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# Empire, trinity, and irony: rhetoric and the Book of Revelation

## ABSTRACT

*The article investigates the question as to whether the use of an intentional reading approach, such as the rhetorical one, could generate innovative avenues for constructing a doctrine of God. The Book of Revelation is explored as case study. Three specific questions - about the rhetorical situation, the strategy, and the aim of Revelation - are discussed from the perspective of empire, triune God, and irony. A number of insights emerged as academic contribution of the study as a result of the methodological choice. A trinitarian naming of God was entangled with empire already at an early stage of Christianity. It was simultaneously implicated by and subversive of empire. In Revelation's presentation of God one encounters redefined notions of divine agency and power, and an association with irony. The creative portrayal of the Divine enabled afflicted communities to navigate a way of life resistant of empire.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Speaking about God under specific historical conditions is the central task of theology. How to accomplish that responsibly continues to be a perennial challenge. An appeal to the normative source, Scripture, is an obvious reflex, but is arguably the perplexing hermeneutical difficulty. This article proposes one approach for doing that, namely the employment of a specific reading strategy – the rhetorical, with an application to the Book of Revelation. The *question* to be pursued is whether such an interpretative method could generate fruitful avenues for



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constructing a doctrine of God. The *background* to this investigation is both personal, as the author has been interested in trinitarian theology in his own academic career, and collegial, that is, to give recognition to Francois Tolmie and his brilliant scholarly journey upon his retirement. Francois succeeded in establishing a focus in his research and making an academic contribution to the study of specific New Testament books such as the Gospel of John, the Letter to the Galatians and to Philemon, and to two interpretative approaches – the narratological and the rhetorical. One seminal article (Tolmie 1998) particularly made an impression on me – his study of God as character in the Gospel of John. In this instance, he managed to integrate three sentiments: text, method, and the central focus of theology. In the specific delineation of the problem of this article, I want to signal my appreciation to him as friend and as theologian by following, formally, a similar direction.

In this article, it will be argued that the use of an intentional reading method or approach to biblical texts may generate fruitful avenues for constructing a Christian understanding of God. By reading the Book of Revelation rhetorically for gathering perspectives on a theology of God, a number of relative *innovative insights* may crystallise. The trinitarian entanglement with empire did not surface only in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, but is to be found fairly early in the history of the Christian faith; the trinitarian impulse of the Early Church was intentionally imperially subversive, and the performative effect of the early trinitarian grammar aimed at forming a specific self – the ironic self. The application of such a rhetorical navigational direction contributes to the wider theological quest for appropriate forms for speaking God in our time, as Tracy (1994:313) incisively argues.

## 2. APPROACHES TO THE QUESTION OF GOD

It may be insightful to attend to a number of examples by scholars who described the presentation of God in the Book of Revelation. This may highlight the attention to the question of the Trinity and to the social context of empire. The interest in the brief overview will be in the *approaches* by two New Testament interpreters – Schnelle and Karrer – and the *motifs* they have selected to do justice to the distinctive profiling of the Apocalypse's understanding of God.<sup>1</sup>

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1 Several studies have explored the theology of God of the Book of Revelation. One can mention Stowasser (2015), Rotz and Du Rand (1999), Aune (2002), and Nicklas (2012). None of these studies connect the god presentation explicitly to rhetoric, empire, or trinitarian conceptualisation.

Schnelle's (2009:752-760) comprehensive theology of the New Testament has three separate subsections discussing theology, Christology, and pneumatology. Revelation has an express theocentric structure, and God as *Alpha* and *Omega* (1:8, 21:6) is the Lord of history who determines everything. According to Schnelle (2009:754), John's<sup>2</sup> concept of God "focuses on power, lordship, and judgement". The title *Pantokratōr*, the Almighty (e.g. 1:8), is a central designation for God. Although Schnelle does not distil his own treatment, it seems that at least three accents are present, namely powerful rule, a dynamic movement, and a salvific thrust. In his discussion of the *Christology* of the book, Schnelle (2009:755) addresses the relationship between Jesus Christ and God up front and points to a certain tension: Christ as the Lamb is clearly subordinate to God, but at the same time there is "total participation in God's rulership". God and Christ are fused into one acting subject (Schnelle 2009:755; see e.g. 11:15, 22:3-4). Schnelle's (2009:756) conclusion in this regard is important:

the deity of Jesus Christ and the primacy of the Father are both equally valid statements of the divine reality, without the distinctions in persons being dissolved.

The unique role of Christ in the Book of Revelation is expressed by the title "Lamb". The Lamb functions as ruler, judge, and warrior. Lowliness and exaltation are both features of the Lamb. The section on *pneumatology* is brief and according to Schnelle (2009:759) the notion of "seven spirits of God" refers to the fulness of God's work and belongs to the throne of God.

The perspectives identified by Schnelle are crucial for any construction of God in the Book of Revelation. He has identified some of the major and prominent features that such a profile should have. At the same time, one cannot but point to some weaknesses in his approach. He shies away from acknowledging that some form of incipient trinitarianism is already present in Revelation, and he neglects to place his interpretation in a specific and concrete social and political context of empire. Ultimately, it is an a-historical discussion. One also encounters a discussion devoid of any critical sense of the kind of God profiled in Revelation. There is, for example, no mention of the problematic of violence. Finally, the treatment of pneumatology is too brief, and the contributing dimension it could bring to the Divine portrayal in the Book of Revelation undervalued.

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2 In this article, the name John refers throughout to the *author* of the Book of Revelation. This neutral designation does not indicate any specific historical person or relationship to the Johannine literature. It is merely a shorthand manner of speaking.

Karrer's (2020) article is important, not only because it was published in the authoritative *The Oxford handbook of the Book of Revelation*, but also because it had access to a wide array of previous reflections on God in this text. For Karrer (2020:218, 219), John is a "great theologian" and his presentation of God "strikes the nerve of his time". He is particularly aware that the understanding of God relies on earlier Jewish-Christian traditions, but that in the new construal it also engages the Graeco-Roman context of its time (Karrer 2020:206). Karrer's approach is basically threefold; he explores the distinctiveness of Revelation's God from the perspectives of the divine *name*, the *designations*, and the *narrative description*. The *name* of the God of Israel – YHWH – functions in a crucial manner in the text. As the Greek-speaking Jews used *Kyrios* instead of the Semitic form of the name, the occurrence of *Kyrios ho theos* (*Kyrios*, the God – as the more correct translation) in 1:8, 4:8, 18:8, 19:6, 21:22, and 22:5 is particularly significant, especially where it is combined with the notion of power or might (*Pantokratōr*). The author of Revelation is presenting a counter to Zeus, to outcompete him. At the same time, it is part of the anti-imperial opposition. Not the emperor, but the Hebraic-Christian God is worthy of worship (see especially 4:11) (Karrer 2020:208). To the receivers of the text the message, was clear: Our God, *Kyrios* alone is almighty and worthy of worship. When moving to the various *designations* for *Kyrios*, Karrer (2020:215) points out that these are construed by John "in response to the challenges of his time". Titles such as "*Alpha and Omega*" and "*Pantokratōr*" stress God's universality, uniqueness, and power. Karrer explicitly mentions that the use of these titles is in competition with the Roman world. Noteworthy is his (2020:215) awareness that there is some form of problematic, in this instance. The *Kyrios*, the *Pantokratōr*, is both warrior and saviour. In his third section, Karrer attends to the *narrative* dimension and discusses primarily the image of the throne in Chapter 4. The aim of the vision is to replace other forms of devotion. The narrative itself embodies a warning about judgement, and God, the judge, dominates parts of Revelation. Karrer (2020:218) raises his concern again about the problematic profiling of the divine:

One must ask if the author of Revelation succeeds in counterbalancing this line of God's wrath and judgment with the line of his grace.

Karrer's article is a solid achievement and any discussion of Revelation's God cannot ignore it. His work evidences a close reading of the text, an awareness of the contextual nature of the construal and of the problematic areas. What one misses is an antenna for a fuller treatment of the nature of the divine in John's work, a realisation that the complex reality of God requires attention to Christology and pneumatology and that these cannot be bracketed out. Although aware of the contextual quality of the portrayal, a deeper signal to colonial entanglement is also absent.

### 3. RHETORIC AS INTENTIONAL READING STRATEGY

When approaching a text with a rhetorical optic, one views the text not as a fixed object, a repository of ideas, but in a dynamic light as a “vehicle of persuasion” (Carey 2023:91, 108). The association of rhetoric with “persuasion” has a long tradition, going back to the Hellenistic era. The so-called “rhetorical turn” since the 1960s has elicited a new appreciation for an old cultural practice, that has also found enthusiastic supporters in New Testament interpretation.<sup>3</sup> Conventionally, there is reference to three species of rhetoric (juridical, deliberative, and epideictic or ceremonial) and to the three species of persuasion (ēthos, logos, and pathos). In the case of Revelation, the hearers/receivers had to decide (deliberate) which course of action to take, as John was promoting an exclusive option to them – the worship of only God (see DeSilva 2020:70, 80). Various studies have attended in detail to the three elements of persuasion in the text of Revelation (see DeSilva 2020:72-82). Carey (2014:230), who examines early Christian apocalyptic rhetoric, mentions the “practically inexhaustible set of persuasive resources” manifested by the authors, and the Book of Revelation is an exceptional embodiment thereof. For example, Revelation is clearly unique in its thick intertextual referencing to the Old Testament to establish authority; in its employment of *ekphrasis*<sup>4</sup> (use of visual depiction of God to counter visual rhetoric of Roman); and in the use of justice as description for God’s character as *topos*.

In this article, some form of focus and delimitation is necessary. It is impossible to discuss the immense scope of rhetorical avenues used by John. There will only be broad reference to the rhetorical *situation*, *strategy*, and *aim*, with a corresponding emphasis on empire, the triune nature of the divine, and irony. This approach is obviously based on the early and foundational work by Kennedy (1984), who suggested as rhetorician a workable “method” for New Testament scholars.<sup>5</sup> The approach is also well conveyed by Carey’s (2014:220) recent words:

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3 For the development of various trajectories of this in the study of the Bible, see Carey (2023:91-103).

4 For a good summary of the nature of *ekphrasis* and the instances of scholarly reflection on Revelation, see Stewart (2017:227-232).

5 It may be insightful to refer to Tolmie’s “method”. Tolmie (2005:27) decides against the use of a specific (ancient) rhetorical model; he prefers to choose “to reconstruct Paul’s rhetorical strategy from the text itself”. However, it is interesting that he (2005:28) finds it necessary to reconstruct a “rhetorical situation” for the Letter to the Galatians.

Rhetorical interpretation investigates the *social context* in which texts emerged, the conventions of persuasion appropriated to particular cultural moments and genres of discourse, the persuasive *strategies* at play in the texts themselves, and the measurable *effects* of those text upon actual audiences. (My italics – RV.)

The notion of “effect” should be stressed. In his insightful discussion of the relationship between hermeneutics and rhetoric, Wuellner (1989:23, 29, 32, 35) kept on returning to this. Rhetoric discourses are viewed as forms of power to produce effects, to generate action. The power of a discourse lies ultimately in the “efficacy of truth” (Wuellner 1989:35). This is crucial for a text such as Revelation and its theocentricity.

*Two additional perspectives* should be mentioned, in this instance, that are relevant for the central concern of the article, the construction of an understanding of God. The first perspective is advocated by Schüssler Fiorenza, herself an outstanding scholar of the Apocalypse. She produced one of the first rhetorical commentaries on the book (1991).<sup>6</sup> After an analytic part, Schüssler Fiorenza (1991:117-139) distilled her interpretation under four rhetorical rubrics: world of vision (empire), exigence (tribulation), motivation (resistance), and restraints (competing voice). The fruitful and challenging position that she advanced has to do with the *epistemological character* of rhetorical criticism. Schüssler Fiorenza (1999:86) is suspicious that the method has hitherto remained trapped in a positivist position; its own rhetoricity has not been subjected to investigation. She pleads for a “full-turn to a political rhetoric of inquiry” that practises a hermeneutic of suspicion. An antenna for gender dynamics and the impact of androcentric language has hitherto been absent. Her approach, a critical feminist rhetoric of liberation, is “committed to the emancipatory democratic struggles around the globe” (Schüssler Fiorenza 1999:96). The implications for proposing rhetorical interpretation, when appealing to Scripture for one’s understanding of God, is fairly obvious. The image of God that transpires is never ethically neutral.

Secondly, it may be pertinent to state the obvious. To design a communication with multifaceted rhetorical quality is an intentional activity. This applies equally to the distinctive presentation of the Divine put forward by the text. Speaking about God is an *act of creative imagination and construction*. This very quality of God talk is often neglected in theology. The author of the Book of Revelation was clearly an *intellectual* who

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6 One should also mention the solid recent study by the South African Decock (2021), who innovatively introduces to the rhetorical study of Revelation the notions of *mystagogia*, *lectio divina*, and *ekphrasis*, from the study of Spirituality.

deliberately designed a portrait of the Divine to fit the communication aims he had in mind. In an intriguing article, Nicklas (2020) investigates this very aspect of the author as being an intellectual. There is an exceptional level of self-reflexivity present in the book, and a “highly creative theologian [John] gives a new synthesis of traditions, images and ideas about Israel’s God” (Nicklas 2020:12, 16-17, 24). Carey (2014:224) also underlines this. One finds “highly learned activity in Revelation” and the author most likely had scribal credentials. He was clearly familiar with the conventions of classical apocalypses, the codes of Roman imperial propaganda, and ways to interpret the Jewish Scriptures. Rhetoric teaches theology precisely this: speaking about the Divine is more than merely repeating conventional descriptions; it also requires sophisticated new image formations in every situation. This should be viewed as part of a *larger sentiment* that theology as such is a rhetorical practice. One may refer to the work by Cunningham (1991). He (1991:418) argues for a “rhetorical turn” in theology, as “the task of theology is to persuade others to thought and action”. The benefits of such an approach are its attention to concrete, historical reality, its ethical interest, and its focus on praxis (Cunningham 1991:414, 419).

#### 4. EMPIRE AS RHETORICAL SITUATION

The following words uttered by Yarbro Collins (1977:241) convey a crucial insight into the interpretation of the Book of Revelation, and at the same time open a door to the bewildering world of the state of scholarship on this text:

Perhaps the hardest won and most dearly held result of historical-critical scholarship on the Revelation to John is the theory that the work must be interpreted in terms of the historical context in which it was composed.

The work was obviously entangled with the world of the *Roman Empire*, but questions about date and place of origin, the occurrence of persecution, and obligatory participation in the imperial cult are matters of contestation and of *shifting academic opinion*. Carter (2020:133-141) has mapped these debates and registered the changes in the scholarly opinion about the interaction of Early Christianity and the Roman world. The time of Domitian’s rule (80s-90s CE) still enjoys the support of the vast majority of interpreters, although some continue to argue for the context of Nero’s reign in the 60s. Two widely held perspectives – on supposed persecution and on mandatory participation in the imperial cult – have come under scrutiny and the lack of hard evidence for these practices in the time of Domitian have turned the tables on these interpretative assumptions.

Carter's (2020:141) conclusion and alternative take on the historical situation are important. Instead of a simplistic oppositional interaction, one should rather think of "diverse and multivalent interactions" between the Jesus followers and the empire, as well as of internal disputes among the churches. The view of scholars has moved from a one-dimensional understanding of hostility to an appreciation of the complex imperial structures and the multiple local challenges (Carter 2020:147).

John's call for distance – "to come out of her, my people" (18:4) – requires obviously further attention. In her discussion of the social situation addressed in the Book of Revelation, Yarbrow Collins (1984:84-110, especially 84, 106) advances a significant perspective: the experience of "crisis" is often a matter of feeling, of perception. For John, there existed a conflict between the Christian faith and the social situation. His book is not a simple response to circumstances. "At root is a particular religious view of reality" (Yarbrow Collins 1984:106). In his major study, Thompson concurs with Yarbrow Collins' interpretation. John "constructs a reality [and] encourages his audience to see themselves in conflict with society" (Thompson 1990:174-175). For Thompson (1990:176), this is characteristic of a particular genre, the apocalypse, and John held such a understanding of reality. This shaped "his psychological experiences, social perceptions, religious insights, and literary expressions" (Thompson 1990:18). A linear, referential relationship between text and context has given way to a more complex one of the text as perceptive, constructive, and evocative.

The central and *key issue* of the book starts to crystallise, in this instance, namely the question of the daily negotiation of empire in the life of the Jesus followers, and the dilemma about societal participation and accommodation. There were emphatic differences of opinion among the Christians. One reads in the seven letters about "the practices of the Nicolaitans", which John hated (Rev. 2:6); about the "synagogue of Satan" (Rev. 2:9); about "the teaching of Balaam" (Rev. 2:14), and about a woman Jezebel (Rev. 2:20). In this instance, one encounters the opponents of John: the Nicolaitans, the Balaamites, and Jezebel who are linked by specific activities such as eating food sacrificed to idols and fornication. There were clearly two opposing views among the Christians, namely a world-affirming view and a world-opposing one (Carter 2009:45). The one group advocates participation and John recommends separation.

The messages to the churches in Revelation 2-3 highlight not only the spectrum of challenges, but also the *local character* thereof in ordinary life. These might have been hospitality, assimilation, or even complacency.<sup>7</sup>

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7 For a discussion, see Koester (2009:7-9).



The visions in the remainder of the book situate these contingent matters in a *wider framework* of politics, religion, and economics. John radically questions and critiques the myth of an enduring Roman dominion, the identification of political and religious orders, and imperial economic practices (see Koester 2009:9-12).

The next section discusses how *recent interpreters* have started to become *critical* of John's seemingly sanitised dualistic view. Entanglement with empire could run very deep, even in the rhetoric and in the construction of God.

## 5. TRINITY AS RHETORICAL STRATEGY

Strategies in early Christian rhetoric were sophisticated and multifaceted (see Carey 2014). John's work wrestles with two fundamental questions, according to Boring (1986:257),<sup>8</sup> namely the question of God and the question of history. As the critical issue was one of allegiance, the book is inescapably *theological* and *theocentric* (Bauckham 1995:41; see also Koester 2009:12). It is about God, and the specific *presentation of God* could also be considered *the primary material strategy*.

In the earlier section on the examples of approaches to God by Schnelle and Karrer, *two important perspectives* already transpired that should be investigated further in this section: the engagement with empire, and the divine status of Jesus, that is, some form of binitarianism.

### 5.1 God and empire – Inversion or re-inscription?

There is arguably no scholar who has explored the relationship between *God and empire* in Revelation as creatively as Moore. He is not only thoroughly acquainted with the scholarship on Revelation, but also with theoretical fields such as postcolonial studies. The imperial splendour of God is pictured as exceeding that of the Roman emperor. The critical question is whether the difference between Roman sovereignty and divine sovereignty is quantitative or qualitative (Moore 1995:40). Put differently: To what extent does Revelation merely reinscribe empire, rather than resist it? Is there an inversion and renunciation, or an apotheosis of imperial ideology (Moore 2007:437; 1995:35)? What makes Moore's discussion important and fruitful is his employment of postcolonial theory, especially the notions of "catachresis" (misuse, or parody as found in Spivak's work) and "hybridity" (proposed by Bhabha). Chapters 4 and 5 are an outstanding

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8 Interestingly, he finds the summary of John's theology in 19:6 – "Alleluiah! The Lord our God the Almighty reigns".

expression of parodying the empire.<sup>9</sup> With hybridity, the problematic nature of engagement with empire transpires acutely. Revelation becomes replete with language of war, conquest, and violence. The messianic empire is established by means of mass slaughter on a surreal scale (see e.g. 9:15, 18; 14:20; 19:15, 17-21). Moore (2007:451) refers to the “fatal flaw in Revelation’s theology” as it epitomises a new imperialist orientation. The throne becomes a metonym for God; the attributes and actions ascribed to God are imperialist. Moore (1995:43) asks the unsettling question: Who is the God of Revelation? The One revealed through Jesus Christ or through the Roman emperor?

Postcolonial theory is undeniably a productive handmaid to rhetorical interpretation. For contemporary interpreters and theologians, it does not suffice to merely demonstrate an interaction with the social environment and some form of exceeding attribution in the case of God reflection. There should be an antenna for the potential *problematic* result of this strategy. Postcolonial discourse has generated insights and resources that could assist in dealing with the dilemmas in God construction in a more sophisticated manner. Notions such as catechresis, mimicry, and hybridity could help understand, in a more satisfactory way, the posture towards the Roman Empire. There was at the same time internalisation and opposition.<sup>10</sup> These postcolonial categories convey the message “*almost the same, but not quite*” (Maier 2020:509, his italics). There is an appropriation of imperial language, but it is deployed in a paradoxical manner. There is an “ambivalence”, an “instability” present in the mixing or hybridisation that should be recognised. Maier (2020:510) mentions “highly ironic acts of counter-appropriation that both inscribe and deconstruct”. This is of importance for understanding and coming to terms with Revelation’s God. Here is a two-edged sword present; it uses imperial terminology, but critique it at the same time. If this double movement is not grasped and maintained, what Moore (2009:452) fears can happen. The Christian theological imagination prioritises only the imperial metaphors with their concomitant association of brutal and absolute power.

## 5.2 Towards a trinitarian construction of the Divine

The question, possibility, and potential of a *trinitarian optic* are insinuated at this exact point. How does one undertake a theo-construction under imperial conditions? The basic contention of this article is that empire

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9 The entire throne-room scene is an exercise of this strategy, for example, with expressions such as “worthy art thou”, and references to the 24 elders.

10 For a good discussion, see Maier (2020:508, 510).

should be countered by a trinitarian conception of the divine and by an ironic disposition. Both are not immediately obvious in the case of Revelation and should be argued.

The impact of the Roman Empire permeated all aspects of life, and a *similar totalising strategy* was required to counter it. John did not merely write an epistle and denounced specific idolatrous practices. The book of Revelation is a colossal counteroffensive. Barr (1984:41, 49) captures this effectively with his interpretation of the Apocalypse as a “symbolic transformation of the world”. The Christians in Asia Minor had to understand their world differently. The central players had to be replaced, values had to be reversed, and symbols had to be redefined. A fantastic journey to another reality was necessary to view their world in a new light. More was at stake than a mere imitation, or even a surpassing of power and sovereignty. Nothing would have sufficed but a presentation of the *Christian Deity in full saturation*. In this instance, the genius of John emerges. He used what the Hebraic-Christian tradition availed him at that historic moment; he engaged the external religious world of his time, and imagined the Divine in its fullness of being and action. He intimated a trinitarian God and this God greeted the hearers of the Apocalypse:

Grace and peace to you from him who is, and who was, and is to come, and from the seven spirits before his throne, and from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead and the ruler of the kings of the earth (1:4b-5a).

Before turning to a *discussion of the Trinity* in the Book of Revelation, it may be necessary to make a number of *preliminary remarks* in general. There are examples available of scholars who make an emphatic claim for the trinitarian nature of the Divine in the book. *Two specific questions* should be considered when attending to these positions. Is there sufficient ground in the argumentation to make such an assertion considering the ambiguous and complex manner in which gods were viewed at that time? Hierarchical thinking was the grammar of the culture, and it applied also to the metaphysical world (see Young 2013:374-378). Secondly, how should this “trinitarian” conceptualisation be placed in juxtaposition to the imperial social context? Put differently: Was John’s trinitarian portrayal necessitated by the imperial exigencies, and was there sufficient reconstruction to subvert empire? One could even formulate it more simply: Why did John use a threefold description of the Divine, and are there adequate qualifiers to distinguish it from the terror of imperial power?

The work of Bauckham on the Apocalypse of John is significant and deserves careful attention. He (1993:23) considers the distinctive doctrine of God of this book to be its greatest contribution to New

Testament theology. For Bauckham (1995:43), “Revelation’s portrayal of God is deliberately and reflectively trinitarian”. John carefully thought and considered his understanding of God. Bauckham assigns special weight to the unique salutation of the book in 1:4b-5a, quoted earlier. He is, however, weary and makes a number of qualifications. The word “God” is consistently employed in a restrictive form and refers only to the Father of Jesus Christ; hence, his preference to talk about the “divine” in Revelation. Bauckham (1993:24) also points out that John did not have the resources to conceptualise the relationship of Jesus to God in ontological terms. When moving to picture the interaction among the three, Bauckham (1995:48) mentions that the One on the throne is “absent from the world”, and God’s presence is mediated by the slaughtered Lamb and the seven spirits. Revelation has a striking high Christology. Although never called “God”, a number of cyphers point to his divinity: the application of self-designations of God to Jesus, e.g. *Alpha* and *Omega* (22:3), and First and Last (1:17); and the worshipping of Jesus with God (e.g. 5:13). Bauckham (1995:52) calls attention to an intriguing grammatical feature in the text. When God and Jesus are mentioned together, the author never uses a plural verb. Christology has become part of monotheism.

Reynolds’ (2006) article is valuable because it contains detailed referencing to God, Christ, and the Spirit in Revelation. Having asserted that Revelation conveys the “fullest delineation of the Trinity”, apart from the Gospel of John, in the New Testament, Reynolds gives a summary of the data, states the ontological equality of the Three, and attends to the distinctive roles of each member of the Godhead. There are several instances of Jesus sharing divine ascriptions with God, namely honour (5:13), wrath (6:16), salvation (7:10), kingdom (11:15), and the same throne (22:1, 3). There are also a number of instances where the relationship between Jesus and the Spirit is particularly intimate. See for example 3:1 (Jesus holding the seven spirits), 5:6 (Jesus having seven eyes that are the seven spirits), and 22:17 (both the Bride and the Spirit invite to the water of life). Reynolds emphasises the unique non-overlapping role of the three divine members. The Father is the figurehead, the sovereign ruler, the creator, the One with authority. Jesus as the Lamb has a wide array of tasks in the economy. He is the Mediator between God and creation. Reynolds is clear that the precise status and function of the Spirit is more difficult to capture. The connotation of “seven” with the Spirit refers to perfection and completeness. An interesting interpretation by Reynolds (2006:70 n 33) is to view the Spirit as life-giving, when he points to the equation of the Spirit with the river of the water of life (22:1).

In the work by Smith, who even published a monograph on the Trinity in Revelation recently (2022), one encounters similar perspectives as found in the work by Bauckham and Reynolds. A summary of his approach is given in a new book arguing fairly exhaustively for the Trinity in the Bible (Smith 2023). Trinitarian theology is considered “native” to the text (Smith 2023:348), and the salutation in 1:4-5a is obviously of importance for arguing the case for the Trinity. The text “pressures us to see a trinitarian dynamic” (Smith 2023:348). The throne vision is crucial in the book, as it becomes the locus of divine activity in Revelation and discloses a great deal about the book’s doctrine of God (Smith 2023:364). One may attend to the challenging position of the Spirit. Smith (2023:364) argues that, although the Spirit is not “on” the throne, one should think of the Spirit as “on the ‘throne side’ of the heavenly topography, proceeding from Father and Son”. The “seven spirits” of Revelation, who are the seven eyes of the Lord in the Old Testament (Zech. 4:10), is the Holy Spirit. The Spirit should be considered the “gatekeeper for the divine prerogatives in John’s visionary journey” (Smith 2023:361). The Spirit has the authority to illuminate divine knowledge and wisdom.

The work by Bauckham, Reynolds, and Smith are relevant for understanding the question about the “Trinity in Revelation”. One can concur with the relative weight they assign to this book’s contribution to New Testament theology’s thinking about God, and with the arguments they construe to demonstrate identity and distinction “in” the Divine. What leaves one with some form of *dissatisfaction* are the *un-historical approach* and the *absence of a critical stance* towards the potential problematic features of the profile of the Divine projected by John. The reality of empire and its determinative impact on John’s rhetorical construction should be accounted for. This is where the contribution of an intentional reading strategy such as rhetoric of postcoloniality transpires. It prompts the discussion to a deeper reflection. More is required than mere demonstration of unity and differentiation. The interplay with a rhetorical context, and how that influenced decision about description, should come into play. A second hiatus in the discussion is that of a comparative religious nature. What was exactly referred to when one talks about gods, or the divine? How plastic was this category in that time? Too easily in the discussion by Bauckham, Reynolds, and Smith, “sharing” of divine prerogatives is equated with ontological identity. That is problematic in a hierarchised cosmology.<sup>11</sup>

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11 On the ontology of ancient divinity, and the phenomenon of intermediary figures, see the recent work by Bird (2022).

### 5.3 Addressing dilemmas

The *two basic problems* identified in sections 5.1 and 5.2 – the validity of a trinitarian claim to Revelation’s Divine and the dilemma of re-inscription of Roman ideology – should be further investigated, especially with regard to Christology and pneumatology.

First, some comments on the *claim of a trinitarian presentation* of the Divine in Revelation. The two extremes should be avoided, either a denial of a trinitarian presence or a full-blown trinitarian claim. The intricate network of differentiated relationships between God, Jesus Christ, and the Spirit (in various presentations) cannot merely be ignored. John was undeniably projecting a uniquely “thick description” of the Divine, a saturated picturing. It was both a retrieval of the many resources in the tradition available to him, and part of his rhetorical strategy. It does not suffice to keep the discussion of God, Jesus Christ, and the spirits/Spirit compartmentalised as one often finds in academic work. The fullness of the Divine in Revelation should be acknowledged. One should talk at least about an “incipient trinitarianism” present in the text. That would acknowledge what is in the text, and what was most likely happening in Early Christianity at that time. The position of Christology, as evident in the interpretations of Reynolds and Smith, poses the least of the challenges. The problem is *pneumatology*.

There are fewer references to “spirit” in Revelation than to God and Jesus Christ. This has also been an area of neglect in academic scholarship, although one has started to encounter voices for a redress. Kuykendall’s (2021) recent article is a fine attempt to address this need.<sup>12</sup> His fourfold approach is noteworthy. Kuykendall (2021:528-536) attends to the *numerical significance* of references; then to 20 *textual references* to Spirit in general (for example – Spirit and churches, in the Spirit, the seven Spirits, the Spirit says, the Spirit of prophecy, Spiritually speaking, and Spirit of life). In the third section, he (2021:537-541) identifies five *metaphors* for the Spirit: Spirit as seven blazing lamps, as water of life, as anointing ointment, as cloud, and as smoke. In the final section, and this is particularly relevant for this article, Kuykendall (2021:541-544) distils the *theological role* of the Spirit in Revelation, and mentions the intimate connection to God and Jesus, the life-giving activity, the connection with discipleship, witnessing, prophesying, and worship. Kuykendall’s (2021:527, 541, 544) conclusions are important. In this instance, one finds “a deliberately crafted theological message”, the Spirit “permeates the Apocalypse”, “His emphasis on the

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12 When his article is compared to that of Thomas (2020) in *The Oxford Handbook to the Book of Revelation*, one immediately perceives the exceptional depth thereof.

Trinity exceeds any other NT document". Apart from the conventional arguments for the trinitarian status of the Spirit – seven spirits as the Spirit, the same authority accorded to the Spirit, and the position *vis-à-vis* the throne, Kuykendall (2021:537, 542) accentuates the “water of life” metaphor (7:17; 21:6; 22:1, 17), that is, the association with eternal bliss.

Kuykendall’s study and his approach make a definite contribution to the scholarship of this book. His conclusion that Revelation’s pneumatology has a stronger trinitarian emphasis than is normally recognised should be carefully considered. The *hiatus* in his work is obvious, once one adopts a rhetorical reading strategy – its neglect to relate the treatment to the social exigence of empire. If John, in his picturing of God and Christ, is deliberately anti-imperial, what about his rich pneumatology? This is clearly a question in need of further academic exploration.

The attention can now shift to the *second* of the dilemmas, the *ethical* one. One finds in Johns’s (2020) article a fine treatment of the Christology of Revelation. His arguments and those of Barr (2006) give some direction, as they have a sensitive antenna for the ethical problems posed by the book’s violent symbolism. The divine violence in Revelation should be recognised and acknowledged. Texts such as 6:16; 14:1, 10, 20; 19:21, and 20:14 that speak about wrath, army, blood (“rising as high as the horses’ bridles for a distance of 1,600 stadia”), and birds gorging on human flesh in direct connection with Jesus Christ are unsettling. Barr (2006:214) identifies three outstanding characterisations for Jesus in the book as part of the narrative development: Jesus as the majestic, human-like figure at the beginning, the slaughtered-standing Lamb in the middle section, and the heavenly warrior towards the end. The entanglement with the empire is undeniable, but Johns (2020:225) emphasises that it is intentionally *anti-imperial*. For example, references to the overcoming of death – Jesus as first-born from the death (1:5), who is alive for ever and holding the keys of death and hades (1:18) – have primarily a political force (Johns 2020:227). The import of his own death, “conquering”, is part of Johns’ anti-imperial Christology, that is inherently resistance literature (Johns 2020:229-231). For both Barr and Johns, 5:6 – the shocking appearance of the Lamb – is the “fulcrum” of Revelation. The Lamb *has* replaced the Lion (Johns 2020:233); the Lamb is ever the Lamb, and one must not “through [one’s] reading, see him as the dragon” (Barr 2006:220). The lamb should function as a prism through which the text is read.

The ethic of the text as such, the moral nature of the reality created by an author, has become increasingly relevant for contemporary interpreters, also in the case of Revelation.<sup>13</sup> *Three additional proposals* from recent scholarship can be briefly mentioned to convey the struggle to come to terms with the violence in John's text. Low (2014) interacts explicitly with Moore's reading of re-inscription of imperial ideology and finds it too simplistic. He (2014:258, 263) focuses on Revelation as *dramatic work*. As a drama, Revelation performs an alternative to the Roman Empire; hence, the need for the visual elements. Using a literary-critical reading of the text, Martin (2018:248, 247) makes God's silence in the text "the interpretive fulcrum". When God speaks, after having remained silent up to 21:5, "God speaks in a still (?), small (?), at least normal, voice" (Martin 2018:256). In contrast to the previous sections of the book with its cacophony of voices, there are no decibel adjectives when God speaks. Both the visual and the aural were part of the imperial spectacle, where violence was authorised by loud noise (Martin 2018:255). God's words in the present tense – "I am making everything new" – force the reader to go back and reread the whole:

We must not read for the future vengeance and wrath, but for how violence can be inverted to speak to God's present renewal of all creation (Martin 2018:258).

In response to postcolonial interpretations, Kotrosits (2014:480, 486) submits an affective reading of the Lamb on the throne, exploring the emotional impacts of the visualisations. Visual imagery evokes emotions, but it could be volatile and even contradictory. The slaughtered Lamb on the throne gives expression to feelings about imperial life; it could express dreams of victory, but also painful vulnerability. Such a reading "retains its complexity and ambiguity"; it does not solve problems, but it charts a course for the text's full impact (Kotrosits 2014:501). The common denominator in the proposals by Low, Martin, and Kotrosits is the employment of innovative methodological options – drama, literary and aural, and affect theory. All of them generate a sense of a surplus of meaning in the text that should be explored again and again.

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13 The study of violence in Revelation by the South African scholar De Villiers (2015) is worth mentioning. De Villiers (2015:201) highlights the "two trends" in Revelation – the non-violent and the violent parts – and discusses gender violence in the text. The violence in the text "is not a malignant growth that can be neatly excised from the otherwise healthy body". It should be acknowledged as an integral part of the book's discourse; only then could one deal with the complex nature of violence.



## 5.4 Trinity as strategy?

There is enough textual and scholarly evidence that one could speak about the “Trinity in Revelation”. A responsible approach would be to signal emphatically that it is “incipient”; the conceptualisation is still quite removed from the creedal formulations of Nicaea and Constantinople. It is, however, imperative, when speaking about God in this text, to consider the full and comprehensive presentation of the divine, including Christ and the Spirit. If Christology and pneumatology are bracketed off, one does not grasp and recognise the effective force of John’s rhetoric. A totalising social reality such as the Roman Empire requires, in a rejection, a similar saturated alternative reality. John’s uniquely rich, textured, and multifaceted descriptions of God, Jesus Christ, and the Spirit should be appreciated in their rhetorical effectiveness. It is more than a mere impressive picture that is presented; it is also, and especially, about the dense articulation of *divine agency*. The profundity of transcendence is balanced by an overwhelming historical immanence of Christ and Spirit directing cosmic history. Only a trinitarian profile in its anti-imperial character would suffice for this. It should be acknowledged that the imperial engagement in the creative re-imagining could become ethically unsettling. But to dismiss Revelation’s notion of omnipotence, as the renowned systematic theologian Keller (2005:35-52) is doing, is missing the strategy and vision of John. It is about power, as Schüssler Fiorenza (1991:117) insists, but about a *re-envisioned notion of power*. Numerous *cyphers* signal this – the rainbow and river association with the throne; the unsettling silence from God on the throne; the sword coming from the mouth of the divine warrior, and victory won without battles described. As multiple newer studies on the affective, visual, and aural quality of the book highlight, it is always in service of rhetoric, an exercise in persuasion. Once the text is reified, ignoring its rhetorical intent, one cannot escape from the violence quagmire. The vision of the Divine in Revelation is confronting and subverting empire, but it should always be critically approached to grasp its rhetorical sophistication. The inherent ambiguity to God images is the particular contribution rhetoric makes to God talk.

## 6. IRONY AS RHETORICAL AIM

The exigence addressed by Revelation, as described in the section on the rhetorical situation, is clear – resistance to empire, no accommodation and integration. John offered the churches a compelling vision of an alternative world where God could be exclusively worshipped. A first reading seemingly created the impression that John himself could not escape the seductive

influence of empire and that his persuasive strategy remains trapped in Roman ideology. He placed contrasts before them, but the material of his world looked so alarmingly familiar. And he did not delineate an alternative programme for the churches (see Carter 2009:44; 2020:143).

Maybe something more subtle is present and at play in John's vision. In a seminal article, Barr (2009) suggests a way to counter the charge that John was merely reinscribing Roman hegemony. He (2009:27-30) proposes an *ironic reading* of Revelation. A conventional definition of irony is that one conveys the opposite of what one says. There is some contradiction present that calls for further reflection. This is the point of irony for Barr (2009:27) – things are not quite what they seem; more thinking is necessary. He gives as examples Jesus as Lion/Lamb (5:6), the heavenly warrior with no battle (19:11-16), and the *Pantokratōr* who never acts and rarely speaks (11:17). However, he views the entire plot of the book as being ironically constructed. For Barr, John does not imitate empire; one finds a radical inversion of power. An ironic reading appreciates John as destabilising the “whole paradigm of power” (Barr 2009:30). The book tells a narrative “where God never acts and where God's agent prevails through faithful resistance and suffering” (Barr 2009:30). The contradictions should be ironically interpreted. Maybe John was not so naïve as many contemporary readers think (Barr 2009:21)!

To appreciate the potential of the category “irony” to deepen the understanding and interpretation of Revelation, one should be attentive to the wider multidisciplinary discourse on it. It is not easy or even possible to submit a simple and stable definition of this dimension of human language, life, and history. This complex phenomenon has a long and intricate history from Socrates in the Hellenistic age to postmodern thinkers such as Rorty.<sup>14</sup> Writing illuminatingly about the expansion of irony in the 20<sup>th</sup> century to refer to all that is complex, the scholar of irony Hutcheon (1992:219, 220, 231) suggests that one should understand it as a communicative process between different meanings, “where both the said and the unsaid must play off against each other”, with a critical edge. As liminal space “in between” the spoken and the unspoken, it is constructive where new configurations of ideas could take place. Because it is between meanings, it will remain “complexifying”.

In this limited purview, *two specific elements* in more recent time should be identified that may be pertinent to the focus of this article – irony as a “reflexive stance” and irony as a “way of life”. In a fascinating article, Klug (2021) employs “irony” as a way to overcome an understanding of

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14 For a good introduction, see Colebrook (2004).

truth that is coded in binary terms (true or false). As “reflexive stance”, irony permanently questions authority and interpretations for greater insight into truth, without denying truth as such; it aims to “re-fluidify interpretations of phenomena and to keep them open to a wider horizon” (Klug 2021:408, 420). Irony, as epistemological approach, resists simplified interpretation. It is critical of knowledge, but it remains oriented to truth and further insight. As theologian, Klug (2021:402, 420) suggests that the church could be considered “an ironic society of truth-telling”. The second scholar who has made a contribution to an understanding of irony in our time is the renowned philosopher Bernstein. The title of his work, *Ironic life* (2016), conveys his interest. He is particularly appreciative of Socrates and of his well-known question “How should one live?”. Socrates created a new form of life; he “incarnated” irony in his life. This is what Bernstein (2016:9, 13, 125) tries to recover. This widening of irony, beyond the narrow definition of irony as trope in which something contrary to what is said is to be understood, is at play, in this instance. It has to do with “the art of living” (Bernstein 2016:2, 106). This has also become a pervasive interest of much of philosophy since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century.

In his discussion of the ethics of Revelation, Schnelle (2009:764) captures the motifs of victory and witness with an “ethic of resistance and endurance”. With reference to the performativity of Revelation, Gorman (2011:177-186) discusses the spirituality of the book and describes practices such as worship, discernment, cruciform warfare, embodied witness, and hope. Obviously, matters such as ethics and spirituality are valid, as well as the motifs these scholars mention. The question is whether something more fundamental could be identified as rhetorical aim, which in a sense integrates these insights. The suggestion, in this instance, is that an ambitious text such as this one, wants to create a specific kind of person – *an ironic self*; a person that has a distinctive reflexive stance and a unique way of life. John wanted his readers and churches to view their reality in a different light and live in a different way. A broadened understanding of irony may have the capacity to capture those intentions. Only an ironic self could inhabit a world with God on the throne that has a rainbow encircling it, with a *Pantokratōr* who is without agency, with a warrior who is a slain lamb, and with a sword coming out of his mouth; in short, a world in which this reality has become the empire of this unsettling Deity – “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah, and he will reign for ever and ever” (11:15). As an “iconic community”, the Christians had to constantly reinterpret the world created by John, in order to grasp that their God destabilises the Roman myths, and constantly navigate a course to life to embody their identity.

Mention should be made of *two questions* that inescapably emerge, namely the relationship to *politics* and the relationship to the *Trinity*. The first one is found in the scholarly literature, but as a fairly contested issue. Irony could easily lead to “fence-sitting” political paralysis. Hutcheon puts the question squarely on the agenda with her outstanding study *Irony’s edge: The theory and politics of irony* (1994). Irony is always politically charged:

irony can and does function tactically in the service of a wide range of political positions, legitimating or undercutting a wide variety of interests (Hutcheon 1994:10).

The second question is conspicuously absent from trinitarian discourse. Once the textual world of Revelation has been understood as fundamentally ironic, both these questions receive some form of answer. Irony is intrinsically political, resisting empire, injustice, and power abuse. The ironic self is an ethical self with a sensitivity for the deeper layers of violence in a social world, because it looks with a sharper focus. Trinitarian thinking may acquire from this text stimulating directions about irony. In a trinitarian ontology, irony is always present as an antenna both to the kind of power associated with a god-construal, and to the very nature of divine agency. Trinitarian power is ironic, and trinitarian action as well. In this way, the Book of Revelation opens fertile avenues for thinking about central theological questions.

## 7. CONCLUSION

The insights acquired in response to the initial formulation of the focus and of the research problem can now be briefly summarised. To employ an intentional reading approach in an effort to construe a biblical understanding of God has proved to be fruitful. A rhetorical take on a text such as the Book of Revelation emphasises the imperial context, the deliberate strategic portrayal of the Divine, and the express performative effect of irony. The way in which John has accomplished these sets an example to contemporary God thinkers in their attempt to re-imagine God for our time. The investigation disclosed a particularly dense, multifaceted and complex presentation of the Divine. Traditional elements have been reworked, and symbols of the imperial environment have been ironically hybridised. Triadic elements have been related so intimately that one is arguably justified in speaking about an “incipient trinitarian thrust” in the text. This fact, as well as the numerous distinctive namings for God, Christ and the Spirit render Revelation important as canonical witness to Early Christianity’s theological labour. The Divine is at once majestically

transcendent, and intimately present in the historical process. In a context of totalising imperial seduction, only a corresponding totalising conceptualisation and portrayal of the Divine could motivate the churches for resistance. In a genealogy of a trinitarian articulation of God's identity, the engagement with empire is quite early. Only a textured trinitarian vision on divine agency would have sufficed in an imperial context. There are simultaneously formal similarities, but radical material disruption as well. It was all about power, but power redefined through suggestive cyphers – the Lion as Slaughtered Lamb, a throne with a rainbow and a fountain, a silent *Pantokratōr*, a Spirit associated with water of life. The entanglement with empire will remain part of the trinitarian confession's grammar, but also with irony as human possibility to navigate complexity and contradiction. The trinitarian God of Revelation requires irony to discern the divine's ambiguous work in history. The trinitarian God of the Apocalypse prompts an ironic life to negotiate social affliction with perseverance, faithfulness, and hope. This is the beauty and the glory of the One who is making everything new.

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### Trefwoorde

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