THE TRANSCENDENT GOD-VIEW: DEPICTING STRUCTURE IN THE THEOLOGICAL MESSAGE OF THE APOCALYPSE OF JOHN

J A DU RAND

1 THE QUESTION AT STAKE AS POINT OF DEPARTURE

The theological message of the Apocalypse of John is to be understood theocentrically. In its profound and distinctive narration of God the emphasis falls predominantly on God's transcendency, to the extent that almost all anthropomorphisms are avoided. This brings to the foreground the question concerning the actuality and applicability of the message of the Apocalypse. Does the narrator succeed in bridging the gap between the transcendent God as ruler and judge and the challenging situation of his followers in this world theologically? In other words, is the 'from above' God-language of transcendency able to transfer a meaningful message to the contemporary situation as it is perceived by the apocalyptic prophet John and his readers? Is the perception of God by any means effectively communicated by means of such far-off God-language?

The argumentation which follows, departs from the transcendency or God perspective and is an effort to come to theological grips with the 'full prophetic daring of John's vision' (Bauckham 1993:145). A bird's eye view of a possible literary structure for the Apocalypse provides a framework within which the theological message can be understood. Before exploring the functional transcendent view on God in the theology of the Apocalypse, some selective intertextual tendencies or perspectives on God from the Jewish apocalyptic and Graeco-
Roman worlds function as relief. The final aim is to find a structural framework for the theological message of the Apocalypse from the transcendent God perspective.

2 LITERARY STRUCTURE AND THEOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Literary structure as framework
When we primarily focus on the literary codes as well as the content of the text of the Apocalypse of John, it can be viewed as an artistically meant witnessing narrative. With regard to the mode of text, the Apocalypse is interpreted as a dramatic narrative (cf Du Rand 1991:213). The narrative originated in a specific rhetorical situation which evoked the author's visionary response (Schüssler Fiorenza 1991:132; Barr 1986:247). The reading of the text of the Apocalypse is meaningful when the reader is mobilised by means of language strategies and if he/she co-operates. This means that we, as real readers, should try to understand the original communicative situation of the Apocalypse in order to come as close as possible to a shared frame of reference to understand the intention of its God-language. The narrative scheme of the Apocalypse reflects a specific narrative flow or course of text to convey the story or content. The arrangement of the material is presented according to a certain plan or plot in which the theological perspective on God functions dominantly. The narrator of the Apocalypse of John is using the dominant God perspective from a particular point of view to communicate his message to the reader. This perspective undoubtedly centres round the functional position of God in the story and is reflected in the portrayal of the whole narrative of the Apocalypse.

Therefore John's visionary response is not only an esoteric sectarian answer to a crisis (Collins 1984:84) or a distorted dissertation on Christian being, but a serious attempt to involve the readers with a view to coming to grips with their own existence (cf Du Rand 1993:299). By way of association and admiration the reader finds catharsis in understanding God's purpose for this world. By integrating viewpoints from reader response criticism, the theory of music and theological interpretation, the plot of the Apocalypse can be divided roughly into three acts serving as literary framework for its theological message: (cf Barr 1984:48; Du Rand 1993:309)

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<th>Theme of plot:</th>
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2.2 A theological framework for the apocalypse?
It would be wrong to reduce the meaning of the Apocalypse of John only to archetypal or ontological concepts (cf Farrer 1949:47; Minear 1968:72). That would mean to de-historicise the Book, which comes down to neglecting the theological issues and the socio-theological function of the Apocalypse. The strength of the Apocalypse of John, on communicative level, does not only lie in its language, symbolism, historical perspectives or composition, but in its theologically evocative power (cf Hanson 1985:5). To put it in Schüssler Fiorenza's words: 'A purely formalistic literary understanding of Revelation overlooks the fact that John did not write art for art's sake, but that he had a definite purpose in mind when writing the book' (1989:418). The theological self-understanding of the Apocalypse is therefore aimed at the strengthening of Christians who had to cope with persecution and suffering. In such circumstances the issue of power, embodied in one's understanding of the message of the Apocalypse, is of decisive importance (cf Giblin 1974:489; Schüssler Fiorenza 1977:349).

Just to mention some of the known and important theological viewpoints or angles from which the message of the Apocalypse can be described:

2.2.1 The perspectival reading of the Apocalypse by Schüssler Fiorenza (1991:117-139) is a fresh approach and stimulating. She calls it a contextualised, praxis-oriented model of Biblical interpretation. The recontextualising interpretation as a theo-ethical rhetoric seeks to enable the readers to reflect on their own practices of reading. In such a way connections are made between socio-political locations and religious-ideological assumptions. That is why Schüssler Fiorenza departs from the seven prophetic messages in chapters 1-3 to emphasise the contextual pressure and endurance (Rv 1:9), as a depiction of the socio-theological location which the seven churches in Asia Minor had in common (1991:119). Such a rhetorical model of theo-ethical praxis is a liberationist reading which aims at moving the readers to practical engagement in this struggle for God's qualitatively new world of salvation (Schüssler Fiorenza 1991:122). The goal is liberation from Babylon's/Rome's oppression, the powers of which are the agents of the destructive power of Satan. Therefore the theo-ethical criterion for faithful Christian practice lies firstly in resistance and, according to the Apocalypse, later in moral behaviour. The Christians who reject the oppression of the world power Babylon, will receive justice and liberation.

To sum up in Schüssler Fiorenza's own words: 'The central function of Revelation is the elaboration of God and the Lamb's power not only over the lives of individuals but over the whole world and its political powers' (1989:419).

2.2.2 Another angle of theological reading could be from the messianic war perspective. This approach to the message of the Apocalypse concentrates on the
Jewish hope of a Messiah who would be the descendant of David and king and military leader of his people (cf Giblin 1991:222-231; A Collins 1975:207-231; Bauckham 1993a:67-70; 1993b:210-237). The descendant of David, as anointed king, is to liberate Israel from the oppressors to establish God's rule. Jesus is identified with the expected Messiah who will establish God's rule over the whole world. God's conquest of evil is not by military force but narrated in military language. In Rv 22:16 Jesus calls Himself ‘...the root and the descendant of David...’, depicting his Messiahsip (cf Isaiah 11:1), as well as ‘...the bright morning star’, to be understood as a symbol of the Messiah who would conquer the enemies of Israel (cf Numbers 24:17). This viewpoint of the conquering Messiah (cf Rv 3:21; 5:5; 17:14) and his conquering people, sharing in his victory (cf Rv 2:7, 11, 17, 28; 3:5, 12, 21; 12:11; 15:2; 21:7), together with the language of battle (cf Rv 11:7; 12:7-8, 17, 13:7; 16:14; 17:14; 19:11), colours one's whole theological interpretation of the establishment of God's kingdom on earth (cf Giblin 1991:224).

2.2.3 It is also possible to read the theological message of the Apocalypse from the perspective of salvation and judgement. God's purpose for this world and its people unfolds through the three series of judgements embodied in the seals, trumpets and bowls, through which evil is eliminated. That is what Ladd (1963:75-80) calls the theology of satanic evil breaking out in historical manifestation. On the other hand, according to Ladd, salvation manifests in the coming of God's kingdom of a thousand years when ‘the resurrected saints reign with Christ’ (1963:81). The final state of salvation is a new heaven and a new earth (Rv 21:1).

2.2.4 Linking up with the previous point of view is the reading of the theology of the Apocalypse from the angle of the eschatological exodus motif (cf Casey 1981:135-219; Bauckham 1993:70-72). The exodus tradition was understood as a paradigm of God's saving activity for his people, incorporating judgement of the oppressors, as well as the presentation of the destiny of the people whom He redeemed, indicating the final salvation as eschatological exodus. The tripartite characterisation of the exodus motif would involve redemption, judgement and inheritance. The central image in this reading is the passover lamb motif (cf Rv 5:6, 9-10). The Lamb ransomed a people and made them ‘a kingdom and priests serving our God’ (Rv 5:10). This utterance calls into memory the words of the Sinai covenant (Ex 19:5-6) where God confirmed to his people that they were his ‘treasured possession’. John probably linked Rv 5:6,9, dealing with the Lamb, to the new exodus motif of Deutero-Isaiah and reckoned the suffering Servant of Isaiah 53:7 as the passover Lamb of the new exodus (cf Bauckham 1993:71). The central role of the Lamb's death in our concept of redemption echoes the central-

2.2.5 The interpretation of history as dominant point of view in reading the theological message of the Apocalypse emphasises that the troubled churches of Asia Minor are to understood ‘their present history as embraced in the act of God who will also act in the future to establish his just rule over all creation’ (Boring 1986:257). Boring proceeds to declare that the message of the Apocalypse concerns about two questions: the question of God and the question of history. Rissi formulates this angle of theological reading as follows: ‘The task accepted by John in his vocation to be a prophet (Rv 1:9 ff) consists essentially in the interpretation of history, more precise by the interpretation of present and future history’ (1968:5; cf 1966:1-21; Holtz 1991:336). The two divine interventions, Jesus Christ’s first appearance and his return, are decisive for all human history. The return of Christ is the last act of victory and should be interpreted theocentrically. It is the fulfilment of history.

2.2.6 Each of the five above-mentioned viewpoints conveys an element of truth in the process of understanding the theological message of the Apocalypse. The creation motif may even be added. Therefore any evaluation of the different readings as well as a decision on one of them as the so-called only one would be out of order. On the other hand, derived from the literary plot of the Apocalypse as dramatic narrative in three acts, I would prefer to read the theological message of the Apocalypse from the perspective of the theocentric unfolding of God’s kingship on earth as it is in heaven, emphasising the dominance of the transcendency (and immanency) of God as theological framework. In other words, the theological content would be the unfolding of his kingship and the theological framework the transcendency and immanence of God.

The Apocalypse is communicating a disclosure of a transcendent perspective on this world. It is contextual prophetic communication, addressing Christians at the end of the first century in Asia Minor, viewed ‘from above’ as visionary disclosure from a heavenly perspective. And within the framework of God’s transcendency and immanency the contextualised, historical, holy war, liberational, Messianic and exodus emphases in the theological message of the Apocalypse come into play.

Before describing the application to and implication of the framework of God’s transcendency and immanency for the Apocalypse in more detail, we are to
obtain a somewhat broader perspective on the issue from intertextual Jewish and apocalyptic views, as well as from Graeco-Roman side.

3 SOME RELEVANT INTERTEXTUAL RELIEF PERSPECTIVES ON GOD

Pictures of God often reflect elements of definite historical issues. The links between divine and historical and political images are not only casual relationships but demonstrate a dialectical character (cf Nicholls 1989:3). This is true of the Apocalypse of John. Perceptions about God, expressed in a particular God-language, have often been the product of particular socio-political circumstances. In turn, visionary symbolisation about God and eschatological salvation can influence the course of events at contemporary level. Jewish, apocalyptic and Graeco-Roman conception of God, the personal embodiment of power, have most probably been influenced and formed by socio-historical and political experience which, in turn, to complete the circle, contextualised the perception of God, expressed in their God-language.

3.1 A few Jewish perspectives on God

The God of Judaism is not only one god among many, nor one of many powers, but the one and only God beyond any comparison (Kohler 1968:52). All power and the essence of everything come to rest in Him. As the living God He is everlasting king. Jewish monotheism can never be reconciled with the polytheism of the heathen nations. Even the triune God of the Christian church was seen as semi-pagan. It was regarded as an imperative duty to draw a demarcation between the chaste and imageless worships of Judaism and the Graeco-Syrian and Roman polytheistic sensuality. To the Jewish view, Christianity created a plurality of gods in place of the Graeco-Roman pantheon (cf Kohler 1968:54). The heathen world, in worshipping many divinities, lost sight of the true God.

The Jewish God-idea had gone through stages of development before it reached the concept of a transcendental and spiritual God. First of all, every form of idolatry and polytheism was prohibited, and secondly, a strict imageless worship emphasised that Israel's God was invisible and incorporeal (cf Kohler 1968:74). The complete recognition of God as a purely spiritual being came as a next stage after ripening of thought. And in the process all anthropomorphic and anthropopathic notions were removed to elevate Him to the highest realm of spirituality. Therefore God is spoken of as dwelling in heaven, judging the inhabitants of the earth (Ps 33:13-14). But although Judaism insisted on the Deity's transcending all finite and sensory limitations, the relationship between man and God was still taken as a close relationship.

With the Jewish emphasis on the transcendency of God, angels were to carry out God's will in the universe. And the more a seer became aware of the tran-
scendence of God, the more he recognised the gap between the infinite God and the world of the senses. God's words were to be mediated. That reminds us of the roles of Christ and the angel in the Apocalypse of John. With such a strong emphasis on the transcendency of God, it is not strange that the hope of Judaism for the future was comprised in the concept of the kingdom of God.

One becomes more and more convinced that the overall structure of the message of the Apocalypse could have been influenced by the well known *kaddish* at the close of the Torah lesson when the assembly recited: 'Praised be thy Name. May thy kingdom soon come.' This is also echoed in the well known 'Lords Prayer' (Mt 6:10). The recognition of the sovereign rule of God on earth, his kingdom, as it is in heaven, is the goal and hope of mankind, according to the Jewish mind. All nations are to turn away from idolatry and falsehood and wickedness and become united in their recognition of the sovereignty of the only one God. The theocracy of Israel has to conquer the polytheism of the nation's. In the same way, the reader of the Apocalypse has to develop a kingdom or God-consciousness, in comparison with the Jewish views, in order to oppose the monarchical or emperor-like power structures of everyday life. During later Judaism God's kingdom was no longer exclusively understood as a physical political concept established by an external power, but as a spiritual reality in the sense of a symbolic universe in which they shared (cf Kohler 1968:340).

In writings during the two centuries before and the first after Christ God's transcendency is communicated by references to his omnipresence, omnipotence or omniscience, as well as anthropomorphic representations and anthropopathisms. Attention should also be given to angels who acted as intermediaries and the question whether God was really governing this world.

The most frequent title used in the Jewish literature to describe God's transcendency, (particularly in the apocryphal and apocalyptic writings of the last two centuries BC and the first AD), is 'the most High' (Ecclesiasticus 23:23; 24:23; Tobit 1:4, 4:11; Ethiopic Enoch 1-36 9:3; Ethiopic Enoch 91-104 98:11; 99:3, 100:4; Judith 13:18; 4 Esdras 8:20 [cf Wicks 1915:112]).

Concerning everlastingness as description of the transcendent God, Tobit (13:7, 11, 15) called Him 'everlasting king' and in Ethiopic Enoch 37-70 He is called 'the Lord of kings' (63:2). In Baruch 1:13-3:8, God is called 'everlasting'. God's omniscience is taught in Ecclesiasticus (45:5), Enoch 1-36, The Testaments, Psalms of Solomon, 2 Maccabees, as well as in the Assumption of Moses, Baruch 3:9-4:4, 4 Esdras and the Apocalypse of Baruch. The same applies to his omnipotence. He is called 'the almighty' in Jubilees, Enoch 1-36, 3 Esdras, 2 Maccabees and Baruch 1:15-3:8, to name but a few (cf Rowland 1979, 1982).

In Enoch 1-36 God is pictured as sitting on a throne in heaven. The Testaments and Enoch 83-90 also describe his appearance on the throne (cf Rowland 1979). And in Jubilees and The Testaments it is said that God will come down to
earth. This idea is only found in the Similitudes and Interpolations of Enoch in the last century BC. It is also clear that anthropomorphic or anthropopathic references to God were either lacking in the last century BC, as well as in the first century AD, or used very sparingly (cf Apocalypse of Baruch 78:3; 81:4, 4 Esdras 5:56; 6:6).

The divine remoteness is taught by Enoch 1-36 and Jubilees which state that God uses angelic agents in the affairs of mankind. This doctrine also appeared in The Testaments and Tobit (cf Wicks 1915:58). However, in the last century BC the idea that God sets angels or spirits over nations as punishment for their sin was absent. God's immediate action was accentuated more and more. Angels were more or less seen as God's ambassadors. Enoch 1-36 describes God as remote from mankind, although angelic intermediaries between God and praying men also appear. In the writings of the last century BC no author sets God at a distance from the world like the author of Enoch 1-36.

However, God is conceived of as exercising direct influence on righteous men. The majority of writings from the first century AD regarded God as not distant. God would employ the Messiah as his agent at the great consummation of the world (cf the occurrences in Wicks 1915:115). The decline during this period of the idea that God uses angels in ruling human fortunes is remarkable. It is God Himself who ordains the course of events in this world. He is also the controller.

The general tendency then in the Jewish apocalyptic writings was that the danger of over-familiarity forced some writers to emphasise God's transcendent aloofness. The lack of anthropomorphisms for God can be attributed to the same reason. That is why God's omniscience, omnipotence and everlastingness are accentuated so much. It is even reflected in the doctrine on angels. God's use of angels as governors and ambassadors was mentioned sparingly in the last century BC and the first AD. Instead, God is in immediate contact with his creation. Although God is sitting on his throne and is not accessible, He is in control of the course of events in the world. God's interest in the affairs of individuals only appears in a minority of writings. The transcendent view of God according to the Apocalypse of John seems to be very much in line with the general tendencies in the Jewish writings.

3.2 The typical Graeco-Roman view on power
At the end of the first century AD the religious frame of reference of the first historical readers of the Apocalypse in Asia Minor was no longer influenced by the variety of beliefs about the divine in traditional Graeco-Roman paganism. The emphasis shifted from the anthropomorphic deities of Greek mythology and the variety of spiritual powers worshipped in nature, to the political and religious role played by the imperial cult (cf Price 1984:12; Prestige 1952:37). The traditional cults of Graeco-Roman paganism declined.
This resulted in individuals feeling adrift in a world they could not control. It was also a period of tension for the Christians, particularly in the provinces. On the one hand, the Jewish communities tried to re-establish unity after the disastrous aftershock of the war in Judea. On the other hand, the Graeco-Roman culture was exerting pressure on nonconformists who eschewed civic, religious and political associations because of some ‘ill-understood devotion to a foreign superstition: (De Silva 1992:377). The Christians, as part of a relatively powerless sectarian movement, had to adjust their decision about their confession and attitude in the atmosphere resulting from these circumstances.

The power of the state challenged Christian sensibilities through the activities and threats of the imperial cult. In such a social environment the interaction of the theological message of the Apocalypse with the prevailing situation forced the readers to find a steadfast point of departure concerning their identity. In such a struggle a particular God-view in coming to grips with the concept power, would call for a reassessment of their present and a meaningful response concerning the future. A specific view on God and his involvement with his people would legitimate the Christian confession and deligitimate the everyday demands of the imperial cult.

We should keep in mind that the imperial cult was fundamentally a secular institution, ‘more a matter of practical politics than of religion’ (Price 1984:16). It is within the context of struggle that power should be understood in the framework of homage. The cult was organised by the state to express political loyalty, therefore it lacked genuine religious content although it had the highest pretensions of loyalty and power.

That brings us to the embodiment of power at the end of the first century AD, personalised to a large extent in the emperor Domitian. Dio Cassius writes that ‘Domitian even insisted on being considered a god and was exceedingly proud to be called dominus et deus (Roman History 67, 7; cf Suetonius, Domitian 13). Even Statius refers to his master as: ‘...offspring and sire of mighty deities...whose godhead I heard from afar’ (Silvae 1,1,66; cf Barnett 1991:61). Imperial homage was no new thing. Bowersock traces the imperial cult back to the history of Asia Minor's cults of kings and governors for the purpose of demonstrating gratitude (1982: 171; cf Klauck 1992; De Silva 1992a:277 and 1992b: 384). Emperor Domitian rode on the gulf of Roman greatness and domination and probably used the imperial cult to uphold the imperial system and the disposition of the emperor towards the province of Asia Minor. Pliny (the younger) describes Domitian as a ‘...fearful monster who built his defenses with untold terrors, where lurking in his den, he licked up the blood of murdered relatives or emerged to plot the massacre and destruction of his most distinguished subjects’ (Panegyricus 48). Chapter 13 of the Apocalypse probably refers to the imperial cult in the sense that sacrifices and libations were made to the divus of the em-

The threat to the first historical readers of the Apocalypse might have been to become part of the people of Asia Minor who utilised the emperor cult for their own political safety. But in addition to the political role of the cult, the rituals should also be stressed. The imperial cult, like the cults of the traditional Graeco-Roman gods, created a relationship of power between subject and ruler and it also enhanced the dominance of local elites over the populace (Price 1984:248). We have thus gained an insight into of the function of the imperial cult as manipulation of power. The cult kept the Roman dominion, embodied in the emperor, alive and present in Asia Minor. Even the temples which were built in almost every city in Anatolia reminded the Christians of a particular immanent human power structure. Domitian, however, was not the only root of Roman evil, but the typical representative of the misuse of power.

An important question would be what lay at the root of Roman power and imperialism. Niebuhr indicates that the will-to-power arises from a sense of insecurity and therefore the need to be secure (1959:202; cf Pippin 1987:55). Whether Rome was the aggressor (Harris 1979:4) or only expanding its boundaries, injustice and inequality always played a role in upholding its power. This did make an impression on Christians who urgently cried for justice (cf Rv 6:10). Pippin comes to the conclusion that the Roman will-to-power destroyed itself from within. The pax Romana was decaying from within (1987:56). Rome tried too hard to tie up power with the ritual of emperor worship (cf Price 1984:241). Price elaborates further: ‘Religion just as much as politics is concerned with power’ (1984:242; cf Aune 1983:11; Delling 1959:116). Rome particularly enforced its power and control over the provinces through the rituals of emperor worship. It can be associated with the warlike and religious images in the Apocalypse. The throne of God (Rv 4), for example, is contrasted with the throne of the enemy; the lamb against the beast with two horns (cf Rv 13).

Rome's bid for domination and power is illustrated in the image of the beast from the sea (Rv 13:1-10). And the second beast coming from the earth (Rv 13:1:1) probably represents, by way of interpretation, the agents and priests of the emperor cult in Asia Minor (cf A Collins 1979:95). In my opinion A Collins correct in calling the imagery of the beasts counterfeit power and a counterfeit cult (1979:93). The question in Rv 13:4: ‘Who is like the beast and who can fight against it?’ reflects the polarisation of the transcendent position of God against the immanent power of the Roman empire. The Christians were to choose for an institution of power in another heaven and earth while they rejected the beliefs and powerful human pretensions of this world. The powerful and visible universe of the Roman empire did not provide the answers, therefore another basis of real power had to be projected. For the Christians that could only be found in the invisible transcendent God. A power without all the human flaws! If the harlot can
be associated with the power and position of Rome, then the beasts symbolise the imperial cult and the power of the emperors. Christians could not identify with such human failure and were forced to reorientate themselves to the immanent God represented by the victorious Lamb.

4 GOD'S TRANSCENDENCY IN THE THEOLOGICAL STRUCTURE OF THE APOCALYPSE OF JOHN

4.1 The sovereign kingship of God as thematical framework
The Apocalypse of John communicates to its readers a transcendent perspective on God and this world. The theological message, directed at a particular socio-historical situation, can be characterised as an eschatological blueprint of the unfolding of the kingly rule of God on earth as it is in heaven, involving the readers' participation therein. As indicated above, the unfolding of the kingly rule of God is portrayed from the perspective of God's transcendency, probably to counteract the Roman imperial misuse of power, and in accordance with the Jewish theological views on the transcendent God.

The basic idea of Israel's hope was always the victorious advent of Yahweh and his reckoning with his enemies. He would appear as king and take possession of his realm (cf Mohwinckel 1956:143). The severe annihilation of the kingdom of Israel and Judah, the Babylonian exile and even the pretentious reconstruction during the Persian period, only emphasised the eschatological hope of the coming of the kingly rule of God. The disillusionment with the rule of the Hasmonaens intensified the desire for God's kingdom at the end of time. In later Judaism the idea was that God would send his Messiah-king, the 'son of David', to restore the kingship of God and fulfil the Law (cf Schnackenburg 1963:41). The Pharisees' concept of God's kingly rule was based on his universal control of the world as established through his creative act. God has always been the ruler; it is just a matter of the manifestation of his rule. The rabbis thought this would be brought about by their devotion to the Law. Along the way the image of a transfigured eschatological world grew out of an apocalyptic expectation. The cosmic apocalyptic concept of the reign of God dominated Jewish expectations during the New Testament period. This concept of the kingship of God as theological framework found its culminative climax in the message of the Apocalypse of John.

4.2 Transcendency in the theological structure of the Apocalypse
John's message is an effort to communicate a transcendent perspective on this world. The transcendent God-view within such a transcendent perspective opens the readers' world to divine transcendence. They saw their world in the perspective of the greater purpose of its transcendent Creator and Judge. It does not mean that they were to escape from this world, but only that their views were opened to
the heavenly and transcendent perspective. They were taken up into heaven to see history and themselves from the perspective of the final outcome. That enabled them to live meaningful in the perspective of the transcendent divine purpose (cf Bauckham 1993:8).

From the start (Rv 1:4-5) John describes the divine in threefold terms. His use of the trinitarian formula might mean that he was adopting the standard apostolic form (cf Bauckham 1993:24). The Apocalypse uses different designations for God: ‘the Alpha and Omega’, ‘the Lord God Almighty’, ‘the One who is and who was and who is to come’ and ‘the One who sits on the throne’.

The designation ‘the Alpha and Omega’ (cf Rv 1:8, 17; 21:6, 13) is combined with ‘the first and the last’, which is probably derived from Isaiah (cf 44:6; 48:12), where it emphasises God as sole Creator and sovereign Lord of history, used polemically against the idols of Babylon. God is not like human-made gods. He is the incomparable transcendent God. His kingship comes ‘from above’ and is established on earth. This is even more emphasised by the designation ‘the One who is and also was and who is to come’ (cf 1:4, 8; 4:8; 11:17; 16:5) bringing to the foreground the divine eternity (cf Ex 3:14). The fulfilment of God’s eschatological rule (‘who is to come’) over this world lies in his coming (cf Davis 1973:152). His transcendence should, however, not be understood in terms of being totally apart from this world but in relation to the world. In other words, this designation is not meant ontologically, describing God’s self-existence, but functionally, to demonstrate his commitment as transcendent God who is also designated as ‘the Lord God Almighty’ (cf Rv 1:8; 4:8; 11:17; 15:3; 16:7; 19:6; 21:22 and 16:14; 19:15), indicating his omnipotence and control over the course of historical events (cf Jer 5:14; Hos 12:15; Amos 3:13; 4:13). The idea of the unfolding of God’s kingship on earth as it is in heaven is the demonstrated best in the designation ‘the One who sits on the throne’ (Rv 4:9; 5:1, 7, 13; 6:16; 7:15; 21:5; cf also Rv 4:2,3; 7:10; 19:4 and 20:11). The throne is a central symbol in the kingship perspective and transcendency view in the message of the Apocalypse. It focuses on God’s sovereignty and transcendent kingship.

In the description of God’s sovereignty, manifested in salvation brought by Christ, in the messages to the seven churches in chapters 2 and 3, the socio-historical and immanent situation on earth is put on the table. Thereby the field where God’s kingly rule has to be unfolded, the earth, is pictured. Right after this, the narrator starts with John’s vision of the transcendent God in heaven in Chapter 4. John helps his readers to look further than their own situation. They are in the hands of the sovereign God whose kingship is already recognised in heaven. They are taught what God’s programme comprises. God’s kingship on earth must prevail in the end. The readers are assured by God’s transcendence, sitting on the throne, that his kingship is the ultimate reality behind all reality. The acknowledgement of God’s kingship on earth as it is in heaven is guaranteed by his tran-
scendancy, as pictured by John. Such a perspective gives meaning to everyday life, although it is imperfect because of the damage done by evil.

The divine throne picture probably draws on the prophetic visions of God's throne in Isaiah 6 and Ezekiel 1 (cf Thompson 1990:57 as well as 1 Enoch 14:18-22). Revelation 4 is very distinctively structured, in the sense that there is a definite absence of Christian features. It falls back on the framework of Jewish monotheism. God is not pictured in anthropomorphic terms. It is only said that He is like precious stones (Rv 4:3), emphasising the greatness of the heavenly figure. The unknowable transcendence of God is protected by the fuller description of the set-up in front of the throne, instead of focusing on Him sitting on the throne (cf Bauckham 1993:32). The readers are invited to commit themselves to worshipping together with the four living creatures and twenty-four elders (cf Thompson 1990:69). The adoration of the living creatures and elders is described in three parts. First, the living creatures sing a hymn (Rv 4:8b) in which they call God holy, almighty and the One who was, and is, and is to come. Next, while the creatures give glory, honour and thanks to Him sitting on the throne, the elders fall down before Him and worship Him. They praise God for his creation (Rv 4:11) while they lay their crowns before the throne. This is symbolical of man's acknowledgement of God's kingship and the image functions as motivation that God's kingly rule be established on earth as it is acknowledged in heaven by the elders. The liturgical language of worship may reflect a combination of ruler cult and Jewish traditional practice (cf Morton 1985:102). This worship is expanded to include all creatures in the whole cosmos (cf Rv 5:13). God's creation (ch 4) and salvation through the Lamb (ch 5) illustrate his commitment, although He is pictured as transcendent. God's kingship is real and untouchable in comparison with Rome's pretended divine sovereignty. False or true worship reflects commitment to the real purpose of the transcendent God for his world (cf Mounce 1977:132). The worship of the beast (Rv 13:4, 8, 12) stands against the universal worship of God (Rv 15:4; 19:5-6). The unfolding of God's kingship according to chapters 7-19 is time and again interestingly celebrated by the worship of the transcendent God in heaven.

John's understanding and description of God correlates with the contextual circumstances of his readers, who were experiencing the pretentious sovereignty of the Roman empire. The imperial system's political power is symbolised by the beast from the sea (Rv 13) and its economical power by the harlot (Rv 17-18). Political and economical power were only the means by which the Roman religious pretensions operated. The blasphemy of the beast from the sea, referring to his claims of the divine names (cf Rv 13:1, 5), reflects its claims for religious loyalty from the people in contrast to the devotion due to the only God in heaven. The false prophet (cf Rv 13:11) can be compared with the imperial priesthood, enforcing the imperial homage and worship. The deification of Rome's political
and economical power is directly counteracted by John who describes God as totally transcendent. In this sense, John's God-view was rectifying the readers' perception of power. Resistance to Rome meant operating from a particular God-view and demonstrating the unfolding of God's kingship on earth by true worship of the transcendent God against the false pretentious Roman interim.

The recognition of God's kingly rule on earth occurs through the unfolding of God's sovereignty, manifested in the three series of judgement on the powers of evil, as well as the unfolding of salvation, brought by the Lamb (cf Boring 1992a; 1992b). The flashes of lightning, rumblings and peals of thunder from the throne (Rv 4:5) symbolise the transcendent God's self-manifestation (cf Ez 1:13). John follows the typical Jewish writers' style of indirectness by avoiding anthropomorphisms in his descriptions of God on the throne. We only read about a voice coming from the throne (cf Rv 16:17). God's transcendency protects his incomparability with any idolatrous pretentious human ruler. Only God's sovereignty is absolute. Authoritarian human structures of power have no right to appeal to God's sovereignty to justify their own idolatrous self-deification.

The throne in heaven symbolises transcendence. One might say that the symbol of the throne binds the story of the Apocalypse together in a theological symbolic way. The narrative orientates the reader to God's transcendence by mentioning the seven spirits before the throne of God in heaven (Rv 1:4; cf 4:2,3,4,5,6,9,10; 5:1,6,7,11,13; 6:16; 7:9,10; 8:3; 14:3; 16:17; 19:4,5; 20:11,12), to conclude with the throne of God and the Lamb in the new heaven and on the new earth (cf Rv 22:1,3), emphasising the unfolding of God's kingship on earth. And in between we read about the throne of the beast (cf Rv 13:2; 16:10), symbolising the pretentious human claims to kingly rule on earth.

The function of the elders as witnesses on their thrones (cf Rv 11:16) is to symbolise their role in the unfolding of God's kingly rule. Those who conquer will share in Christ's throne, like Him sitting with his Father on his throne when He has conquered (Rv 3:21). Taking into consideration that the throne was the sole prerogative of the ruler or his representative in the orient world (cf Gen 4:40; Neh 3:7), the functional role of the Lamb (Rv 3:21; 22:1,3) and the elders (Rv 11:16; cf those to whom judgement was assigned according to Rv 20:4) in the proclamation of God's kingly rule is remarkable. John's use of the image of the throne does not only evoke the transcendence of God but draws the readers into recognising their own destination with the transcendent God. Through their witnessing task of proclaiming God's kingly rule, the believers are involved in the transcendent mystery of God, not through any deification of human power (like Rome), but by being corporately part of witnessing to God's sacrificial involvement in the world through the Lamb, as well as the Spirit's presence through the voices of the believers.

God's transcendence does not imply that He is so far distant from the world.
that He is not at all involved in his creation. It only emphasises the distinction between the infinite God and finite creatures, between absolute power and human pretension. But when God comes to dwell on earth with his people, the distinction between heaven and earth will be abolished in the new Jerusalem (cf Rv 21:3; 22:3-4). God's perfect immanence is not yet manifested on earth because of evil, still obscuring God's full kingship and glory. That is why the transcendent God, as Creator, will renew 'the first heaven and the first earth' to become 'the new heaven and the new earth'.

In the message of the Apocalypse the Lamb, as sacrificial agent of the transcendent God, acts to renew creation and bring all things to God's eschatological fulfilment. The transcendent God has become immanent and visible through the Lamb. The slaughtered Lamb is the key event in God's conquest of evil and the establishment of his kingship on earth (cf Bauckham 1993:63). Therefore salvation and judgement are the visible effects of God's turning of the kingdom of the world, ruled by evil, into the kingdom of the Lord and Messiah (cf Rv 11:15). As Bauckham says: 'The continuing and ultimate victory of God over evil which the rest of Revelation describes is no more than the working out of the decisive victory of the Lamb on the cross' (1993:75; cf Du Rand 1993a:305). The believers, related to the transcendent God through the Lamb, have an indispensable role to play in the conversion of the nations of the world (cf Rv 15:2). The full purpose of the transcendent God, namely to establish his kingly rule on earth, is further achieved by the Spirit's activity through the witness of Christians to the world.

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**Prof Dr Jan A du Rand, Department of Biblical Studies, Rand Afrikaans University, PO Box 524, AUCKLANDPARK, 2006 Republic of South Africa.**