The One who sits on the throne:
towards a theory of theocentric characterisation according to the Apocalypse of John*

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ABSTRACT
Characterisation theory has provided insights into narratological studies of biblical characters. One notable exception, however, is the central character of the Bible: God. This article explores the unique difficulties of theocentric characterisation, using the Book of Revelation as an example. It suggests an approach of indirect characterisation which emphasises relationships within the story world and beyond. Interindividuality takes seriously the interrelatedness of all creation to the Creator. The hearer/readers are drawn into the surreal world of Revelation and invited to identify their relationship with the One who sits on the throne.

1. THE THEOCENTRICITY OF THE BIBLE
God addresses God's time and culture bound creation through the words of other creatures who are equally time and culture bound with the purpose of revealing God to them. Unfortunately, New Testament scholars have neglected detailed and comprehensive investigation of statements about God (Dahl 1991:157). Culpepper (1983:113) laments that the 'theo-logy' of the Gospel of John has not been given sufficient attention. The same is true for the 'stepchild' of Johannine studies, the Apocalypse of John. Although there have been some

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1 Gender inclusiveness is awkward in English. Gender differentiation is dealt with differently in some African languages. Pronouns denote personhood, not gender. In Swahili the personal pronoun, 

2 Smalley (1994) argues that Revelation was written by the same author as the Gospel and letters—John the Beloved Disciple. Others, like J A du Rand (1991), while not adhering to Apostolic authorship, also include Revelation in the Johannine corpus.
excellent christological studies in connection with Revelation there has been a
dearth of ones with a theocentric emphasis. A refreshing exception is Boring's
(1989) commentary which takes seriously the centrality of the person of God in
the Apocalypse. Du Rand (1994) also emphasises the theocentricity of Revela-
tion. He sees the theological message of the Apocalypse as encompassed and
structured by a transcendent view of God. God's transcendence is balanced by
God's intimate involvement with God's creation.

Biblical literary studies in general, however, have often excluded the charac-
terisation of God. God is not characterised in the same way other characters
are, but that does not mean God is not present, or even not central. Brueg-
gemann (1995:419–428) is one of those who are taking the theological implic-
tions of literary studies seriously. In an article in which Brueggemann considers
the promissory poems of Jeremiah 30–31 he advocates a method which 'opens
up ways to observe something creative and interior about the character of God'

Sternberg (1985:153) speaks of biblical theocentricity in the following terms:

God figures as both inspiring originator and individual viewpoint, as object and sub-
ject of representation, as maker of plot and agent, as a means to an end, as art and
reason for the whole.

We can speak of the Apocalypse in similar terms, extending the implications
even further. God is the ideal interpreter. The theocentricity of Revelation is
complete. God is the One who is at the same time supra-author, main character
and superaddressee. Each of these elements is important to an approach which
recognises the centrality of God to, in and through the text.

The superaddressee, according to Russian theorist, Bakhtin (1986:126), is a
third party in dialogic relationship with an author and addressee. This third party
has an absolutely just responsive understanding of the heteroglossia (the social,
historical, psychological matrix of context which is an essential part of the com-
unication between the author and addressee; see Bakhtin 1981, 1986; Reed
1993). In Bakhtin's understanding this superaddressee assumes various ideologi-
ical expressions. It may be God, absolute truth, the court of dispassionate human
conscience, the people, the court of history, or another ideal reader. My
approach is more limited. I assume the superaddressee to be the God of the
Christian Bible who has been revealed in the Hebrew scriptures and is finally
and fully revealed in Jesus Christ (cf. Heb 1:1–3) and the written testimony of the

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See, for example, Cook (1962), Comblin (1969) and Edwards (1982 ). Many journal
articles also concentrate on Christology. See, for example, Boring (1992a&b), J Charles

Some, for example Cotter (1996) and Oosthuisen (1989) have studied the charac-
terisation of God in the Hebrew Bible.
early Church. This approach self-consciously admits to a bias, but any other position regarding the identity of the superaddressee would also suffer from bias.

Josipovici (1988:307) makes the intriguing suggestion that instead of thinking about the Bible as a book to be deciphered or even as a story to be told, we should think about it as a person. We do not decipher people, we encounter them. We realise that we cannot tell a person's story. We cannot capture her essence in a poem or a photograph. If we know her well, we will never confuse her with anyone else. We will never exhaust our discovery of her facets. Kepnes (1993) makes a similar point in relation to Buber's works. To Buber the text is always a potential Thou which speaks back to the reader demanding an equal response. Certainly this extends the theocentricity of the text one step further. In this metaphor, when we engage in conversation with the text we encounter God.

This is a dialogical relationship, not meant to absolutise the text. The text is static, but the printer's ink is not embalming fluid. The text is actualised—comes to life—when it is read. We must, of course, realise that the text is hybrid. The Nestle-Aland\textsuperscript{26} text was not available until 1983. It is the result of textual criticism and will probably remain static unless new manuscripts are discovered or technical theory and/or methods change. In addition the many vernacular translations constitute another level of interpretation. The fact that these are static hybrids does not alter the power of the message. The canonised text is living and sharper than a laser beam (a modern equivalent of the two-edged sword—Heb 4:12). It is God's word in the triple sense of supra-author, main character and superaddressee.

In Revelation 1:2 the implied author straightforwardly states that his name is John.\textsuperscript{5} Whoever the historical author might be, someone (or ones) penned the autographs which eventuated in the text of Revelation which the Church accepts as authoritative. But there is also a 'supra-author.' A plenary view of inspiration acknowledges that it is God who ultimately is the author of the revelation of Jesus Christ (Rv 1:1)\textsuperscript{6}. This does not necessitate a dictation theory, for the man John remains the human author who recorded his experiences as repeatedly commanded\textsuperscript{7} (Rv 1:11, 19; 2:1, 12, 18; 3:1, 7, 14; 14:13; 19:9; 21:5). In doing so,

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\textsuperscript{5} For convenience in this study John will be referred to as the author/narrator of Revelation. This does not require the complicated and largely unsuccessful attempt to identify the historical author. Nor does it differentiate between the voices of the implied author and narrator. This is not to deny the importance of such studies, but they are beyond the scope of this article.

\textsuperscript{6} The genitive here is multivalent. Revelation belongs to Jesus. It is about him, and he is its source.

\textsuperscript{7} The exception is Rv 10:4. As John was about to write what the seven peals of thunder had spoken, a voice from heaven told him not to write what the thunder had spoken, but to seal them.
he created a literary document to be shared with the churches of Asia minor at a particular point in history. This document has been read and studied by countless others throughout history, especially by those within the faith communities who accept its canonisation. God, as the superaddressee, understands this document better than the people of those churches. God understands it better than a modern reader who is far removed from the dialogic relationship of another time and another culture. The One who sits on the throne understands it better than the man John, since God is also the supra-author.

To complete the theocentricity of the document supra-authored by God and best understood by God, the One revealed by Jesus Christ is God. God is the main character of the document. This 'wholly other' quality of the book might seem to remove it from human description and discussion, but it does not. This portion of the Christian canon which is so God-centred is also very human. It is written by a human servant (albeit under divine unction and direction) to and for human understanding and response.

The heteroglossia of Revelation involves the first-century Mediterranean world behind the text, the more particularised weird and wonderful world of visions and symbols within the text as well as the worlds of current readers in front of the text. There must be, in Gadamer's (1975) expression, a 'fusion of horizons' between these disparate worlds. This fixed text (again, generically understood) in its particular historical and literary context (Bakhtin 1981) represents an immense plurality of experience which at times seems almost impossible to unravel. Total understanding is impossible because there always remains a surplus of meaning which is irretrievable to anyone except the supra-author who is also the superaddressee. The fact that centrifugal, decentralising tendencies are more powerful than the centripetal, homogenising forces in communication (Bakhtin 1981) adds to the ironic revealing/concealing (see Kelber's (1988) excellent discussion) tendencies of Revelation.

2 THE CHARACTERISATION OF GOD

The character of God is not proscribed within the text as much as that of the other characters. When we speak of the character of God, we usually mean the essential nature of God (Thompson 1993:186). It is a theological rather than literary construct.

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8 Here document is understood in a generic sense, not the individual, specific and disparate manuscripts available to various communities across the centuries.
9 Jesus Christ, this revealer of God, is in some mysterious way himself God.
10 Africans, for example, bring to the text a vast history of religious traditions about the supreme God. See, for example, Greene (1996:122–138).
In her excellent article, Thompson restricts her discussion of the characterisation of God in the Fourth Gospel to the textual markers. She thinks it possible to isolate the characterisation within the Gospel of John, to consider God as a literary figure constructed through the process of reading. Culpepper (1983:113), on the other hand, believes that it is difficult to describe the characterisation of God in John's Gospel. This is because God never appears and the only words God speaks are 'and I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again' (Jn 12:28). Sternberg (1985:323) extends this difficulty in portraying God to the whole Bible. God is the Bible's hero, whose characterisation presents a special case. In the beginning, in Genesis 1:1, God enters the story with a complete absence of preliminaries. Most dimensions associated with character do not apply to God. Physical appearance, social status, geographical location, as well as personal and family history are conspicuously absent. This emphasises the qualitative distance that separates God from humans. It also separates God from pagan gods who, like humans, exist in matter, time, space and society.

The characterisation of gods in ancient Greek literature was not as problematic as was the character of God for early Christians. Greek gods were depicted essentially the same as human beings, who acted and spoke as such. This difference between false gods and human characters on the one hand and the character of God on the other makes it difficult to use the same literary markers. The usual rules and boundaries of character may not only be inadequate to speak of God as a character in narrative, but also not provide an adequate basis for making theological claims.

Tracy (1984) disagrees. He argues that a narrated identification yields both a character within a story context and that character's character. If we say that God is loving and just, we must be able to point to the actions in which God's love and justice are displayed. Love and justice will characterise God only if these terms are appropriate appraisals of God's actions. In the same way, love and justice will be filled with meaning according to the story we tell of God's activity in relation to God's creation (Tracy 1984:12–20). God is most distinctively characterised as the 'logically singular instance of “divine agency” or the “perfection of agency”' (Tracy 1984:76, 126). According to Tracy, God is self-creative, all-powerful and fully unified as a self. God's activity has the fullest possible integration and coherence. Unlike other characters, God's actions will be totally consistent. There will be no reversals or reassessments as often evident in the human characters (Tracy 1984:107–108).

All this is complicated by the reader's context. We may bring to the text ideas of God's omniscience, omnipresence, omnipotence and immutability which do not cohere with narratives in which God seems to change. Thus, Sternberg (1985:322) can maintain that God does not change. It is our acquaintance with God that frequently and at times surprisingly does. We may come to the
text with an understanding of God which has been built through prayer, meditation, perhaps even philosophical and theological reflection. We tend to read the text in ways that verify our prior knowledge.\(^{11}\) Admittedly I do. The consideration of God's character is influenced by previous teaching and reflection. But reading God's character is more than a mere intellectual exercise. It is an act of worship.

Given the conviction of God's reality which many readers bring to the Bible, the question of the characterisation of God is not so much whether the character 'lives' beyond the page, but whether the narrator can make God 'live for the reader' (Thompson 1993:186). Unfortunately, because of the lack of teaching and preaching or even academic attention to the person of God in Revelation, God does not live for many readers. I try to listen to the story of John's visions and enter into the surrealistic dream world of a dragon and locust armies, of angels and a throne in the midst of a crystal sea. I truly want to learn about the One who sits on the throne, but it is difficult to 'sustain the gaze' (Macy's 1987 term). There are too many jarring images. The multivalent language evokes too many emotions and fervent responses. The historical references are too difficult to recover. Nevertheless, a sustained gaze does bring the character of God to life.

It is with this in mind that McCracken (1993) transposes the categories of characterisation. He begins with the Kierkegaardian thought that only God is truly a self. God, McCracken says, is the only true self because a person without spirit is only a physical and mental phenomenon. Nohrnberg (1991:60–61) holds a similar position, pointing out that all characters other than God have their lives and substance on loan. Individuality is extended to them from God, for God is the Bible's only true 'I am.' With this in mind, human characterisation ceases to be the norm which has to stretch to accommodate God's character. Instead, God becomes the paradigm by which all characterisation is interpreted. This view of biblical characterisation provides a heuristic paradigm of the relationship between divine and human characterisation. It does not, however, allow for a close reading of characterisation in specific narratives. It creates a circular logic for investigating the characterisation of God in which we are caught between a theology from above and below. This impasse will be bridged by the theory of interdividuality, discussed below.

In narratological terms, this means that somehow the vision recorded in Revelation refers to the Reality that is God. It assumes a critical realism (see Van Huyssteen 1989) in the sense that ultimate Reality is true and knowable in the mystical presence of God. Raschke (1982) cautions that 'to name God in finality

\(^{11}\) Language, too, influences our understanding of God. The word for God in Swahili (\textit{Mungu}), for example, basically indicates that which one worships (Frankl 1995:271).
and fullness...is to rouse the Beast.' God cannot be tamed, domesticated or analysed. The One who sits on the throne can best be described as jasper and sardius (4:3). The mystery remains, yet Revelation is just that: revelation. Its purpose is to communicate, to elicit a faith-response.

Revelation is unique literature. Although it conforms to the conventions of great literature, the record of John's vision is not just great literature. Its canonisation recognises it as privileged, sacred literature. Revelation contains obscure, even cryptic language and images, but it is not written in an esoteric, heavenly language. God reveals God through the language of a particular people at a certain point in history. This is true in spite of the exigencies of language and communication theory hinted at above. Revelation has much in common with other first-century literature, but the Christian church accepts it as authoritative. God, believers insist, is mysteriously present and is revealed through the fantastic images and characters narrated by a man who was on the island of Patmos almost 2 000 years ago.

3 TOWARDS A THEORY OF CHARACTERISATION

Characterisation in biblical narrative is complicated by the fact that most definitions of character have been formulated by literary theorists in relation to fiction. The mimetic quality of characterisation is a lot different in theocentric biblical writings. Many of the fundamentals of characterisation, however, are constants.

3.1 The starting point

Theory of biblical characterisation is firmly grounded in classical and modern secular literary theory. This, then must be the starting point.

The very definition of character in literature is problematic. Prince, in *A Dictionary of Narratology* (1987:12) defines character as 'an existent endowed with anthropomorphic traits and engaged in anthropomorphic actions; an actor with anthropomorphic attributes.' This provides an adequate starting point, but raises

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12 See the discussion of the unique use of language in prophetic/apocalyptic literature under the topic, genre.

13 Several excellent studies have been made of the unique grammar of Revelation and its literary value. Mussies (1971) analyses John's use of morphological categories of Kainé Greek and addresses the problems of interpretation, text composition and bilingualism. Dougherty (1990) presents a computer-assisted catalogue of every instance of a syntactical phenomenon. Each is described, explained and classified in an order similar to that found in classical and biblical Greek grammars. Thompson (1985) argues that the major reason for the peculiarly un-Greek use of the verb in Revelation is the influence of Semitic syntax.
all kinds of questions. It assumes knowledge of the classical and structuralist preference for action over characterisation; the tendency to subordinate actors to plot. In that sense, a character is little more than an element of setting, something that exists in a story to move the plot forward. However, as Henry James recognised in his famous essay, 'The art of fiction' (in Roberts 1948:13), characters and action are interdependent. 'What is character but the determination of incident? What is incident but the illustration of character?' he asks. Alter (1989:69), in his discussion of the fictional character, answers by going beyond this reciprocity. Character, he says, is epitomised in the functionally superfluous passage which gives the character a 'surplus margin of gratuitous life.'

Prince's stipulation of anthropomorphism is also telling. According to his definition, the magic carpet of the fairy tale, the beast or dragon of Revelation can be considered characters only if they exhibit humanlike qualities. How does this impact on the characterisation of God? Must the Alpha and Omega become recognisably human to be considered a character? Is this a necessary condescension by the One who sits on the throne so that there can be a point of contact (a fusion of horizons) with us who can only think in terms of human history? Does it intimate a reversal of the biblical declaration that God made humanity in God's own image, thus relegating Genesis 1:27ff to an aetiological saga? Is God merely a projection of our human thoughts and experiences? Is it a domestication of God who is wholly other? Or is it an expression of the I-Thou (Buber 1970) relationship between us and the Transcendent? What of the non-anthropomorphic representations of God in the Hebrew Bible (e.g. the burning bush or the still, small voice)? Crites (1975:26) defines personification as creating an entity which can be addressed, who remembers and responds, and who acts. Her definition broadens the concept to include all theophanies. This comprehensive definition of character includes other than human entities. All human, heavenly and satanic characters must be included because of their contribution to an understanding of God's character.

Chatman (1978:127) defines character as a paradigm of constructed traits that the reader attaches to a name. Burnett (1993:16) builds on Chatman's statement and describes character as an effect of the reading process. The reader accumulates indicators from the text and compiles a composite view of a character who 'may at times “transcend” the text and seem to possess individuality.' As Burnett (1993) suggests, however, the mere collection of traits is not sufficient to account for the resulting literary character who takes on life and form beyond the ink-on-paper symbols we call writing. Somehow, as Thompson (1993:177-204) points out, 'the character is always greater than the sum of his or her literary parts.' That 'somehow' may be the reader's contribution to the production of character which, as Kermode (1979:75) says, is a 'source of opacity, of complex, various and never definitive interpretation.' Characters emerge as
'ghostly doubles' of living persons who during the dynamic process of reading come to exist in the consciousness of the reader. The text generates the characters, but a reader must apprehend them; texts signify characters but do not prescribe them (Growler 1993:218–219).

There is a sense in which the revealing of narrative is also a concealing. The characterisation of God in John's vision enables us to understand God better, but at the same time the mystery remains. The fullness of God's character cannot be portrayed in one narrative. The situation, point of view, purpose, etc. all contribute to what can be said about God through this particular narrative. Also, we bring to the reading of Revelation our reading of many other God-texts (in the Derridean sense).

Chatman (1978:141) lists three features which he calls indications rather than criteria for characters. He says, in agreement with Prince, that a human being who has a name and is important to the plot indicates a character. Notice the additional designation of a name. However, many biblical characters who are important to the plot remain nameless. The good Samaritan, and the Samaritan woman, for example, carry the plot in their respective stories. In Revelation, angels, beasts, ‘women’, witnesses, horsemen and others who remain nameless are nevertheless essential to the story. Anonymous characters as well as character groups must be taken seriously for their contribution to the story and the One who is central to it.

3.2 Point of contact: referentiality

The relationship of literary characters to real people has occupied interpreters for centuries. Narrative theory provides very little help in resolving the dilemma. Alter (1989:51), for example, laments the formal and ideological marginalisation of character by structuralists and post-structural literary theorists. He charges the narratologists with having very little critical vocabulary with which to discuss the mimetic dimension of character. Donaldson (1993:81–96) tries unsuccessfully to solve this riddle of the narrative character by introducing the rather fantastic figure of a cyborg who would be more at home in science fiction than narrative theory. Her paradigmatic cyborg figure is an ‘uncanny and unstable hybrid of animate organs and inanimate machine’.14 She uses the cyborg to bridge the gap between the character trapped in the mechanics of the print medium and her life beyond the page. But the attempt is not successful. There are too many facets of

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14 Her analysis of Potiphar's wife in Genesis 39 offers provocative insights into a reading of the woman as one who uses her sexuality to prevent a 'male homosocial redistribution of the household.' However this feminist counter-reading of the traditional sexual harassment motif is not enhanced by the high-tech but confusing cyborg analogy.
language, imagination, technical skill (to name only a few factors involving both author and hearer/reader) for them to be solved by yet another literary character.

The problem of referentiality has been ably argued by many and its intricacies are far beyond the scope of this present discussion. However, a brief look is necessary. In classical thought mimesis is a way of speaking about meaning and truth given a continuous relationship between things. In this connectedness thoughts or words reflect or mirror other layers of reality. This approach is helpful in a consideration of the characterisation of God in Revelation. In his landmark essay on the theory of character, Weinsheimer (1979:188) argues for a mimetic view. In his concept the difference between fictional and historical characters is that the former are limited to 'static, complete texts and the latter to open-ended, rewriteable texts.' What is written about an historical character can never completely portray the real person. Because of this, histories are never more than 'pre-texts' which anticipate further research, fuller consideration, and more texts. Certainly this is true of God who is historical in a way beyond human comprehension, of whom we receive glimpses and know in part (1 Cor 13:12).

Bal (1985:81–82) helpfully labels characters ‘paper people,’ insisting that characters resemble people. This mimetic relationship is important as we consider the characterisation of God especially if, as I assume to be the case, God is not a fictitious character. If God is not simply the construct of one first-century, Asian man (or of Christianity or even religious humankind), how is it that the narration of that man (or the Christian scriptures or other sacred writings) refers to that ultimate reality?

Thompson (1993:182) notes that there is a move away from a mimetic or representational theory of character where the emphasis is on the correspondence between characters and real life. It is a shift which parallels that in narratology in general. The emphasis has moved from author to text to audience. The way readers read and interact with the text in large measure determines the understanding of the characters. In this sense a character is not a fixed entity with an essence. Rather, a character moves within the plot, and the reader gradually builds a picture of that character. The resulting construct may vary somewhat from reader to reader, but it is usually not significantly different from that predicated by the author (or supra-author) who placed the markers within the text. Alter (1989:55–61) calls this relationship ‘imaginative intercourse’ between the experience of the writer and that of the reader. He argues that the unity of a character inheres in ‘dynamic contradictions’ which are mobile, unstable, and elusive. This is an important insight for the discussion of the characterisation of God.

Martin (1986:128) points out that the result can satisfy the requirements of Aristotle’s double logic of a character who is unexpected but, in retrospect,
inevitable. The quests for the historical Jesus may indicate that this process is not as automatic or predictable as we might expect. As Schweitzer (1954:4) points out, ‘objective’ histories of Jesus were actually re-creations of the theologians who fashioned a Jesus subservient to their interests and predilections. Likewise, the portrait of God is built up by ‘a brushstroke here and a brushstroke there, with each story or lyric poem contributing a small part to the total effect’ (Ryken 1974:34).

Bal (1985:81–82) helpfully summarises four problems in accounting for the character-effect: (1) clearly distinguishing between the human person and the character, (2) the division of characters into categories, (3) the extra-textual situation, and (4) the ideology of the investigators.\(^{15}\)

### 3.3 Point of ancestry: Greek characterisation

Like the secular literary critics, biblical literature scholars have based their analysis of character on classical Greek models. This is perhaps inevitable since there is no comparable presentation in any Jewish literature or other Christian sources. Burnett (1993:7–8) lists several reasons why characterisation in classical literature became important to biblical critics, especially as regards his area of interest in the studies of the gospels. The most obvious reason is that it happened by default because the Greeks are the only ones who structured a system of rhetoric and poetics that is extant. However, Burnett’s (1993:14 footnote) quotation of Raphael (1960) is all too true: ‘Little did he [Aristotle] dream, poor man, that his scrappy remarks would be taken so seriously by later dramatists and critics.’ With this caution in mind, it is nevertheless important to mention several aspects of Aristotle’s theory of characterisation. Although Revelation is linked very closely to the Hebrew Bible and is therefore Asian in its outlook, it was written in Greek and a product of a very Hellenised society. According to Aristotle there are four dimensions of characterisation: *chreston*, the quality of goodness or evil; *harmotton*, appropriate traits which are related to action; *nomoiros*, those idiosyncrasies which individualise characters; and *homalon*, consistency of character (Chatman 1978:110). The Greeks posited a mutually explanatory correspondence between character and actions. People’s actions reveal the essence of their character (their positive or negative *chreston*), and their standards dictate their actions. The *chreston* of a character, the alignment of that character with virtue or vice, reflects a strong tradition of literary stylisation.

Halliwell (1990:57) suggests that it relativises and redefines the individualism of the modern, Western world. To the ancients (and to many in the modern

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\(^{15}\) Malina (1989:127) is careful to point out, for example, that Mediterranean characters who appear in the Bible stand in contrast to American understandings of persons as psychological individuals in a social world in which economic relationships are primary.
non-Western world) people are identified by the group of which they are a part. There is a tendency to evaluate and understand people by reference to wide, ethical categories and standards. These standards formed the foundation for Greek judgments of character. The characters of Revelation conform to this type of characterisation. The cosmic antagonists never swerve from their opposition to God and God's people. The human characters tend to remain either insiders or outsiders. There is opportunity for change in, for example, the repeated calls to repentance, but this entails a realignment of group membership, not individualised characterisation.

The importance of these classical understandings in the characterisation of God is obvious. God's actions reveal the essence of God's *chreston* (goodness). God's *harmatton* (appropriate traits) are both revealed and demonstrated by God's acts. The *homalon* (consistency) of God can be evaluated in relationship to the deeds of God. That which distinguishes God from God's creation and all other gods is God's *nomoios* (uniqueness).

3.4 Point of divergence: direct and indirect characterisation

There are two modes of Greek characterisation. Descriptive or narrative characterisation tends to give a more distanced, moralistic image within the categories of goodness, consistency, appropriate traits, and uniqueness. Indirect characterisation allows the characters to speak for themselves, through their words, actions and relationships (Halliwell 1990:58). Though the characters are brought close to the hearer/readers through the latter technique, it is an indirect form of characterisation because the audience must infer the character. In the Bible as in most ancient literature characters tend to be types rather than individuals. They seldom diverge from traits that are initially ascribed to them (Gill 1983:471; Burnett 1993:6). The typified role may come from a social role or culturally accepted trait (see below) of biblical society. It may be inferred from intertextual markers as well as from the poetic techniques of the narrative itself, especially the plot. As mentioned above, characters in Revelation rarely change roles. One exception is the change of heart exhibited by the people of Jerusalem not killed by the earthquake. They were terrified and gave glory to the God of heaven (11:13).

Burnett (1993:13–14) suggests that there is a modern distaste for this minimal and indirect characterisation. This may be why biblical characters tend to be read solely as types. This is not to say that typical characters are not helpful. Alter (1989:58) rightly observes that it would be disorienting to have no dependable stereotypes. Relating individuals to general types is one of the principal ways we know people in real experience. The use of types in written characterisation reflects the mental procedure we use every day outside of reading and stimulates a similar cognitive process for understanding literary characterisation.
In addition, in Revelation types serve a rhetorical purpose. The hearer/reader is brought into the story and constantly challenged to choose between opposing types. In Revelation a myriad of characters takes on typical roles and helps the reader to understand the necessity of aligning with the One who sits on the throne or the forces opposed to the One who was and who is and who is to come. Martin (1986:118) also values flat, static characters who have no new vision to offer. He sees the ‘inevitability of their connections with the reality they inhabit’ as that which makes them interesting. The reader can anticipate their actions.

Martin uses Huckleberry Finn as an example. We would not be able to see the prejudice, violence, and conformity of his world if we did not see them ‘through the transparency of Huck’s amoral eyes, which strip away the conventions of “civilization” to reveal what we civilized readers would not otherwise see.’ In a similar way the ironic funeral dirges of the kings, merchants and seafarers help us to understand their horror of Babylon’s loss and their terror of meeting a similar fate. The rhetoric of the Apocalypse reveals the falseness of the wealth and power of Babylon. The finery of the harlot covers her essential evil essence and blasphemous pretensions. This is the point of view promulgated by Revelation’s rhetoric, but the perspective of the kings, merchants and seafarers presents an alternative. Their laments provide an all too real glimpse at the privileges of association with the rich and powerful. Of course, the image is fleeting and patently false, but perhaps all too prevalent in the first-century Asian and today’s church.

Not all biblical characters are flat. It is an oversimplification and distortion to depict ancient characterisation as static and unidimensional. Biblical characterisation has suffered because of this error. An unfortunate distinction between flat and round characters has polarised their categorisation. For Chatman (1978:132–133), a flat character is one with a single or very few traits. Round characters possess a variety of characteristics and there may even be discrepancy among them. Their behaviour is not predictable. They are capable of changing. They are open constructs, with the ability to gain insight. John is such a round character in Revelation. His self-description situates him as an equal to the hearer/readers. He trembles at the visions and needs the help of elders and angels to interpret some of them. In spite of all his privileged insights he mistakes an angel as one to be worshipped, not once but twice. John is both insightful and obtuse.

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16 Boring (1989:194–224) believes that John is not misplacing his worship. Rather this is a rhetorical device to combat Angel worship in the Asian church. Whether that is true or not, on the story level the character is ‘round’ in his fallibility.
Berlin (1983:32) broadens the base of character development. On a continuum she lists agent, type and character. An agent is one about whom nothing is known except what is necessary to the plot. It is a function of the plot. A type has a limited and stereotypical range of traits and represents a class of people. A character has a broader range of traits which do not all belong to the same class of people. We know more about the character than is necessary for the plot. Reinhartz (1993:131-132) further delineates 'pure agents' as those in whom the narrator appears completely uninterested as unique and discrete individuals. The reader's responsibility to infer character from words, deeds and relationships could allow a character to move back and forth along the continuum, fluctuating between type and individuality.

The importance of a biblical figure is not necessarily his position on this agent, type and character continuum. Agents focus the reader's attention on the main characters and the plot. Anonymity works negatively in the construction of the anonymous characters themselves, deflecting attention from them to the central characters. They contribute positively to the construction of the named characters with whom they interact. They also help the development of the plot. Reinhartz (1993) demonstrates the importance of anonymous characters in an article in which she discusses the unnamed characters in 1 and 2 Samuel. The army, for example, is a typified character group composed of numerous anonymous individuals (1:123). As such the army is important as a backdrop or stage setting for the personal lives and adventures of a principal character. In Revelation there are many anonymous character groups, each contributing to the complex milieu of insiders and outsiders in relationship to the One who sits on the throne and the new Jerusalem. The locust army which torments the earth for five months constitutes the first woe. This scene thrusts the plot forward towards the climactic battle between the army of heaven and the armies of the kings of the earth. Each army contributes to the plot as well as the characterisation of their kings.

Reinhartz (1993:121) divides anonymous characters or character groups into two categories based on the degree and type of relationship to principal characters. There are those who are autonomous characters whose definitions are independent of those of any named characters. She distinguishes these characters by the degree and nature of relationships to named major and secondary characters. The numerical size of the group, she says, is also important. In I Samuel the smaller the group, the more intimate relationship there is with the named character and the more detailed the characterisation of the unnamed character. This is not the case in Revelation where numbers carry considerable symbolic power. The two witnesses, twelve tribes and one hundred and forty-four thousand are equally important and bear similar relationships to the lamb and the One on the throne. In Revelation most characters are not named. They assume their identity by their loyalty to God or enemies of God.
Important principles in the construction of the image of a character include: repetition, accumulation of characteristics, transformations, and relations with others (Bal 1985:85-86). Repetition allows relevant characteristics which are repeated in different forms to emerge more and more clearly. Odd facts coalesce and complement each other and accumulate to form coherent characteristics. Once important characteristics have been identified, changes can be noted. Similarities and contrasts in relationship to others are especially important in biblical narrative. Community rather than individuality is a cultural given, so the interrelationships of characters must be noted with special care by readers from a cultural milieu steeped in individualism.

Day (1995) successfully uses Chatman's trait-based theory of character in her study of Esther, *Faces of a Queen*. However, I agree with Donaldson's (1993:83) criticism that Chatman's theory perpetuates the traditional Aristotelian view of character as inert and descriptive. Chatman (1978:125) defined a trait as 'a narrative adjective out of the vernacular labeling a personal quality of a character, as it persists over part or whole of the story.' The traits, which exist at story level, are not in reality traits but names for 'socially invented signs' (Chatman 1978:124). The purpose of their use is to prompt the reader to identify the character by means of culturally recognisable qualities of character.

Each genre has its own highly developed system of conventions. The melodrama has the damsel in distress, the villainous landlord and the hero who arrives in the nick of time. Audiences are urged to respond with sighs, boos and cheers as the respective characters enter the stage. The actantial model of subject, object, receivers, helpers and opponents likewise labels characters in airtight categories. In this sense 'character traits' may be more a function of the requirements of a story than of personality (Rashkow 1993:107). Of course, genre plays a part in a character's predictability (Bal 1985:84). Apocalyptic works have clearly defined roles for the actants to fulfill. The characters of Revelation are discussed according to their earthly or heavenly nature as well as the alignment of their loyalties.

It is also important to remember that cultural differences assign various values to personality traits. A tribe in New Guinea baffled a missionary by valuing the treachery of Judas. Equally baffling to provincial Westerners are the ancient Mediterranean values of group orientation over individualism and autonomy.17 It is the tendency of each social entity to characterise human qualities in the light of its own standards.

The readers of Revelation bring with themselves value-laden labels and hierarchical preferences for traits displayed by characters. The churches

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17 Malina & Neyrey (1988:145–151) provide a helpful table which compares United States values with those of the Mediterranean.
addressed in chapters 2 and 3 are condemned or commended on the basis of their traits. Their hard work, perseverance, endurance of hardships, et cetera, provide textual markers for commendable traits. People throughout history have displayed such attributes, but they may not have been called by the same names. They may not have been valued or even recognised. The church codified and articulated them as Christian virtues. Readers educated by the church, then, may bring to the text expectations which are fulfilled by their promotion. However, the post-modern, post-Christian West tends to see Christian virtues as archaic, puritanical and limiting, even fanatical. These readers would react very differently to the text.

3.5 Point of departure: interdividuality

McCracken (1993) reacts in another way to the Western concept of character. He believes that character conceived in individual terms is inadequate for biblical characterisation because of the essentially communal nature of first-century Palestinian culture. He, therefore, coin an essentially oxymoronic term: ‘interindividual character.’ Following Bakhtin (1981, 1986), he understands character to involve an essential relationship with others. Interindividuality is revealed in moments of dramatic interaction between what we commonly call characters. This space between, where one encounters another, is the threshold or boundary. Characters, he says, are ‘formed, reformed and revealed in dialogic interaction at a moment of crisis’ (McCracken 1993:29). This runs counter to Chatman’s trait-based theory in which traits define an essential character or typical essence which is revealed in the course of the story.18 To state it even more boldly, characters exist in the boundary between themselves and another. The words of one character to or about another are less important for their objective truth than for the response they elicit from the other.19 McCracken (1993:31) uses the example of Gideon who is defined as Gideon in relation to his ancestors, prophet, clan, family and the Midianites.

Interindividual characterisation hints at the African concept of personhood. The Sotho-Tswana say, ‘Motho umuntu ga ubantu’ (I am because I belong)
(Maluleka 1991). M Mpolo (1985, quoted in Augsburger 1986) transposes Descartes' famous dictum to say the same thing: *cognatus ergo sum* (I belong, therefore I am).

This concept of individuality in community and characterisation by relationships has important implications for the characterisation of God in Revelation. Careful attention must be paid to all interaction between the One who sits on the throne and the other characters (to use more traditional Western terms). The non-divine characters find their identity in relationship to God and their response to God's presence and actions are essential in determining God's characterisation. God in Revelation is not an isolated entity sitting on the throne. God is God in relationship to John, the elders, the angels, the churches, the dragon, the beasts, the one hundred and forty-four thousand, the kings and multitudes of the earth, and every other character.

There are five distinguishing qualities of the character as interindividual. (1) Character is relatively free and independent, not closed, limited, strictly defined from an objective authorial position. (2) Character exists in a dialogic relation with other characters. It is a case of I-other or I-thou rather than just I. (3) Character exists in a real present, in a dramatic contemporaneity with the hearer/readers. Characters are placed in a 'zone of contact' with the hearer/readers rather than distantly observed as an object (Bakhtin 1981:32). (4) Character is something that the author tends toward speaking with rather than about. The narrator does not tell a story primarily by asserting knowledge about a character. Instead, a character is placed within a situation, provoked, and given an opportunity to respond. (5) Character exists in discourse. The life of a character is manifested only in a moment of encounter. In Revelation, all that happens, all actions and reactions are the result of the sovereign direction of the One who sits on the throne, and everyone receives their characterisation in relationship to God.

4 CONCLUSION

Interindividual characterisation is the most extreme form of indirect characterisation. It relies on the relational connection between and among characters to come to an understanding of a character. Human, satanic and heavenly characters are free and independent but usually do not move out of their typical roles. They serve as types to guide the hearer/readers to appropriate responses. The characters, even those who form part of the setting, do not exist in isolation.

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20 Setiloane (1986:13ff) extends the meaning with 'Mohle ke Modimo' (the human is divinity). This idea that each individual has a spark of the divine, is not what is here meant by interindividuality.
There is always a dialogic relation with other characters. The characters are not to be viewed from a distance, but in a contemporaneous reality in which the hearer/readers are invited to participate. The implied author/narrator, John, speaks about the characters, but he also speaks with them. Though he is in a sense merely a chronicler, he himself is involved in the action along with the other characters. He often does not have privileged information to elucidate a character. He merely records the responses of characters placed in exceedingly boisterous action. Beasts, a dragon, a woman clothed with the sun, a harlot and many other unforgettable characters come alive through the discourse within the story and between the story and the hearer-reader.

In Revelation God rarely enters the story directly. God does speak (1:8; 21:5–8), but God is most often depicted indirectly, through relationships with God's creation. From this indirect perspective, God's character can be inferred. The character of God comes alive through the interindividual relationships between the Creator and all creation whose personhood derives from the One who sits on the throne.

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