

Rhetoric and God's Divine Revelation

Examining The Persuasiveness of the Oracles to the Seven Churches Through Aristotle's Canon of Invention.

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In the opening chapters of the Book of Revelation John of Patmos is told by Jesus Christ to write down God's divine revelation. Seven churches in Asia Minor are mentioned by name—each given praise for their faith and good works and condemnation for their tribulations. The churches of Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamos, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea are told that the end of the world is at hand—repentance is necessary. Widely considered to be the most complex piece of apocalyptic rhetoric, this paper applies Aristotle's canon of invention to the seven "oracles" in order to explain a number of persuasive techniques available to John and why he would have employed them in Revelation. The aim of the rhetorical criticism is to determine the effectiveness of John's message to persuade his audience to repent of their sins.

“I looked, and, behold, a door was opened in heaven: and the first voice which I heard was as it were of a trumpet talking with me; which said, Come up hither, and I will shew thee things which must be hereafter.” (Revelation 4:1)

The Book of Revelation, the last book in the New Testament of the Christian bible vividly depicts the Second Coming of Jesus Christ to Earth for the final battle between good and evil. The author, who calls himself John, is told in a divine revelation from God to write down all that appears before him. Through the course of twenty-two chapters the Book of Revelation John describes ominous warnings and calls for repentance, plagues and chaos spreading throughout the earth, the judgment of man by God, and a glorious reign in the New Jerusalem for those faithful to God after Christ's Second Coming. Although believers and non-believers continue to debate the extent to which John's account is a literal description of the end of days or is instead a metaphoric message of inspiration to his listeners, Revelation is, without question, a critical part of our historic and cultural identity. Figures such as the antichrist and the communion of saints, concepts such as the rapture and the Armageddon, and the symbolic moral struggle between good and evil are critically dependent upon the text of Revelation.

Why Revelation?

Apocalyptic rhetoric is perhaps the most fascinating form of rhetoric for several reasons. The complex allusions and use of mathematic and linguistic symbols allow for many different disciplines to examine apocalyptic messages. For this reason, Revelation has appealed both to historians and statisticians in a way much uncommon to other texts. Second, apocalyptic rhetoric has been used as a justification of moral righteousness by several different groups through the past centuries. Lee Snyder (2000) explains:

“Scholarly attention is appropriate, for apocalyptic rhetoric may play a significant role in both religious and secular world-building. Apocalyptic rhetoric helped drive the Crusades, the Protestant Reformation, the French Revolution, and the Puritan settlement

of the U.S....David Koresh was expounding *Revelation* when he met his personal apocalypse" (402).

The frequency of Revelation's moral justifications are quite evident; the cryptic prophecies within Revelation have acted as a lightning rod for moral justification precisely because they are left almost wide open for interpretation. The text of chapter thirteen of Revelation, for example, describes one of the enemies of God using numerical descriptions of his characteristics and very general explanations of his wickedness (emphasis mine):

"And I stood upon the sand of the sea, and saw a beast rise up out of the sea, having seven heads and ten horns, and upon his horns ten crowns, and upon his heads the name of blasphemy and I saw one of his heads as it were wounded to death; and his deadly wound was healed: and all the world wondered after the beast...and they worshipped the beast...and there was given unto him a mouth speaking great things and blasphemies...and it was given unto him to make war with the saints, and to overcome them: and power was given him over all kindreds, and tongues, and nations."

Although humanity has not seen a man or creature with seven heads upon its shoulders, if given a specific interpretation of the beast's description the heads, crowns, and horns could symbolize any number of things.¹

Finally, concepts derived from Revelation, such as the rapture, have been particularly prominent in today's political and popular culture. Byassee (2004) argues: "Mainline seminaries have ignored this phenomenon in inverse proportion to its social and political influence." By *this phenomenon*, he means the Western political and social landscapes have been consistently shaped by the growing influence of Revelation's concepts despite a serious lack of formal academic research.² John's message has found a renewed audience in today's popular culture.

¹ Notice also that the beast speaks blasphemies against God and wages war with the holy members of the Christian churches, but the content of the blasphemies and the details of the wars the beast will carry out are left out are wholly missing. This allows for creative, sometimes extremely creative explanations by secular and religious leaders who "fill in the blanks" so to speak with a message tailored to adopting a particular course of action.

Left Behind, a popular young adult fiction book series which describes a civilization after the divine rapture, has accrued a large fan base and has sold 40 million copies since the first novel appeared in 1995.³ Countless films dedicated to John's work have also appeared in the past decades including such titles as *Gone* (2002), *Apocalypse* (2004), and *Saved* (2004).

While several scholars have rhetorically analyzed the entire content of Revelation, most notably David DeSilva and Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, I will instead focus on one aspect of John's message. The artifact of my examination will be limited to the seven oracles of Asia Minor delivered to the seven churches of Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamos, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea. The specific focus is necessary to analyze the effectiveness of John's message to a specific audience, which up to this point, has gone unexamined or assumed by other critics. The conclusions of my research question (stated later) will also concentrate specifically on John's ability to persuade a specific audience.

The Seven Oracles

In the opening chapter of the Book of Revelation, Jesus Christ tells John:

“Write the things which thou hast seen, and the things which are, and the things which shall be hereafter; The mystery of the seven stars which thou sawest in my right hand, and the seven golden candlesticks. The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches: and the seven candlesticks which thou sawest are the seven churches” (Rev. 1:19-20).

The seven oracles allow us to narrow our focus on the first three chapters of Revelation because they create a specific audience to whom John persuades. Biblical and secular scholars have

² Byassee continues: “the rapture’s proponents have not only established a publishing juggernaut; they have also been influencing members of Congress and presidents” (18). Byassee’s claims can be observed in the past U.S. congressional and presidential elections where the conservative Christian voting block has become a serious target for campaigning politicians.

³ Nantais & Simone, 2003.

proposed several possible audiences for John's message, however John's inclusion of the seven oracles is meant to explicitly connect with the members of the seven churches. Working from this initial premise this paper will seek to answer the following question: Does John effectively use the available means of persuasion to evoke the intended response from his audience? Answering this question will first require a contextual analysis of the author and his intended audience: Who is John? What are his goals, or why is he writing to the churches in Asia Minor? Why are the seven churches named in the second and third chapters of Revelation given special attention over other Christian churches? What is the background behind each of these churches when they receive John's message?

After answering these questions I will discuss the available means of persuasion available to John using testimony from David DeSilva found in his work "Seeing Things John's Way: The Rhetoric of the Book of Revelation." From this discussion I will draw a conclusion that John effectively or ineffectively achieved his goals. Although it is ultimately impossible to know with certainty if the seven churches responded the way John intended we can determine his persuasiveness through abstraction⁴ and how closely he follows Aristotle's requirements for good rhetorical invention.

Whither A Classical Rhetorical Paradigm?

The validity of Revelation as a work of apocalyptic rhetoric, including the seven oracles to the churches of Asia Minor, has been well established. Yet this alone does not demonstrate the *need* for a rhetorical criticism of the artifact nor does it specify what type of rhetorical analysis should be used. The method which I have selected, the Neo-Aristotelian model, will be justified

⁴ By way of situational analysis, abstracting the context of the audience and the occasion allows us to draw hypothetical conclusions about the members of the seven churches such that if Ephesus was experiencing *w*, techniques *x* and *y* would or would not effectively persuade the members of the Church to do *z*.

later in the paper after the proper interpretation of Revelation's text has been chosen. However, to quickly highlight the method here I will direct my focus to Aristotle's first cannon, invention, in order to examine the available techniques John might have used in his appeals to ethos, pathos, and logos.

The connection between religious and rhetorical criticism has been prominently displayed in the past decades and has resulted in "fresh understandings" of concepts such as "proverb, oracle, psalm, song, narrative, and myth" (Robbins & Patton, 327). Criticism of Revelation, however, is few and far between; the breadth of major scholastic investigation into the text's rhetorical components is so wide that one loses track of the most important questions a critic should ask. Was John of Patmos an effective rhetor, did he persuade the seven churches of Asia Minor? By focusing solely on this question, my rhetorical criticism can help reframe important aspects of Robbins and Patton's *fresh understandings* in a succinct argument.

John of Patmos

In Rev. 1:9 the author identifies himself as "John, who [is] also your brother" and indicates that his revelation from God occurred on "the isle that is called Patmos." Unfortunately John is a name all too common to those familiar with the New Testament.⁵ Countless guesses have been logged, including testimony by Bishop Irenaeus (c. 202), a prominent figure in the early Christian church, who declared that John of Patmos was John the son of Zebedee and apostle to Jesus.⁶ Still, without any concrete evidence to support Irenaeus' claim or claims from other religious and lay persons John's true identity will always remain mysterious.

⁵ Perhaps the most famous John in the New Testament is the man regarded as Jesus' cousin, John the Baptist. Other figures include John Mark, John the apostle, and John the elder.

Popular consensus puts John's work within three distinct time periods. According to DeSilva, the two dates most favored by scholars are the "Year of the Four Emperors" (88-89 CE) or the end of Roman emperor Domitian's reign (81-96 CE). However, a third suggested date ranges from 98-117 CE, during the reign of Trajan (DeSilva, 34).

Prophet or Political Exile?

To say that prophecy is an important part of the Hebrew and Christian faith traditions is to overly simplify one of the most important aspects of the Abrahamic religions. Though dated, Bernard's characterization of a prophet's role in Hebrew culture is succinctly precise:

"In the Jewish commonwealth the distinction between the religious and the secular, between church and the state, was not recognized; and so the prophets who proclaimed the will and purposes of Jehovah to his people played a conspicuous part the foreign and domestic policy of a nation" (117).

In the Old Testament, prophets play diverse, powerful roles such as the leading God's army into battle "as did Samuel," or assuming the role of a statesmen such as Isaiah, or a priest such as Jeremiah (Id., 118). For Christians, Jesus' baptism, death on the cross, and resurrection were fulfillments of longstanding Hebrew prophecies. Furthermore Jesus declares in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke that "prophets should appear after his ascension" (Id., 119).

When John claims that he himself is a prophet, it is not to be taken lightly. Although John does not directly state that he is a prophet, the setting in the opening of Revelation makes John's position quite clear. John of Patmos invokes a special relationship with God such that it is he, the

⁶ His claim "carries some weight since as a young man, Irenaeus knew Polycarp, who had in turn known John" (DeSilva, 32) Dionysius of Alexandria and the Roman presbyter Gaius also claimed to know which John was the author of Revelation. When John describes the place of the twelve apostles in Revelation it seems as though he is speaking from the perspective of an outsider. However, the text by no means excludes the possibility that John of Patmos was in fact an apostle of Jesus.

“humble servant” who is chosen by Jesus to disclose God’s divine revelation of the end of days.⁷ As we shall discuss later, Jesus command to “write the things which thou hast seen” (Rev. 1:19) conjures the image of an oracle speaking *through* John as God spoke through the prophets of the Old Testament rather than speaking *to* John from a distance.

But before and after Christ’s life and death it is not the case that prophets commanded full acceptance from their audience. The threat of false prophets weighed greatly on the minds of Jews and Christians alike. John was unquestionably aware of this threat and the possible impact it could have on his message. False prophets are mentioned throughout Revelation, including specific references in the oracles to Jezebel the false prophetess (Rev. 2:20) and the Nicolaitans (2:6, 15). The presence of false prophets in Revelation could be an important tactic to asserting John’s own credibility by means of value-driven juxtaposition, as we shall discuss later. While it is clear that John is acting as a prophet in Revelation, truthfully or otherwise, we must consider other motivations he might have for writing Revelation. Is there more than a religious occasion for reaching out to the churches of Asia Minor?

To answer this question we must first understand from where John of Patmos is writing; requiring both an investigation of his geographical location and his reasons for being in said location. DeSilva explains “It is not entirely clear how John came to be on the island, or what the circumstances of his stay were” (33). John’s ministry may have gotten him into trouble with the Roman government who at the time was still very opposed to Christianity. DeSilva continues:

“Eusebius read this in line with the tradition that John was exiled to Patmos during the reign of Domitian as a result of his activity in the churches...Confronted with John’s

⁷ The underlying premise for this argument is that God does not choose willy-nilly to whom he will deliver his divine message.

stance toward Roman imperialism...a local official (or Domitian himself) might well have seen relegation to the island of Patmos as a political solution" (33).

If John were living in exile on Patmos as a sort of political prisoner, it is possible that Revelation's religious message could have doubled as a political statement. Rome is indeed a major part of Revelation's symbolism which has been interpreted with a clearly negative connotation. It may never be known whether John's journey to Patmos was voluntary or obligatory, but the possibility of motives other than a divine calling tell us an important fact about John of Patmos: He is a complicated individual. Part of the alluring complexity behind the apocalyptic rhetoric of Revelation is the mysterious identity and motivations of its author. Indeed to conduct a thorough investigation of the available means of persuasion available to John, we cannot assume without question that John is simply the humble servant to God.

A Voice Crying Out in the Aegean

Whether prophet or political exile, it is clear from the text of Revelation that the author is concerned with Roman imperialism. John's relationship to Rome is an important aspect of his method of persuasion. The oracles to the seven churches may in fact be more than a warning about God's divine judgment. Could John have written Revelation as a way of illuminating the threat of Roman imperialism to Christianity?

There are several places in the Book of Revelation where it is possible to draw parallels between the story's figures and the Roman Empire. In fact, DeSilva claims that the parallels are so strong that "there is little reason to suspect John's own hearers had to reach very far" to identify them (37). Several contextual clues, when framed correctly, illustrate John's interest with Roman imperialism.

The first clue is John's choice of setting for Revelation: "Babylon the Great" (Rev. 14, 16, 17, 18). John's readers, who were quite familiar with the Old Testament, would have immediately connected Babylon "the representative of world empire in the Old Testament" with the dominance of the Roman Empire in their own time (O'Donovan, 83). This can be considered a type of code to disguise John's sharp political criticisms, which some skeptics have been quick to question. However, John very quietly draws a more observable parallel between Babylon and Rome for his readers in chapter seventeen. John calls Babylon the "woman arrayed in purple and scarlet colour," (17:4) and "is that great city which reigneth over the kings of the earth" (17:18) who sits atop "seven mountains" (17:9). Both literary and historical accounts of Rome famously depict its location upon seven hills. Revelation depicts the fall of Babylon and the rise of the Christians in New Jerusalem.

The second clue comes from the oracle to the seven churches. Collins (2000) explain that during the late first century CE "the Roman officials did not seek out Christians to arrest and interrogate them" however citizens with civil rights could bring about formal charges against Christians through the Roman legal system. They continue: "Conflicts between Christians and Jews had led, or was about to lead, to the formal accusation of Christians by Jews to the Roman authorities" (Collins, 393). John's awareness of the political consequences resulting from conflict between the Jews and Christians can be clearly seen in the oracles to the churches of Smyrna and Philadelphia. "Fear not" he tells the Christians of Smyrna "behold, the devil shall cast some of you in prison, that ye may be tried" (Rev. 2:10). He promises punishment to those in Philadelphia "which say they are Jews, and are not, but do lie" (Rev. 3:9). In many places throughout Asia Minor, such as in Philadelphia Christian congregations had "little or no status or

power” so John’s message can be seen as one of encouragement for his brothers to maintain their religious identity (393).

The characters within the text of Revelation are a third clue connecting the book to the Roman Empire. The beast “fatally wounded but healed” (Rev. 13:3) has drawn plausible comparisons to Roman emperors. Emperor Nero, for example, committed suicide and in doing so caused a civil war “that nearly brought his particular imperial power down” (DeSilva, 39). Similarly, the beast rising from the sea has been compared to the naval superiority of Rome and its expansion into Asia Minor by means of maritime navigation. We have already discussed with some detail the character of the woman sitting atop the seven mountains.

If one accepts the distinct parallel between Babylon in Revelation and the Rome of John’s time, the words from the oracle to Smyrna and Philadelphia, and the allegorical characters within the text it is not only possible but compellingly probable that John was trying to warn his audience of Rome’s threat to Christianity. Some claim that the textual evidence is not strong enough to implicate the Roman Empire in Revelation. However, it is important to remember that an outright criticism of Rome would have meant severe consequences for the critic. John would have needed to code his message in such a way that his readers would understand its political tones while making the same tones invisible to non-Christian Romans.

He That Hath Ear: John’s Intended Audience

The major premise put forth in the beginning of the study was that John chose a specific audience for his message—the seven churches in Asia Minor. The contextual developments of both the author and the occasion have relied on this premise. Exploring the context of Revelation’s audience, however, requires that I explicate the grounds for the major premise. In

other words, in order to describe John's intended audience I must first demonstrate why John is trying to reach only seven churches.

The oracle separately admonishes and praises each church; contained within the faults and successes the oracle provides information that is topical only to the members of the church. The second and third chapters of Revelation are peppered with "a variety of pastoral concerns regarding the situation in each congregation" (DeSilva, 49). In Pergamos, for example, John "recalls the violent death of Antipas" who was Jesus' faithful witness.⁸ He also criticizes the church in Pergamos for following the "doctrine of Balaam" and coexisting with the Nicolaitans.⁹ The "deeds of the Nicolaitans" appear in the oracle to Ephesus as well, but this time John praises them for rejecting their ministry rather than embracing it.¹⁰ The differentiating factors among the churches are so dynamically separate it is as if the oracle given to each church is meant to be understood only by the members of the church itself.

Historians who point to Domitian's "cruel repression of the Christian movement" typically frame the situation of the seven churches named in Revelation as one of "severe persecution" (DeSilva, 50). The text of Revelation itself reinforces this notion with its vivid accounts of the suffering of the Christian faithful and the righteous punishment of the churches' enemies. DeSilva explains that John is acutely aware of the growing political and religious tensions in Asia Minor:

"Does a person write a lament psalm when nothing is wrong?...Most of the persecution described in Revelation belongs to John's vision for the *future*, but we should not dismiss the evidence of conflict and crisis in the seven oracles as generic topics having no bearing on the realities faced by [the churches]" (51).

⁸ Ibid. See Rev. 2:13

⁹ Rev. 2:13-14

¹⁰ Rev. 2:6

However, readers must take equal care to avoid drawing a necessary connection between apocalyptic writing and a situation of persecution. If one were to draw such a connection, the possible motivations for the authors of apocalyptic rhetoric could be severely undercut. Not *every* rhetor uses apocalyptic imagery to inspire a message of absolute fear or absolute hope. John's message to his audience must be treated on its own merits. While persecution is clearly present in the seven oracles, is John solely treating his audience as a persecuted people?

Analysis from the oracle to Pergamos may be helpful in answering this question. In it, the oracle names Antipas the "faithful martyr, who was slain amongst you, where Satan dwelleth" (2:13). But Antipas is the only martyr named in the oracles, a singularity which would not favor an argument of widespread persecution in Asia Minor (DeSilva, 52). Conversely, the oracle precedes Antipas' martyrdom with these words of praise: "I know thy works, and where thou dwellest, even where Satan's seat is: and thou holdest fast my name, and hast not denied my faith" (Id. 2:13). The same sort of praise is echoed in the oracles to Ephesus, Thyatira, and Philadelphia. This pattern suggests that the Christians of Asia Minor are not in the *midst of* serious persecution, but are instead living in a moment when high tensions could reach their breaking point at any time.

This would dramatically change the occasion for John's rhetoric from a message of hope to a message of warning and urged preparation. Consider the refrain from each oracle to the churches: "He that hath ear, let him hear what the Spirit sayeth unto the churches" (Rev. 2,3). The use of repetition is a clear device to drive home an important point. In the same way that Paul Revere yelled over and over again in his ride from Lexington to Concord "The British are coming! The British are coming!" so too is John delivering a stern warning to the churches of Asia Minor through the oracles.

In Search of an Interpretive Framework

Up to this point we have not addressed a serious concern: From what type of interpretation should the text of Revelation undergo scrutiny. Perhaps you have met someone who believes that John wrote a word for word account of things soon to transpire on earth. Another individual might tell you that John's literal account describes events which have *already* transpired long ago. And still yet another person will claim that Revelation's words are a metaphor for Christians, not a literal account of actual events. Before examining John's rhetorical devices we must adopt an interpretation of Revelation. In doing so, we are able to create a framework designed specifically to analyze the seven oracles to the churches of Asia Minor.

DeSilva does an exceptional job of collapsing the varying interpretations of Revelation into four basic categories. He explains that these approaches are derived from "four basic schools of interpretation: the preterist, historicist, futurist, and idealist approaches" (2). The major premise of each approach is well defined from its title, with exception perhaps to the preterist approach. The historicist school reads Revelation as "a prediction of events spanning the time between the book's composition and the establishment of the new heavens and the new earth" (3). The futurists, much like the historicists, take John's predictions absolutely real—his predictions, fixed events in time. However, unlike the historicists, futurists do not look to the present and near past for evidence of the book's predictions. Instead, futuristic readings "look to the future for the fulfillment of the vast majority of Revelation's material" (4).

The preterist approach, was presented as a response to the first two interpretations put forth by mostly Western Evangelical Christian sects. Preterists argue that John's predictions

were fulfilled in the distant past, except for those pertaining to the end of times. DeSilva explains:

“Some preterists read Revelation as a prediction of events from John’s time to the establishment of the Christian state under Constantine, with the millennium representing the age of the church following its legalization and ascendancy” (5).

Thus unlike historicists and futurists, preterists are not concerned Revelation’s material in relation to present or future events except perhaps for the very few predictions concerning the end of time.

The final interpretation, idealism is perhaps one of the strongest contemporary interpretations of Revelation and greatly differs from the other three approaches by denying the premise that the book is a “collection of predictions” (5). Idealists argue that John uses “symbol, vivid imagery, and dramatic action” to express religious truths for many generations of Christians. Though idealism remains popular among theological scholars, it fails to recognize the significance of John’s message to his immediate readers, particularly the seven churches John writes to in the book. Although the more literal interpretations succeed on this point, all three approaches cannot provide definitive proof for John’s predictions. The best evidence that can be offered by historicists, futurists, and preterists is ultimately circumstantial.

DeSilva provides what he considers to be the best interpretation for decoding the messages within Revelation—the “contemporary historical” approach. Quoting those who have laid the groundwork for the perspective, DeSilva explains the major premise behind the contemporary historical approach:

“The foundational premise guiding this approach is the modest affirmation that ‘the Apocalypse was written specifically for the benefit of people who were living at that time and for the purpose of being understood by them’ (6).

This fifth approach attempts to incorporate the philosophical and symbolic methodology of investigating John's message while avoiding its most detrimental flaw; contemporary historicism analyzes John's message to the specific audience of those who would have received and been immediately impacted by his message. DeSilva explains, "How would a Christian in Ephesus have understood John's Revelation?" (6). Although the contemporary historical approach sounds quite similar to the preterist approach based on the preceding example, it is important to remember that like the idealist school, advocates of the contemporary historical approach do not regard Revelation as a book of prediction or prophecy.

The interpretive framework for the oracles to the seven churches shall be the contemporary historical approach for two reasons: First, this approach strikes an important middle ground between extremely literal and extremely metaphoric readings of Revelation. Given the circumstantial nature of the evidence that can be presented for either extreme, operating from a central framework allows us to examine the merits and shortcomings of literalist and idealist camps. Second, the historical contemporary approach exhibits "a close correlation" with rhetorical criticism "such that the former can function as a species of the latter" (16). Earlier I stated that the Book of Revelation is no ordinary book but is also a message to a specific audience. Upon accepting this premise the challenge for scholars is to the success of the speaker's message via different paradigms for communication. Rhetorical analysis of Revelation is a paradigm in great need of a fresh perspective. Aside from major contributions by DeSilva and Schüssler Fiorenza (1991), no significant analysis on this topic has come forward.

Method: Aristotle's Canon of Invention

When one thinks about the word "invention" what comes to mind? Perhaps some sort of gizmo or gadget designed by a person to complete a specific task. This keyboard in front of me,

for example, is an invention by the rudimentary explanation provided above. But does rhetorical invention share the same type of explanation we might give for the keyboard? Consider this: Just as a computer technician designs keyboards like the one in front of me, so too do persuasive speakers design a speech. Although you may not have given it much thought before take a minute to review the parts of a speech and the different tones available for the speaker to deliver the message. Moreover, just as a keyboard is made for a specific purpose, typing, a speaker also has a specific purpose to persuade his or her audience. And just as one cannot conceive of the invention without the inventor, a speech cannot be given without a speaker.

Thompson (1982) argues that the dynamic concept of invention is comprised of three elements: Factual information, creativity, and lines of argument.¹¹ Factual information and justified lines of argument are indeed inalienable elements of a persuasive speech, for if the audience discovered that the speaker had lied or could not follow his argument to begin with the speaker would have no chance to persuade them. But, the presence of factual information and reasonable lines of argument are not enough on their own for the speaker to persuade his or her audience.

The element of creativity, a "major constituent of Aristotle's system of invention" is a key indicator of a speaker's effectiveness (17). A speaker with an uncontestable set of facts, figures, and logical reasoning will fail to persuade his or her audience without the creative means to gain attention. Similarly, politicians, lawyers, and other public figures have been able to persuade their audience to adopt a course of action even though it was later shown that the speaker had used a set of misleading facts or had disregarded the internal proofs for their

¹¹ In Aristotelian language, lines of argument are called *topoi*. The content of *topoi* vary greatly based on the context of a message and can be broken down further into *protaseis*, the Greek word for premise.

conclusions. If a speaker can skillfully use the element of creativity in his or her speech, an audience can still be persuaded in spite of illogical reasoning.¹²

Ethos: Using Creativity to Establish Credibility

Whether John of Patmos actually believes himself to be a prophet or is simply *adopting a role* as it were in his story, his claims of prophecy and divine selection are his two most powerful components of invention. John's extremely special relationship with God allows him to establish *ethos*, credibility with the churches to whom he writes. Pretend you a member of the church of Thyatira in the beginning decades of the Common Era. You have received a message from a man saying God is displeased with your church because many members of the church are following the instructions of Jezebel. The man claims that this woman Jezebel is a false prophetess who "teach[s] and seduce[s] my servants to commit fornication, and to eat things sacrificed unto idols" (Rev. 2:20). Why should you listen to this man who calls himself your brother? How can he be sure that Jezebel really is a false prophet?

These are the same sorts of questions we could have expected some of the Christians in Thyatira to ask amongst one another upon reading John's work. Aristotle elucidates three components of *ethos* a speaker must demonstrate to establish his or her credibility. A speaker must convey good sense, virtue, and goodwill "in the course of the speech itself (DeSilva, 117). John's claim of divine selection and his prophetic status allows him to demonstrate each of these components to his audience within the opening and closing chapters of his message. As a "servant" of the Abrahamic God and "brother...companion in tribulation" to fellow Christians inspired by Jesus Christ, John's humble self-descriptions convey his good sense (Rev. 1:9). John,

¹² This of course, is not to say that *every* rhetor does lie or use faulty reasoning when speaking to his or her audience. Rather it shows the critical importance of mastering creativity in rhetorical persuasion.

as the mouthpiece of God, tells the churches that God rejects the teachings of Jezebel, Balaam, and the Nicolaitans. They are “rival teachers in the congregations” to whom John is writing who are also trying to persuade the members of their respective churches (DeSilva, 118). To establish virtue his virtue, John juxtaposes his humility against the disfavor God finds with some members of the seven churches.

However, John does not have to overtly establish his own virtue or goodwill because he is writing through the voice of Jesus Christ. Instead, John devotes a large portion of the first chapter of Revelation to establishing Christ's virtue and power. In the following excerpt Jesus tells John, who has fallen at His feet: “Fear not; I am the first and the last: I am he that liveth, and was dead; and, behold, I am alive for evermore, Amen; and have the keys of hell and of death” (Rev. 1:17-18). Similarly, Christ's goodwill is shown to each of the churches in the gifts he bestows to those who remain faithful to Him—gifts such as “the tree of life” (Rev. 2:6) the “morning star” (2:28) and “power over the nations” (2:26).

It is through such a robust description of the divine revelation by Jesus Christ to John that has allowed John to establish a high level of credibility with his audience. When one asks, “Why should I listen to John?” The immediate answer from Revelation is *because Jesus spoke to him*. John, after establishing his place as a humble servant of the Christian Church, need only say, “And I wrote down everything Jesus told me!” John's rhetorical use of invention so closely ties himself to Jesus Christ that to reject his credibility could be seen as a rejection of Christ as well.

Pathos: Discovering the Emotional Effect of the Oracles

John seeks to capture his reader's attention by establishing “imminence,” or the expectation on behalf of the listener that an action or event will occur shortly. Revelation begins

with God's decision to show his servant John "things which must shortly come to pass" (1:1), of the "things that are, and the things that shall be hereafter" (1:19). John tells his reader to listen to his prophecy because "the time is at hand" (1:3). What things are going to happen and what time is John referencing? Even though the text does not yet give any explicit details, John has still captured his reader's attention by raising their expectations. Believers who unquestionably accepted God's revelation to John as real and true could even have experienced elation or anxiety. Establishing imminence, says DeSilva, creates a foundation for "appeals to emotions of fear and confidence" (182).

However, the feeling of expectation alone is not itself strong enough to stimulate a desired response from the intended audience. Some move from John's foundational work in the opening chapter to the book's beautifully jarring imagery. In moving from imminence to description they miss the important techniques used in the oracles to the seven churches. During the oracles John uses two techniques to first heighten and then reinforce the faint traces of fear and expectation created during the first chapter.

After establishing a feeling of anxious expectation in his readers John creates a sense of "awe" or inspiration by positioning his own character behind the voice of Jesus Christ. The latter half of the first chapter contains a beautifully poetic description of Jesus which would certainly evoke a sense of wonderment in its hearers. John then (almost too overtly) uses repetitive language to show the crowd that Jesus is not speaking *to him*, but rather *through him*. The oracle for each church ends with an encouragement to "hear what the spirit sayeth unto the churches" (Rev. 2, 3). The oracle at Ephesus begins with the words "These things saith he that holdeth seven stars in his right hand" (2:1) and so to each of the remaining six churches the oracle begins

“these things saith he” (Id. 2,3) followed by language from “scriptural theophanies and angelophanies” (DeSilva, 183).

But what can we make of the instruction “to the church of...write,” which seems to suggest a sender-receiver relationship between Jesus and John of Patmos rather than Jesus acting as a sender through John. DeSilva explains:

“The instruction to ‘write’ signals not dictation of a ‘letter’ but of an ‘oracle.’ It is an instruction quite at home in the Greco-Roman milieu where ‘gods command various individuals, usually through medium of a dream, to write books’” (177-178).

Once readers understood from the oracles that Jesus was speaking through John, the line of direct communication between a divine power and his servants would have buttressed a feeling of anticipation with an overpowering sense of wonder. Those who felt fear for the things that were to come would have surely felt the fear in a greater concentration knowing it was Jesus Christ who was telling them of such things.

In order to reinforce the feelings of fear and awe in his audience, John uses words and phrases in the oracles that were drawn from apocalyptic writings in the Old Testament “notably recontextualizing details from Daniel and Ezekiel” (183). This technique of borrowing from historical sources commonly known by the audience provides a type of justification for their feelings by way of a shared experience. By referencing traditional apocalyptic literature the language of the oracles provide a justification that would remove any feeling of dissonance between reason and emotion.

Imminence, awe, and familiarity: John's three emotional techniques at work in the oracles to the churches of Asia Minor are constructed to progressively establish, heighten, and reinforce emotions of fear, anxiety, and confidence in his audience. If John's credibility was

secure in the minds of his listeners, that is if they truly believed him to be the prophet he claimed he was, the emotional appeals in Revelation's first three chapters would have been powerfully persuasive indeed. At a time when religious and political tensions were so high and the costs of conflict with the Roman Empire so great, John's message (if deemed credible) would have been heard with the utmost seriousness.

Logos: John's Rational Plea to the Seven Churches

Eugene Peterson (1969) offers a critical insight regarding John's perspective during Revelation's construction. Rather than considering the book as a "pastiche of written texts" the reader should instead consider "John's experiences of seeing and hearing, and to the multisensory evocations throughout the text" (DeSilva, 229). In other words, John's intention for Revelation was not to establish a logical proof for the end of days. It is apparent—Revelation does contain "some instances where John makes no appeal to logos" whatsoever (232). These observations, however, should not prevent one from analyzing the rational component of John's message. Those who downplay or dismiss John's use of logos in Revelation fail to address the full breadth of a rational appeal. Reasoning and argumentation do not take rigid forms—they must adapt the speaker's occasion and the context of the audience. These two factors significantly influence John's appeal to logos in two ways: First, John's reasoning employs enthymemes rather than syllogistic proofs, and second, John's evidence relies on narrative logic rather than facts, statistics, and testimony.

Those who study classical persuasion or take courses in the art of rhetoric will come across *syllogisms* and *enthymemes* very early on in their lessons. These are two basic forms of reasoning and can be thought of as the internal components of an appeal to logos. A syllogism will have a major premise, a statement such as "All cows are white with black spots," a minor

premise that follows the major premise, "This animal is a cow," and a conclusion about the subject of the minor premise, "This animal is white with black spots." An enthymeme, which is also known by the term "rhetorical syllogism," is a syllogism with one of its premises missing. Using the example from above, an enthymeme would begin with the premise, "This animal is a cow," and end with the conclusion "Therefore, this animal is white with black spots." The speaker relies on the knowledge of his audience that all cows are white with black spots to complete the argument.¹³

Revelation employs enthymemes rather than full syllogisms throughout the text. When John writes "Blessed is he who readeth and they that hear the words of this prophecy" (1:3) he is collapsing a syllogism (Fig. 1) into an enthymeme (Fig. 2). Why does John choose to use enthymemes instead of syllogisms? As we have already said, one reason is because John's intended purpose for the book was experiential rather than analogical. DeSilva considers a second motivation for employment of the enthymeme in Revelation:

"A second corrective introduced by Aune concerns the goal of the enthymeme, which is to convince an audience, not to achieve logical certainty. A formally valid syllogism built upon scientific premises need not undergird every enthymeme" (233).

Figure 1

Major Premise: Jesus Christ bestows blessings on those who listen to him.

Minor Premise: Jesus is speaking to the people of the seven churches in Revelation through John of Patmos

Conclusion: Those who read Revelation are blessed by God.

Figure 2

Premise: Jesus is speaking through his servant John (Rev. 1:1) and telling him to write what is spoken to him to the seven churches (1:11).

Conclusion: Those who listen to John and read Revelation will be blessed by Jesus (1:3).

¹³ Of course, a member of the audience could point out that some cows have brown spots. But this is not the fault of the enthymeme. The major premise is in this case faulty and would be changed to mirror the conclusion. The premise that all cows are white is used here as a demonstrative example only.

John uses a strong argument from authority as the means of convincing his audience. He spends the first chapter of Revelation constructing the divine power and supreme knowledge of God, who by his power instantiated “the Revelation of Jesus Christ...to shew unto his servants, things which must shortly come to pass” (Rev. 1:1). The success of John’s appeal to logos contained within the enthymemes used in the seven oracles weighs on his audience’s willingness to accept the appeal to God’s divine authority. This is why John continually reminds his audience of God’s power throughout the oracles to the churches. He know that the more willing his audience is to accepting God’s divine authority, the more secure John’s enthymemes become.

An appeal to authority can only go so far; to strengthen his appeal to logos John uses the technique of narrative logic. His depiction of events in Revelation combines a vision for the future with “texts and paradigms from Jewish Scriptures” which are thoroughly ensconced in the practiced religious traditions of his audience (235). This “extensive interweaving” of past and future events and authorities strengthens the credibility of his claims. Although Revelation’s claims are not as strong as demonstrative proof of the Second Coming of Christ, by referencing the prophets of the Old Testament, John is able to *remind* his audience of God’s promises—an appeal which can be just as effective.

Aristotle praised the narrative as a paradigm for its ability to serve as an inductive proof through historical precedent. When one tells a story there is a conclusion (either stated directly or implied) which will be validated by the narrator’s audience based on the testimony within the story. A story about building a home could conclude with the claim that to build a good home one must first create a sturdy foundation. The truth status of this claim will depend on the reader’s evaluation of the testimony given in the story. Applying this to Revelation, John’s story

about the Second Coming of Christ and his claim that his audience must “repent” would also be weighed on the availability of testimony. Referencing parts of Ezra, Daniel, and other books of the Old Testament provides a diversity of testimony that allows the reader to validate or accept the inductive claims made in the oracles and indeed in Revelation as a whole.

Discussion

Let us reconsider the research question I asked so many pages ago: Does John effectively use the available means of persuasion to evoke the intended response from his audience? By starting the critical analysis with the premise that Revelation is primarily directed to the seven churches mentioned by name in chapters two and three, John's audience has been clearly defined. The “available means of persuasion” have also been stated and explained through primary analysis from David DeSilva. Finally, the contextual analysis of the speaker's occasion, which revealed a backdrop of intense socio-political pressures, illustrated the intended response John sought from his audience—to remain strong in and reaffirm their Christian faith. We must now ask if all pieces of the puzzle will fit together, that is if Revelation effectively persuades the members of the seven churches to maintain their faith.

On The Authority of Whom?

Rhetorical criticism of Revelation has to this point focused on the success of John's persuasive techniques. Critics fall short, however, because they do not correctly attribute whom the audience is persuaded to believe. We often think of credibility in terms of rhetorical persuasion as a direct connection between the speaker and his or her audience. That is to say, in a given speech we often assume that the appeal to ethos will depend on the credibility of the speaker him or herself. Yet in Revelation John's appeal to ethos focuses very little on himself and almost entirely on the authoritative credibility of Jesus. In essence, John's effectiveness

relies on the audience belief in the reality of God's revelation as a real, true event, a belief which must be carried mainly by the divine power of Jesus Christ.

Although John makes note of his standing among Christians by citing his position as the "humble servant" who has suffered many tribulations, as much if not more attention is given to establishing the merits of Jesus Christ. In chapter one John says of Jesus:

"[He is] the faithful witness, and the first begotten of the dead, and the prince of the kings of the earth. Unto him that loved us, and washed us from our sins in his own blood; And hath made us kings and priests unto God and his Father; to him be glory and dominion for ever and ever" (Rev. 1:5-6).

Perhaps John's faith is on full display, but nevertheless the greater focus on Christ's character over his own is unmistakable. Interestingly though, John is not finished with his appeal to the character of Jesus Christ in the first chapter. He instead *continues* building Christ's authority in the oracles to the churches. One part of the appeal speaks to Christ's characteristics such as "the first and the last; which was dead and is alive" (2:8), "he that hath the key of David" (3:7), and "the beginning of the creation of God" (3:14). A second part establishes his power wherein Jesus promises to "come on thee as a thief" (3:3), "give [those faithful] the morning star" (2:28), "give power over the nations" (2:26) and "grant to sit with me in my throne" (3:21). We have also explained that John's incorporation of promises and prophecies from the Old Testament are critical statements of authority. These statements though, are not delivered by John himself, but by Jesus Christ speaking through John. Jesus' refrain throughout the oracles is to let the audience hear what the *Spirit sayeth*, before all others.

Recalling an earlier discussion in the Pathos subsection the word "write" as used in Revelation does not refer to a command of dictation. Historical analysis reveals that John's audience would have understood the term in a much different context. "As oracles," claims

DeSilva, John “intends for his audience to hear Christ speaking to them” (179). Aristotle claims in regard to ethos that “as a rule we trust men of probity more, and more quickly...on points outside the realm of exact knowledge, where opinion is divided, we trust the absolutely” (Thompson, 35). During a time of intense political and social pressure, one could expect divided opinions among Christians in Asia Minor about the best available way to comport their faith. In terms of religious rhetoric, the probity of a speaker can find no higher place than in the Son of God. We can thus hypothetically claim that *if* the churches of Asia Minor believed that God was speaking through John, they would have been adequately persuaded. By “adequately persuaded” I mean that their beliefs would have shifted to adopt the provisions and conclusions of the oracles. It is unfortunate that we cannot reach the more concrete claim that their actions were also changed upon accepting God's authority in Revelation.

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