"Your kingdom come 'on earth as it is in heaven':
The theological motif of the Apocalypse of John

Jan A du Rand

Abstract

The power of the Apocalypse of John on a communicative level lies in its theologically evocative power. When the Apocalypse of John is read as a dramatic narrative, different levels of narrativity may be identified. John and the church's story forms level one and the divine and cosmic story level two. Both levels suppose an unplotted presupposed macronarrative level. From this reconstructed theological macronarrative the theological motif is derived, concentrating on the transcendent position of God on his throne. The theological motif deals with the unfolding and acknowledging of God's kingship on earth as it is already acknowledged in heaven. It is told from the perspective of God's transcendency and immanence to become a prophetic communication in narrative format for a specific context.

1 THE APOCALYPSE AS NARRATIVE

1.1 A narrative in general

The Apocalypse of John combines history and theology as God's story and then plots that story. An old story is told in a new way. This God-story should be read as a dramatic narrative within a letter framework (Du Rand 1991:213). It is the result of a journey of faith of an apocalyptic prophet and particular Christian community at the end of the first century. In the process a rich theological vision has been produced, directed to an implied reader via an implied author and a narrator. The story is told from a theocentric perspective. God is represented to the readers so that his significance for their lives becomes actual in their situation.

The point of departure is that certain theological threads bind the story of the Apocalypse of John together. Therefore, the Apocalypse may be called a narrative theology. In other words, theology is the primary unifying thread in the narrative of the Apocalypse. The theological directed narrative scheme also emerges clearly in the formal structure of the narrative. However, the flow of the theological narrative is not the same as its story. Thus, we distinguish between narrative coherence or its course and the content of the narr-
tive. The idea of history being God’s story not only implies a certain plot but integrates form and content in John’s story. The narrative of the Apocalypse is engineered to reinforce a particular understanding of God and Christ among the readers.

History is the spatial framework within which the sovereignty of God is told. Such a contextual reading effectively functions as an expression of identity, particularly in a crisis situation. The actual process of identification is exceedingly complex. It involves an identification of the events of our past experiences (cf Stibbe 1992:52). Further, it involves imagination which fuses the kernel events into a coherent plot with the resulting sense of order and meaning. The final activity, according to Stibbe, is that of storytelling, incarnating a sense of purposeful personhood in an oral or written form (1992:52). A very effective written medium is narrative. To summarise, the believers’ sense of identity is the result of remembering (what God has done in Christ), fused into an identity-enhancing narrative. The coherent theological plot of the Apocalypse reaffirms the believers’ identity and their perception of a meaningful present and future in God’s plan. This has resulted in an overarching universe of meaning, socially understood and constructed. In other words, the theological narrative according to the Apocalypse, helps the believing community (and individuals) to recognise that life in their society makes sense. In such a way the shared knowledge is made objectivate and the theological symbolic universe maintained.

1.2 Different levels of narrative
In his discussion of the narrative christology of the Apocalypse, Boring mentions the very important fact that we are to distinguish among different levels of narrativity in Revelation (1992:704). According to Boring, the vision report which forms the framework of Revelation is itself a narrative as are the visions that form the content of Revelation (1992:703). One can say that visions and narrative in the Apocalypse are not different genres. Even visions may have more than one narrative level. As in Shakespeare’s Hamlet, for example, we can find a play within a play (cf Frye 1982:33). Even if the Apocalypse is viewed as an apocalypse or as a letter, it functions as a story. Parallel to Boring’s narrative christology the same framework of levels of narrativity is applied to the issue of narrative theology, according to the Apocalypse. More than one level of narrativity is simultaneously present at a particular point in the flow of the story.

We may distinguish the following levels of narrativity in the theological narrative of the Apocalypse (cf Boring 1992:704–719):

**Narrative level 1:** John’s account of his experiences as well as the churches’. It can be called John and the churches’ story.
Narrative level 2: The visions of God, Christ and the heavenly throne room as well as the dramatic acts which unfold from the heavenly visions: breaking of seals, sounding of trumpets and outpouring of bowls. We can call this level the *divine and cosmic story*.

Narrative level 3: The macronarrative, which is not plotted in Revelation but comprehensively presupposed by each of the first two narrative levels. It can be called the *theological or God's story*.

This contribution aims at formulating a possible presupposed macronarrative from a *theological* story perspective, to come to the theological motif of the Apocalypse of John.

On the first level of narrativity, the narrative is about John and his relationship to the churches. It is recognisable from the first person presentation, as in Galatians 1–2 where we have Paul’s relationship to the community narrated. To a large extent, level one can be called autobiographical to form a narrative framework around the other levels of narration. John narrates the visions of God and Christ and the plagues (*divine and cosmic story*) within the narrative letter framework (cf 1:9–3:22; 22:6–21).

From the very first verse (1:1) the initiative lies with God. It is God who gave the revelation of Jesus Christ (1:1 NIV). John is on the island of Patmos ‘because of the word of God’ (1:9). ‘God gave the revelation’ may be seen as the formal part but God is also the content of the narrative. God is actor and content of this first level of ‘framework’ narrativity. But the main actor is John himself. This plotted narrative segment derives its theological meaning from a non-plotted macronarrative (cf Boring 1992:707).

Level two of the narrative, the visionary level, described as the *divine and cosmic story*, is constituted by the heavenly figures and plagues within John’s visions. These heavenly figures are the actors. The primary actor is God on the throne. He is defined by Christ (cf 12:5; 22:1, 3). The visions are narrated from 4:1 onward and extend through 22:5.

The following visions emphasise different aspects of the divine role:

According to 4:1–11, God is seated on his throne in heaven and praised for being the creator of all things. God is depicted as the initiative of creating all beings. He is also the ‘creator’ of salvation according to 5:1–14. He holds a sealed scroll in his right hand which contains the future unfolding of the eschatological drama. It seems that the main actor in this vision (5:1–14) is the Lamb who has to bring about the breaking of the seals. In fact the Lamb is just representing God in the execution of salvation. He is God’s agent. The initiative of salvation resides with God. God provided the Lamb who was slain ‘to purchase men for God’ and to make a people ‘to be a kingdom and
priests to serve our God and [who] will reign on the earth' (5:9, 10). Although it is the Lamb who opens the seals, his functional role always refers back to God who sits on the throne (cf 4:13; 6:16; 7:9, 10, 15).

The seven angels who are to sound the trumpets are standing before God, who sits on his throne (8:2). The trumpets are also blown in the presence of God reigning from his throne (cf 8:2–11:19). Even the interlude in 7:1–17 witnesses the role of God in the sealing of the 144,000. God who sits on the throne and the Lamb are praised by the multitude in white robes. It is God who wipes away the tears from their eyes (7:17). It is obvious that according to narrative level 2, the divine and cosmic story, the focus falls on God, reigning on the throne, as well as on the functional role of the Lamb. The reader gets the impression that the whole drama has its origin with God on his throne, coming to earth through the Lamb as God's agent, and concludes with God on his throne.

The birth of the Messiah, part of the divine story (12:1–13:18), is narrated as a kind of flashback prior to the opening of the seals (cf Boring 1992:710). The child being born has a transcendent origin (with God), an earthly commitment and exalted to the throne of God. It is clear that the woman and the dragon as the main opposing actors in this episode are under the transcendent supervision of God. He initiates the episodic contact of the child with this world and he is the ultimate destiny for the child after the completion of his mission.

In 19:11–21 John sees the military figure on a white horse. In this scene the Christ (cf 19:12 with 1:12 and 19:15 with 1:16) is a dynamic actor. He leads the heavenly armies to victory over the evil armies. If the blood on his clothes is the Messiah's own blood (cf 19:13) and if the victory is based on his own death, this divine vision points to the supposed theological macronarrative, indicated as level 3. The same can be said about the vision in 20:1–10, where the divine figure reigns for 1000 years after an angel has bound the Satan and 'fire from heaven' (from God) has destroyed the nations. This scene also needs to be viewed in the framework of the untold macronarrative for further interpretation.

The cosmic emphasis in the divine and cosmic story consists of the events that unfold when the seals, trumpets and bowls strike the earth. The description of these cosmic events is embedded in an emphasis on God while the framework of level one is still present (cf 9:16–17; 16:4–7). God and Christ appear behind these visions, according to the cosmic events, but are not the actors. These cosmic events are narrated as the play-within-the-play because they are initiated by God and the Lamb (cf 5:1–14). The seals contain God's plan and purpose; the trumpets his presence (cf 8:2) and the bowls his wrath (cf 16:1).
In this way the seemingly non-theological visions in chapters 4–22 are formally embedded in narrative level one as well as in level three, the _theological macronarrative_ (the theological story according to content). This unplotted macronarrative is the presupposed narrative world of the visions (cf Boring 1992:713). The churches' divine and cosmic stories are pointing to a larger theological narrative. This macronarrative is theologically determined with a definite link to the time frame. The _theological story_ can be divided according to the narrated acts of God because of his activity in the past, the present and the future. Boring has applied a parallel scheme to a narrated christology (1992:713–718; cf Holtz 1962).

The most prominent references to God's activity in the churches' past, according to the theological story, concentrate on the _creation_ and the _salvation_ God provided through Jesus Christ.

The narrative starts with the overwhelming expression that God is the Alpha and the Omega, 'who is, and who was, and who is to come' (1:8; 4:8). It is God who created all things (4:11; cf 3:14). God's creation is even praised by an angel in midair (14:7). His wrath refers to the creation and the history of humankind (19:15). It is because of the sin of humans against God at the creation that the book of life has come into existence (17:8). God is also the origin of salvation by providing the Lamb (5:13; 7:10). The born child, according to the mythological episode in 12:1–5, was snatched up to God. God's salvation, power and kingdom have come when Satan was hurled to the earth (12:10). Even the song of Moses reminds of God's saving activity in the past (15:3, 4). God's salvation is defined by the offering of his son. Jesus was born (12:1–5), died and exalted. Christ is God's provided atonement. He is the one from God who accomplishes God's historical and cosmic victories.

God's _present activity_ is portrayed in terms of the time of the church which stretches from Christ's resurrection to the eschatological events (cf Boring 1992:716). From a narrative point of view, the present activities of God have identification value for the churches. As the Son shares in God's rule, so the faithful are to share in Christ's rule (3:21–22). In the present God is the communicator, the revealer of the message of the Apocalypse (1:1, 22:110). The words of his prophecy are not to be sealed up (22:11). He is the ruler of the universe because he is sitting on his throne (4:2; 5:1). God's reign in heaven is already a recognised reality. The readers are continually reminded of God's kingship in the metaphor of the throne in heaven. He makes the faithful into a kingdom and priests to serve Him (1:6). Being a kingdom of God means to recognise his kingship on earth as it is in heaven. In his capacity as ruler God sees to the sealing of the 144 000 (7:3) and it is expected from him to take revenge on the inhabitants of the earth (6:10). In the present God looks after his own, the faithful (cf 11:11). He prepares a
place for the woman (12:14) and knows and sees the deeds of the churches (cf 3:2).

God's rulership is celebrated through the worship of the angels, elders and living creatures (7:11; 8:2; 14:7) and the faithful (7:14). God is praised for his justice (16:7). John and his fellow servants are told to worship God (22:9). The God who created everything and saved his own is the same God who reigns and cares for the churches in the present. Christian experience in the present is not a count down between Christ's first and second coming, but a participating response, acknowledging God's reign and his caring.

The future activity of God is concentrated on the eschatological coming and not so much on the historical future. God is described as the 'coming One' (1:4, 8). It is obvious that Christ functions in the same role as God (3:11; 22:20; cf Boring 1992:718). The eschaton or the 'coming' is an act of God.


God's future activity unfolds in a kaleidoscope of variety. He will provide the new Jerusalem from heaven (3:12; 21:2, 10) and he will wipe away the tears and sorrow because of sin (7:17). It is God who will give permission for the unfolding of the eschatological events (cf 9:14; 10:7; 15:1, 2, 7; 16:1). God will send fire from heaven to devour the hostile nations and to throw the devil into the burning sulphur.

God's judgement will become evident. Those who follow the beast will come under his judgement (14:10). The harvest of the earth will come forth on his command (14:15, 19) and God will give 'Babylon the Great the cup filled with the wine of the fury of his wrath' (16:19; 17:17; 18:5). He will judge from his great white throne, the seat of his reign (20:11). Christ is God's agent of judgement (19:14) as he was the agent of God's creation and salvation.

God's judgement is but one manifestation of his kingship and reign. The kingdom of the world will become the kingdom of God (11:15) where God will reign for ever (11:17). His kingship will be acknowledged at the end when God declares from his throne, 'It is done!' (16:17), after the final battle (16:14). Then God, being the ruler, will be praised for his salvation, glory and power (19:1, 5, 6).

God's commitment to his own will take new dimensions in future. He will be the temple himself in the new city (21:22) and he will provide the
light to the city as well as the water, flowing forth from his throne. His presence will be experienced by everyone (15:5, 8). The 144 000 will sing a song of victory before God's throne (14:3). The faithful also will praise God for his justice (18:8, 20). He will let them be part of the great supper (19:17). Those who have been part of the first resurrection will be priests of God (20:6). To summarise: God will make everything new (21:4, 5).

1.3 Systemising the theological macronarrative

If we were to systemise the presupposed theological macronarrative, the following elements would be present. First of all, God is the creator of all that exists. But, because of God's transcendence, his son Jesus Christ is described as being God. Christ came as God's agent into history and was killed to represent his faithfulness to God. His death and resurrection is described as victory, demonstrating the power of the reigning God and providing his followers with identity and power in the world. Through the words of prophets, given by the Spirit, God's activity and presence are realised in the churches. It is God who will bring this history to an end, to celebrate his kingship in this world as it already exists in heaven. This is the basic story from which all the above-mentioned narrative levels are derived. John's story and the churches' story, the divine and cosmic story draw their integrated meaning from this macronarrative, the theological story. The cosmic aspects formally act within the divine and cosmic story, to be overarched by John and the churches' story, and all levels derive their meaning from the theological story. This latter story functions as the truth for those who live in it as story. In one sentence, it contains the truth of the acts of God from creation to eschaton, of which the Christ-event is the defining centre (cf Boring 1992:722).

2 FROM A STRUCTURAL NARRATOLOGICAL VIEWPOINT

The different levels of narrativity are formally interwoven and unfold from a structural narratological point of view in the following three acts as dramatic narrative (cf Du Rand 1991:312-316):

Act 1 Rv 1-3: God's involvement in the church on grounds of the Christ-event

Act 2 Rv 4-11: The unfolding of God's plan of salvation and judgement in the cosmos on grounds of the Christ-event

Act 3 Rv 12-22: The staging of God's salvation and judgement in history on grounds of the Christ-event

Each act is bound together and linked to the other by the development of the plot: the theological story. It seems, at this stage, as if the emphasis on sal-
vation and judgement, based on the effect of the Christ-event, dominates the flow of the narrative. The proclamation of what God has done through the Christ-event comes to the readers through the prophetic witnessing in which the Spirit plays a dominant role (cf 1:10; 4:2; 17:3; 21:10).

The content of the first act concentrates on God's involvement in the church (Rv 1-3). The framework of the first act puts emphasis on the Triune God's activity. God is in the midst of his church through Christ and the prophetic Spirit. The believers are summoned to remain faithful on grounds of the Christ-event.

The second act (Rv 4-11) pictures God's role in the cosmos. It begins with a vision of the heavenly court: God on his throne is praised as the creator (4:1-11) and the bringer of salvation through Christ (5:1-14). The unfolding of history according to God's plan in accordance to the scroll in his hand is at stake. The opening of the scroll leads to the execution of God's judgement and salvation—as is apparent from the metaphor of the opening of the seals (6:1-8:1), followed by the sounding of the trumpets. From time to time, the faithful are assured of God's plan and the meaning of life (cf 7:1-17; 10:1-11:14). They are the possession of God and are protected by him (cf 11:1-14). The opening of God's temple in heaven with a view of the ark of the covenant brings the second act to a close with the same idea as that with which it begins, namely the decisive reigning position of God (on his throne).

According to the third act (Rv 12-22), God's salvation and judgement are unfolding in history. The struggle for power and majesty is staged by polarising the Triune God's activity with those of the dragon and the beasts from the sea and land (12:1-13:18). In this respect, Rv 12:10 is of decisive meaning: 'Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God...'

The dragon (Satan) pretends to be God and pretentiously claims to be reigning through the antichrist and false prophet (13:1-18). On the one hand, the Lamb and the redeemed gather on mount Zion to celebrate their salvation (14:1-5), and on the other hand, three angels announce God's judgement. The execution of God's judgement on the grounds of his power and glory is symbolically enacted through the harvest of the wheat and the grapes (14:14-20). This is followed by the final bowls of God's judgement (15:1-18:24). God is greater than Babylon who is destroyed. The destructive role of Rome is finally broken. In contrast, John sees the bride at the wedding of the Lamb as highlight of God's power and reign.

Satan and the two beasts are cast into the lake of fire. The rest of humanity has to appear before God's throne for the final execution of his judgement (20:1-15). In contrast to the final destruction of Babylon, that is Rome, the heavenly Jerusalem emphasises the epitome of salvation. In the midst of all, stands the reigning God and the Lamb.
The content of the message of the theological macronarrative can be viewed from different theological points of departure. In each theological reading God plays a decisive role. John's visionary response is not only an esoteric answer to a crisis, or even a distorted dissertation on Christian being, but a theological witness of God's plan and purpose for this world (Du Rand 1994:558; Yarbro Collins 1984:84). This indicates that the theological message of the Apocalypse is to be understood as primarily theocentrical.

The real power of the Apocalypse, on a communicative level, does not only lie in its symbolism, composition or historical perspectives, but in its theologically evocative power. Therefore, it would be wrong to reduce its meaning only to archetypal or ontological concepts (cf Farrer 1949:47; Minear 1968:72). The Apocalypse produces contextual theology. Its theological self-understanding is aimed at giving perspective to Christians who have had to cope with suffering and oppression. Therefore, the theological message of Revelation empowered the believers to live from a powerful perspective in which the perception of God was of decisive importance. Such contextual communication of God's plan and purpose for this world is typical of the biblical prophetic tradition (cf Du Rand 1996:52).

Some of the most important theological viewpoints are the following:

Schüssler Fiorenza calls her perspectival reading a contextualised praxis-oriented model of biblical interpretation in which definite connections are made between socio-political realities and religious-ideological assumptions (1991:117–139). The perception of the concept of God plays a prominent role in such a theo-ethical rhetoric, in which the faithful are forced to reflect on their own situation.

The messianic war view of reading the Apocalypse originates in the Jewish hope of a Messiah as the descendant of David as king and military leader of his people (cf Giblin 1991:222–231; Yarbro Collins 1976:207–231). This king is to make war against the godless oppressors to liberate his own people and to establish the rule of God (cf Bauckham 1988:17–40). God’s reign will only be recognised after victory over the enemies of God. The framework is that of battle (cf 11:7; 12:7–8, 17; 13:7; 16:14; 17:14; 19:11, 19). The image of the messianic war describes the whole process of establishing the kingdom of God on earth (cf Bauckham 1993:70). The decisive battle has been won by Christ and his followers and the proclamation of this victory continues until the present.

From the viewpoint of the motif of the eschatological exodus the message of the Apocalypse is understood according to the Old Testament exodus tradition, which forms a paradigm to describe God’s saving activity of his own people, including the judgement of the oppressors (cf Bauckham
1993:70–72). In such a model, the emphasis falls on God’s power to liberate his people and to lead them to theocratic independence in a land of their own. The central image is the passover lamb. God’s liberation of his people from Egypt is paralleled by ‘the blood of the Lamb’ through which a people is ‘ransomed’ and made ‘a kingdom and priests serving one God’ (5:9–10; cf Ex 19:5–6). The scheme of salvation and judgement fits more or less into such a reading emphasising the eschatological exodus motif.

Another viewpoint is to read the message of the Apocalypse as the interpretation of history. It focuses on the understanding of God’s act in history and the acceptance that he will act accordingly in future (cf Rissi 1966:1–21). On grounds of interpretation it can be said that God has and will intervene at least four times in the history of this world. He created everyone and everything; he sent the Lamb and brought direction to history; he sent the Holy Spirit to actualise the ‘new beginning’ in history and he will confirm his victory by the second coming of his Son. According to such a view the central point of departure is God’s sovereignty and reign.

Each viewpoint reads the message of the Apocalypse from a different angle and each reading contains a valuable element of truth.

4 THE MOTIF OF THE THEOLOGICAL STORY

The viewpoint preferred here would be to read the Apocalypse from the inherent literary plot of the theological story itself. The content of such a plot, as the structure of events, is derived from the theological macronarrative which focuses on God’s activity.

4.1 God’s activity

Revelation’s view of God opens the readers’ world to divine transcendence. They are taken up into heaven to view history and themselves from the transcendent inspired perspective of the final outcome. John mainly uses the following designations for God: Alpha and Omega, the Lord God Almighty, the One who is and who was and who is to come and the prominent the One who sits on the throne (Bauckham 1993:23–53). God is the sole creator and sovereign Lord of history (1:8, 17; 21:6, 13), not like human-made gods but the incomparable transcendent God. His rule comes ‘from above’ to be established and recognized on earth. In the expression ‘...who is to come’ (1:4, 8; 4:8) God’s eschatological rule over this world is anticipated. God’s omnipotence and control over the course of history is honoured in the title Lord God Almighty. The presentation of God on the throne demonstrates the unfolding of his kingship on earth as it is in heaven. (4:9; 5:1, 7, 13; 6:16; 7:15;
21:5). The readers know that they are in the hands of the sovereign God when they see through John’s narrative the transcendent God on his throne.

4.2 God on his throne

In a certain sense the theological motif of the story of the Apocalypse flows from understanding the ‘God on his throne’ perspective. The throne symbolises his reign and transcendency. The 46 occurrences of the term ‘throne’ emphasise the prominence of God’s kingship and transcendency, although not all the occurrences refer to God. From the outset God is sitting on his throne (1:4), contrary to Satan’s throne in Pergamum (2:13). God’s transcendent kingship is to be acknowledged on earth as it is already being done in heaven. Everyone who overcomes will reign with God and the Lamb on the throne (3:21). According to chapters 4 and 5 God’s position on the throne, in particular, underlines his sovereignty and kingship. On the one hand, the readers see the situation of the seven churches, and on the other hand, the vision of God on his throne in heaven. This enables the readers’ perspective to view their own situation within the broader context of God’s universal position. He will overcome all opposition to his rule and establish his kingdom in this world. Heaven is the sphere of ultimate reality. God on his throne is the ultimate reality behind all earthly appearances (Bauckham 1993:31).

The vision of God’s sovereignty in heaven is the model of what should be realised on earth (cf Boring 1986:262). The divine throne is also a significant feature of typical Jewish apocalypses (cf Dan 7:9-10; 1 Enoch 14, 60, 71; 2 Enoch 20-21; ApAbr 15-18). The two well known prophetic visions of the divine throne in Isaiah 6 and Ezekiel 1 are referred to in the Apocalypse.

The vision of God on his throne is filled with cultic and political imagery. In a cultic respect it reflects the heavenly worship of God and in a political respect, from there, God exercises his rule over the world. The combination of cultic and political images is also a well known feature of apocalyptic visions of God. Even in the Roman state the emperors and traditional gods of Rome were both worshipped. Political loyalty is often expressed through religious worship. The acknowledgement of God’s rule on earth as in heaven stands over against Rome’s pretended divine sovereignty. The clash of the sovereignties are, on the one hand, illustrated by the universal worship of the beast (cf 13:4, 8, 12) and, on the other, by the coming of the kingdom of God, indicated by the universal worship of God (cf 15:4; 19:5-6).

The reference to the born male child ‘who will rule all the nations with an iron sceptre’ and ‘who was snatched up to God and to his throne’ (12:5) fits remarkably into this theological viewpoint. Christ’s participation in God’s throne and reign is known according to the Apocalypse (cf 5:6; 7:17;
Christ’s sacrificial death illuminates the way God rules on earth. What has already been accomplished in heaven, namely God’s reign, is made manifest on earth through the slaughtering of the Lamb.

In the end the throne of the beast was plunged into darkness (16:10), after which the voice from the throne said ‘It is done!’ (16:17). Judgement, on grounds of authority, also comes from the throne as symbol of sovereignty (20:11; cf 20:4). Only in God’s eschatological coming to his creation, in the new Jerusalem, will his sovereignty be acknowledged. In the meantime, God’s presence in this world is experienced through the Lamb and the Spirit. The new Jerusalem becomes the seat of the divine kingdom. The throne which had been in the heavenly court (Rv 4), is now in the new Jerusalem (22:1, 3). God’s powerful presence fills the whole city.

At the beginning of each act the throne scene dominates. According to the first act, chapters 1–3, the greetings comes from the throne. The second act, chapters 4–11, narrates the vision of God on his throne from where the seals, trumpets and bowls as well as salvation come. At the beginning of the third act, chapters 12–22, the new born child was snatched up to God and to his throne. The story ends with God and the Lamb on the throne (22:1, 3).

The apparent theocentricity in chapters 4–5 is almost repeated in the description of the new Jerusalem (21:1). God’s creation (Rv 4) reaches its eschatological fulfilment when God’s sovereignty and rule (throne) become present among the people. The old creation is filled with the new, God’s presence. In the present world God’s presence is in a sense a paradoxical presence in hiddenness. He is present through the slaughtered Lamb.

So long as humanity in general refuses to acknowledge God’s reign on earth, he is only properly glorified in heaven. After evil has been destroyed, God’s throne will become a reality on earth (22:3) because then his reign will be recognised on earth as it is in heaven. Then, the distance between the ‘One who sits on the throne’ and the world over which he rules has been gone. Thereafter the faithful will reign with Him on earth (22:5). The perfection of God’s rule will be fully recognised and acknowledged.

4.3 God’s kingship on earth

The core of the theological story of the Apocalypse, according to the discussion on the meaning of God’s throne, seems to boil down to the theocentric unfolding and acknowledging of God’s kingship on earth as it is in heaven. The content would, therefore, be the unfolding of his kingship on earth and the framework the narrative of transcendency and immanence. The Apocalypse’s theological story may be called a contextual prophetic communication from a heavenly perspective.
The kingdom of God breaks through where people acknowledge God's kingship on earth. This is the purpose of Christ's death: to free people from their sins and to make them 'a kingdom and priests to serve our God ...' (5:10). In another usage kingdom refers to the coming period of messianic blessedness inaugurated by the 'new born male child' (1:9; cf 12:10). Even the faithful are allowed to reign on earth on God's behalf (5:10). The twenty four elders pay respect to God by casting down their crowns before the throne to acknowledge that their authority and reign should be seen as a delegated authority.

At the end of the second act (chapters 4-11) the establishment of God's kingdom in this world was profoundly proclaimed by the 'loud voices in heaven': 'The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever' (11:15).

This 'Leitmotiv' is repeated throughout the narrative of the Apocalypse. After the war in heaven, when the great dragon and his angels were hurled to the earth, narrated in a mythological framework, a 'loud voice in heaven' proclaimed the result as well as the purpose of this war, saying: 'Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God, and the authority of his Christ' (12:10 cf 11:17).

What happened in heaven, should also be accomplished on earth—the establishment of God's reign. Symbolically, the kingdom of the beast was plunged into darkness by the outpouring of the fifth angel's bowl (16:10). The destruction of evil will lead to the exclusive acknowledgement of God's kingship on earth (cf 17:12, 17, 18).

During the meantime God reigns through the slaughtered Lamb who is 'the ruler of the kings of the earth' (1:5; 6:15; 16:12, 14; 19:19). On the other hand 'the kings of the earth' are intoxicated by the sins of the woman on the scarlet beast (17:2, 9). What a contrast! God reigns through the Lamb while 'the kings of the earth' are ruled by the woman Babylon (17:17, 18). Christ's universal sovereignty in his eschatological triumph over the enemies of God is even inscribed on his garment: 'King of kings...' (19:16).

The unfolding of the establishment of the kingship of God is portrayed from the perspective of God's transcendency to emphasise the distinction between the infinite God and the pretentious divine rule of Rome. But, the transcendent God has become immanent through the Lamb. Within such a framework of God's transcendency and immanence the faithful add meaning to every day life in establishing God's kingship on earth as it is in heaven.

From historical perspective, the annihilation of the kingdom of Israel and Judah, the Babylonian exile and the reconstruction during the Persian period also emphasized the eschatological hope of the coming of the reign of God. Even the disillusionment with the Hasmoneans contributed to the growing
expectations of God's kingship at the end of time. Later, Judaism expected the Messiah-King, the 'son of David', to restore the kingship of God. During the New Testament period the cosmic apocalyptic concept of the reign of God dominated Jewish expectations. Such a context or framework of thought influenced most of the original readers of Revelation. The concept of the kingly rule of God dominates the narrative of Revelation, thus portraying the contextual transfigured eschatological image which grew out of an apocalyptic expectation.

The inauguration of God's kingdom (11:16) is the fulfilling of 'the mystery of God' (10:7). The twenty four elders (11:15) by interpretation take up Psalm 2, the messianic enthronement psalm, and sing as if every expectation has been fulfilled. The sovereignty of the world has been passed to God. God is the true king, not Caesar (15:3). He is through the Lamb 'King of kings' (17:14).

This central motif in the theological story of the Apocalypse also dominates its christology, pneumatology and ecclesiology.

4.4 God's kingship in Christ's activity

The role of Christ, according to Revelation, is to do what God does. He has come to earth to bring the purpose of God's creation to fulfillment. His coming brought God's salvation and judgement. To view the slaughtered Lamb in the midst of the throne picture (5:6; 7:17) helps the readers to understand that Christ's sacrificial death is part of the strategy through which God rules this world. The One who sits on the throne 'comes down' to earth, to put it in that way, through the slaughtering of the Lamb. The sacrifice of the Lamb is God's way to conquer and to destroy evil on earth. In other words, the One who sits on the throne is present on earth as the Lamb who conquers by his death. The Lamb's death is the crucial key in God's programme of conquering evil and establishing his kingship on earth. His judgements are part of his world history programme to convince people to acknowledge his reign on earth.

Christ's representative task is to turn the kingdom of the world, which is presently influenced by evil, into the kingdom of our Lord and Messiah (11:15). This process involves both salvation and judgement. It begins with the slaughtering of the Lamb and ends with his parousia. The victory of his death and resurrection is to be continued and carried by the witnessing church up to his parousia. And this is the locus where the church and the Holy Spirit fit into God's programme.

Christ is sketched as the Messiah, the descendant of David, anointed by God as king, to fight the Gentile oppressors in establishing God's kingly rule (1:17-18; 22:13, 16). Christ is also the passover Lamb (5:6, 9-10) to ransom a
people to serve God. God’s ransomed own will reign with him as priests and kings (20:4–6; 22:3–5). The Spirit’s role remarkably comes to the foreground when Christ is called ‘the faithful and true witness’. (1:5; 3:14). The implication of his witness was that he lost his life. His followers’ faithful witness will also lead to death (11:7) because they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death (12:11).

4.5 God’s kingship through the Spirit and witnessing

John’s narrative is strikingly logical in its build up. In Christ’s death and resurrection the decisive victory over evil has already been won. That is God’s way to establish his kingship on earth. But, how is this acknowledgement of his sovereignty to become effective on earth? John has the answer. In the right-hand of the One sitting on the throne is a sealed scroll (5:1). This scroll contains the ‘secret’ of God’s programme for acknowledging his kingship on earth. Its content is the message of the prophecy for the churches. It is the Spirit who is active in the prophetic witness to as well as of the churches.

The Lamb’s sacrificial death as victory has freed the believers from sin (1:5) and established them as the eschatological church of God (5:9–10), because they are constituted a kingdom and priests serving God (5:10). God’s reign is already realised in the church. But that is not enough, according to John’s story. The ultimate goal of God’s victory through the death of the Lamb is that the believers are in the hands of the Spirit, to declare God’s victory to the ends of the earth. The believers have become martyrs in giving their own lives while they are participating in God’s triumphant witnessing of the death of the Lamb to the world. The Lamb’s victory is to become effective through the witness of the believers in establishing God’s kingly rule over this world.

To establish God’s kingly rule means the repentance of the world because the judgements alone have failed to achieve that. The church’s witness to the nations have become the crucial issue in God’s programme after the death of the Lamb. This witness intervenes before the final judgement, expressed in the seventh trumpet (11:15–19). Therefore, the narrative of the two witnesses (11:1–13) can be called the central item on the church’s agenda. As a matter of fact, the church’s conflict with the powers of evil, according to chapters 12–15, and the final judgements with its final implications in chapters 15–22, can best be understood in the light of the witnessing task of the church (11:1–13). The faithful witnessing and death of the two witnesses, (symbolising the church) are instrumental in the conversion of the nations (Bauckham 1993:84). God’s kingly rule is not only acknowledged by saving his elect
people but also by the sacrificial witness of the elect to convince the nations of God’s kingship.

The two witnesses symbolise the church in its role of witnessing to all the nations (11:3–13). Their witness leads to repentance. They get their power and content from the victorious death of the Lamb. Through their witness they are conquering evil, albeit a struggle with the beast to the death. They praise God for their own deliverance by convincing the nations of God’s kingship. In the end we notice only two possible outcomes: the conversion of the nations who acknowledge God’s kingship or the judgement of those unrepentant nations.

God guarantees the outcome of these nations by providing the Holy Spirit to the church. The seven Spirits represent the fullness of God’s Spirit in the church’s witness to the nations. Through this witness the seven Spirits are using the church to make the victory of God through the Lamb’s slaughtering effective to the whole world. This is the prophetic witness of the church. To equip the church for its mission, the Spirit as agent of visionary experience works through the Christian prophets within the church. The Spirit moves the church to be God’s eschatological people in their prophetic witness, and the seven Spirits enable the church to fulfill its prophetic ministry to the world, convincing the nations to acknowledge God’s kingship on earth as it is in heaven.

WORKS CONSULTED


Professor J A du Rand, Department of Biblical Studies, Rand Afrikaans University, PO Box 524, Aucklandpark, 2006 South Africa.