusalem would be an exercise in hope, a desire and expectation for God's intervention in a seemingly impossible manner. The surety of this hope could only rest on God's faithfulness to his promises, and on his lordship over all of history as "the alpha and the omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end" (22:13).

## Conclusion

Our analysis requires that we form a synthesis of John's apocalyptic theology of hope. We observe a continuity with the apocalyptic eschatology that was central to early Christian proclamation, but we see extensive development in John's effort to articulate a message of hope to a particular group of communities in a context of crisis. I consider hope in Revelation to carry five aspects; it is *temporal* (a tension exists between present and future, proximate and ultimate), it is *spatial* (there is a consistent nearness-orientation, the advent of Jesus is close), it is *social* (God's salvation involves communal and ethnic reconciliation, as in 7:9), it is *political* (a dichotomy is presented between the false city of Babylon and the true city of the new Jerusalem, and there is a subversive interplay between true and false authority), and it is *psychological* (the message of hope is consistently presented as true, assured, and authoritative). These coalesce to make Revelation a breviary of hope, that is, a liturgical text to be read in churches for the purpose of instilling hope in a time of insecurity and crisis. Reading Revelation in this way serves to highlight what many

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<sup>108</sup> David Wilkinson, *Christian Eschatology and the Physical Universe* (London: T&T Clark, 2010): 73.

<sup>109</sup> J.H. van Wijk, "A New Heaven and a New Earth: Dogmatic and Ethical Considerations of an Aspect of Eschatology," in van Egmond and van Keulen, *Hope*, 274. An example of discontinuity with the former is the mention of no sea (21:1), which is a case of John borrowing from ancient mythical language, since the sea was associated with evil, chaos and death in both the Hebrew Scriptures and across Ancient Near Eastern thought.

<sup>110</sup> Stephens, "Creation," 269.

modern interpreters overlook, namely that hope is not one element of the message of Revelation but is its primary message. Creating communities characterised by hope is John's goal and purpose in writing this text, which he expected them to read as a liturgy. This participative element of the text also tends to be overlooked in modern scholarship, which tends to focus on the situation that produced the text and not as often on its effect on readers.

The hope of Revelation is the disclosure of God's victorious rule in Jesus (in which his people participate), the actualisation of justice in the defeat and destruction of God's enemies (who are the enemies of his people), and the final consummation of God's redemptive purposes in the renewal of everything. This hope is not for redemption *from* the world, but *of* the world.<sup>111</sup> It is the perfection of fellowship with God and others, and a vision of a counter-reality "hidden in the present and of which hope can discern the signs."<sup>112</sup> John's hope is a subversive practice of resistance in a context where his readers would have seen God's ways rejected, and evil and injustice flourishing. If John's readers understood themselves to be on the precipice of the end of history, with God already in the process of renewing all things in Jesus, they would have the substance of hope where it may have been lost before.

To know the end from the beginning provides the faithful with an interpretive grid on which to map the tumultuous events of their historical epoch. To John's readers, Jesus has been raised from death and presently inhabits a glorified place of authority, but in lieu of this authority being yet unapplied, they live in the precarious liminal state of the already-but-not-yet, in a counterfeit city under a counterfeit king, awaiting another. In this way hope sustains the churches' present practices, since their hope is grounded in Christ and therefore what they now experience is not the final expectation for the people of God, for the earth, and for the future.<sup>113</sup> What lies ahead is a grand reversal, a future where the oppressed are victorious, the powerful are brought low, life comes from death, and a slain lamb rules the nations.

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<sup>111</sup> John McDowell and Scott Kirkland, *Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018): 59-60.

<sup>112</sup> Ellul, *Apocalypse*, 60.

<sup>113</sup> James Poling, *Rethinking Faith: A Constructive Practical Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2011): 111.

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