Revelation as Drama: Reading and Interpreting Revelation through the lens of Greco-Roman Performance

by

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A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

University of Divinity
2017
Abstract

The book of Revelation is often attested to as being the most “dramatic” book in the New Testament canon, and scholars have begun exploring the possibilities of interpreting Revelation from such a perspective. This thesis argues that viewing Revelation through the lens of Greco-Roman dramatic performance contextualises the violent and lurid imagery of the text as highly stylised performance art that heavily references contemporary Greco-Roman performance imagery. Further, understanding the text as hidden transcript assists readers to understand better the text’s message to its readers, the early followers of Jesus in Asia Minor. The “over-the-top nature” of imagery in Revelation mimics and satirises the excesses of Roman society whilst pointing to Rome’s exploitative power. By reading the text in this way, readers are able to discern its message more clearly—the rule of God over against the imperial power of empire, and the coming Christ who redeems and rules over the entire kosmos. In order to interpret John’s message in this way, a hybridised approach is developed and applied to the text. This approach firstly explores the Greco-Roman imagery within the text, utilising selected tools from visual exegesis and performance criticism to identify both intertextual references and performance markers. A postcolonial reading is then applied to the text in order to explore the text’s meaning as satirical “hidden transcript.” Such an interpretive approach makes unexpected and at times ambiguous connections with various aspects of Greco-Roman culture, such as Roman heralds (praecones) and the naval displays (naumachiae) of Rome. This approach also demonstrates the use of both “mother” and “whore” as stock characters in Roman comedies, providing another dimension for understanding the references to women in Revelation. Overall, I argue that this hybrid approach helps the 21st century reader to understand better the text’s Greco-Roman connections, providing a framework that allows Revelation to be more easily read and comprehended within its context.
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Acknowledgments

Writing a thesis over the course of four years has been a remarkable journey. I am immensely grateful to the proverbial village of people who have cared for, sheltered, and encouraged me along the way.

Firstly, my family. I am immensely thankful for both my parents—for the lessons, the patience, the time spent together, but most of all their encouragement and the support. I am who I am today because of them. I am grateful also for my sister, whose pride and belief in me has helped me to keep going. She has also never stopped challenging me to do better. We have been through many trials, challenges, and momentous events as a family, and we are all the stronger for it.

Next, my amazing wife, Danielle. Although I have been working on this project for longer than we have been dating or married, she has been my pillar of strength for as long as we have been together. Her love and support for me enabled me to press on and complete this journey. I am glad to say that concluding this project will allow us to spend much more time together. In saying this, I am thankful for both the endless patience she has displayed, and the sacrifices she has made to allow me to keep working.

It has been an enormous privilege to have two excellent supervisors, who have each encouraged, challenged, and assisted me in countless ways. I wish to honour Dr. Keith Dyer, who has been there from the beginning of my theological journey as a fresh-faced undergraduate, and whose guidance, tutelage, and counsel have assisted me for many years. Without him, this project would never have found its genesis or completion. He has been an excellent example of a mentor, a scholar, a pastor, and a leader. I also wish to honour Dr. Jon Newton, who has become a colleague and friend, and whose wise advice has always served me well. I wish to also acknowledge the assistance of both Shelley Ligtermoet and Dr. Andre Brett in proofreading and providing helpful suggestions and critiques.

Thanks must also go to the University of Divinity for its outstanding support of theological education in Victoria, and to the Australian Government for its generosity in funding higher
education, particularly through the Australian Postgraduate Award (now known as the Research Training Program) of which I was a recipient.

Finally, a special thanks must go to my friends and colleagues at the two main institutions I have had the pleasure of serving over the duration of this project. To my friends and congregation at CityLife Church, particularly our Manningham campus, and to my friends and colleagues at Harvest Bible College, thank you for your encouragement.

I dedicate this thesis to the memories of two great men; Stephen Choi and Paul Geh, both of whom challenged me to go further in my faith and studies. You may be gone, but you will never be forgotten.
All the world’s a stage,
    And all the men and women merely players;
    They have their exits and their entrances;
    And one man in his time plays many parts,
    His acts being seven ages.

William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, Act 2 Scene 7
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Chapter One

Introduction

The book of Revelation is a strikingly visual text. Its imagery has inspired countless works of art, and when read carefully, its form resembles a drama—a type of performance commonly staged on the great theatres found scattered throughout the Greco-Roman world of antiquity.¹ Whilst it seems that John never intended Revelation to be physically performed as a play, an awareness of the performance markers embedded within the text, as well as an understanding of its allusions to both performance and visual culture (particularly Greco-Roman forms of both), enables the text’s message as hidden transcript to rise to the surface. Reading and understanding Revelation from the perspective of performance requires a fresh hermeneutical approach, one that is able to identify the performance markers in the text, is able to correctly identify the different allusions being made in the text, and is able to interpret these allusions within the text’s original setting. Interpreting the text in this way draws out Revelation’s message of hope, and reminds contemporary readers of Revelation’s strongly anti-imperial message.

1. The “problem” with Revelation

Revelation is a curious and often problematic text. Written by someone whose identity remains somewhat shrouded in mystery and intrigue, bearing strong hallmarks of Jewish apocalypticism combined with Christian theology, it is not surprising that the

¹ Numerous commentators attest to the “drama” of Revelation—these are discussed at length in Chapter 2.
text has a tendency to elicit one of two responses: it tends to be either ignored or sensationalised. Its lurid language, potent imagery and seemingly impenetrable allusions have alienated many Christians who dare not open the text—as Schüssler Fiorenza points out, the text remains “a book with ‘seven seals,’ seldom read and often relegated to a curiosity in the Bible.”² At the same time, in other quarters, it has managed to give rise to a plethora of prophecies, predictions, and fantasies as people scrutinise the text for hidden meaning, seeking to apply the presumed eschatological gnosis hidden within John of Patmos’s words to their current situation. In some of these circles, a distinctive eschatology has been built around the words of the text, and the various approaches to understanding the text are as varied as the multitude described in Revelation 7. Revelation “was subjected to some strange interpretations” almost as soon as it was published, and Jon Newton, among others, sets out a number of ways in which the book continues to be misused.³

Naturally, these interpretations have contributed toward the text’s reputation for controversy, and is also one of the reasons why the text has the dubious distinction of being one of the most misunderstood in the Bible. From its origins in the late first to early 2nd century CE, through to its eventual inclusion in the canon and its use in apocalyptic prophecy today, the book has generated fierce disagreement. Somewhat tellingly, Schüssler Fiorenza notes that “no generally recognized or accepted consensus has been reached in regard to the composition and the theological interpretation of the book.”⁴ Ancient sources paint much the same picture, with church father Eusebius noting that some churches would class it among the “accepted teachings,” and that others would reject it.⁵ This disagreement continues today, with the text regularly being

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⁴ Schüssler Fiorenza, Revelation: Justice and Judgment, 35.
condemned both by scholarship and by lay commentators. Opponents of Revelation have argued that the book is violent, misogynistic and generally unhelpful, and that the reception history of the text reflects these issues.

Revelation's vivid imagery distinguishes it from the remaining texts within the New Testament canon, and has captured the imaginations of people for millennia. This has resulted in a huge range of interpretations of the text in a wide variety of forums. Whether represented in art, in films, or manipulative prophecies, John's apocalyptic work remains open to be read and misread by all who approach it. Whilst the imagery of the text has inspired some truly extraordinary pieces of art, it has also inspired doomsday cults and church movements founded upon self-destructive readings of the text. Most importantly, the text's reputation has caused the average churchgoer to avoid actually reading it, effectively ending their Bibles at Jude. It is vital that readings that take seriously the text's historical context and background should come to the forefront of interpretation, enabling readers to interpret the text more confidently and responsibly.

I must confess some personal reasons for wanting to explore the Book of Revelation. Throughout my own life, I have encountered many Christians who were, for a variety of reasons, unable or unwilling to even open the text. Within my context, a culture of fear and suspicion hovers over the text, exacerbated by the twin spectres of poor exegetical teaching and doomsday prophecy mongering. Although Revelation's somewhat sordid reputation does precede it, and has done so for centuries, it is inexplicable that a book so widely influential in wider culture should be avoided by Christian readers. Revelation has much to offer, and a careful, nuanced reading of the text can draw out many helpful insights for the contemporary reader.

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6 As we shall see throughout this thesis, a number of commentators take issue with Revelation for a wide variety of reasons—some of which we will attempt to explore and resolve.

7 A brief anecdote: in the writing of my thesis, I met numerous Christians who praised me for being "brave enough" to study Revelation. Several of them were highly educated, yet were unwilling to engage with the text of Revelation.
Keith Dyer argues that “a disturbing amount of the popular literature seems to glory in a Divine Warrior who snatches away the faithful before defeating the powers of evil and trashing earth,”⁸ and it is certainly true that poor exegetical interpretations of Revelation are widespread. As literary critic Harold Bloom argues,

The influence of Revelation is out of all proportion to its literary strength or spiritual value. Though it has affected the strongest poets, from Dante and Spenser through Milton on to Blake and Shelley, it also has enthralled the quacks and cranks of all ages down to the present moment in America.⁹

Among the myriad of poor or ill-informed interpretations, it seems that there is a strong need for readings of the text that are able to ground their interpretations of the text in its context and reality. Although a postmodern viewpoint would argue that an “unbiased” view of any text is impossible, it seems that Revelation requires just that—or, perhaps, a fresh new perspective. This study suggests that approaching and reading Revelation from the perspective of performance art can provide one such perspective on the text, one that not only allows the text to speak for itself, but also creates new possibilities for exegeting the text.

2. The idea of reading Revelation via performance

Over the centuries, Revelation’s imagery and colourful language have inspired a wide-ranging multitude of artistic works dealing with the “Apocalypse” or “end times”—from

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paintings and sculptures during the Renaissance, to the songs and films of the contemporary period.\textsuperscript{10} From an interpretive perspective, these works can sometimes be theologically problematic given their tendency to lead interpreters toward a literalistic reading of the text, as most of these works are founded upon creating an image formed from such a literal reading. However, their representation of the text is arguably quite useful in that they help their audience to visualise, to feel and hear Revelation. In fact, many scholars argue that the text loses some of its power when it is simply read as a text on paper. Schüssler Fiorenza argues that the text requires a fresh approach that draws out the intricacies and beauty of the text:

Exegetes and theologians still have to discover what artists have long understood: the strength of the language and composition of Revelation lies not in its theological argumentation or historical information but in its evocative power inviting imaginative participation... the often somewhat unsophisticated discussion of the imaginative, mythopoeic language of Revelation needs to be replaced by a literary approach and symbol analysis that would bring out the evocative power and “musicality” of its language, which was written to be read aloud and to be heard.\textsuperscript{11}

This is unsurprising news to anyone who has read the text alongside any of its contemporaries within the New Testament or even the Hebrew Bible; John of Patmos’ master work speaks in bold, vivid pictures, using imagery from a multitude of sources—Jewish, Greek, Roman—and language that excites and frightens at the same time. It bears a richness of a sort matched by very few other books in the canon, and its

\textsuperscript{10} For multiple examples, see John Walliss and Lee Quinby, eds., \textit{Reel Revelations: Apocalypse and Film} (Sheffield: Phoenix Press, 2010), 91-111.

\textsuperscript{11} Schüssler Fiorenza, \textit{Revelation: Justice and Judgment}, 22.
language is one that most cultures are familiar with: the theatrical, passionate, colourful medium of dramatic performance.¹²

Harry Maier points out that Revelation contains all the vital elements of drama, specifically in its plot. Listing a variety of Greek literature and early Christian writings, he contends that their “elements of discovery and reversal reflect Greco-Roman antiquity’s visual culture,”¹³ and argues that Revelation is no different, born of cultural hybridity and requiring its readers to “keep on the lookout for all of its strains to appreciate the genesis of John’s adventuresome tale.”¹⁴ Maier understands that Revelation is intrinsically bound up with the conventions of dramatic performance, and that hybridity and reversal are therefore vital to its plot. He argues that the reversals and hybridity in Revelation are intended to force John’s audience to consider their position as Christians and what it means to stand against the injustices of empire. According to Maier, Revelation is a multisensory, dramatic performance that demands a response. But to what extent is it valid for us to read Revelation—or indeed any Biblical text—as performance?

The public reading of Scripture is a practice attested to throughout the Hebrew Bible. Deuteronomy, for example, commands the priests to “read this law before all Israel in their hearing” (Deuteronomy 31:11). According to the author of Joshua, after destroying the city of Ai, Joshua assembles the entire assembly of Israel and “read all the words of the law, blessings and curses, according to all that is written in the book of the law” (Joshua 8:34). In a similar way, in 2 Kings, we are told that Josiah, upon discovering the book of the law, brings together all of Judah in order to “read in their hearing all the

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¹² A clarification: given the diversity of dramatic performance in Roman culture—from the formal setting of the theatre to the lewdness of street mime—I will use the catchall term “dramatic performance” to describe the multitude of performance arts that existed around the time of the writing of Revelation.


¹⁴ Maier, Apocalypse Recalled, 78.
words of the book of the covenant,” (2 Kings 23:2) and we are also told that Ezra did the same after rebuilding Jerusalem’s wall (Nehemiah 8:1-3).

It seems that the practice was also common in synagogues during the first century CE—in a well-known passage from the Gospel of Luke, Jesus “stands up to read” and is handed the scroll of Isaiah, which he stops reading mid-sentence (Luke 4:16-21). The early church devoted themselves to the “public reading of scripture,” (1 Timothy 4:13) and it seems highly probable that the letters found in the New Testament canon were also read aloud to the assembled *ekklesia*. This assumption is made on the basis of literacy rates in the ancient world, and Paul's assumptions that his letters will be read aloud to assembled *ekklesiai* (seen in his habit of addressing multiple people in his letters). Whilst public reading is not always understood as performance, it certainly has performative elements to it, and given the extensively blurred lines between Hellenism and Judaism in the first century CE, it seems reasonable to assume that some measure of oratory and drama were applied to readings of Scripture.

Alongside Jewish practices in reading scripture, it is well known that both dramatic performance and the visual culture associated with performance formed an integral part of Greco-Roman society; as we shall see in subsequent chapters, aside from the theatre (which by the first century CE was firmly established in many of the cities in the Roman Empire), there was a diversity of dramatic performance around the empire,

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15 Of course, the “scriptures” attested to in this instance were most likely the Hebrew scriptures.
16 Paul’s writings also contain extensive rhetorical markers, as attested to by Betz, deSilva and others. It seems likely that Paul’s letters would have been read or “performed” by the letter-carriers. See Hans Dieter Betz, *Galatians: A Commentary on Paul’s Letter to the Churches in Galatia* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979); David A. deSilva, *The Credentials of an Apostle: Paul's Gospel in 2 Corinthians 1-7* (North Richland Hills: Bibal Press, 1998); Lee A. Johnson, “Paul’s Letters Reheard: A Performance-Critical Examination of the Preparation, Transportation, and Delivery of Paul’s Correspondence,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* Vol. 79 No. 1 (Jan 2017): 60-76.
17 We will explore Jewish engagement with Greco-Roman culture in Chapter 3.
18 Perhaps the most comprehensive work on orality in the Hebrew Bible to date can be found in William Doan and Terry Giles, *Prophets, Performance and Power: Performance Criticism of the Hebrew Bible* (New York: Clark, 2005). It is important to acknowledge that there will always be some interplay between oral performance markers embedded in texts (due to their hypothetical origins as oral performance), and a “performance mode of thought” which reads performance markers into the text, as we shall explore later.
including street mime, presentations at private symposiums and even smaller works designed to be read or enacted before a limited audience. Important information and cultural norms were both transmitted via oral forms, whether through official channels like heralds (praecones), through performance, or through storytellers.\(^{19}\) The visual aspects of performance, especially of the theatre, were an important part of Roman popular culture; for instance, lamps fashioned in the shape of theatrical masks\(^{20}\) and mosaics depicting scenes from plays have been excavated from Roman ruins.\(^{21}\) Bettina Bergman argues that these images formed a “memory theatre” of sorts, meaning that images would call to mind particular allusions, whether performances or well-known stories.\(^{22}\) This concept (similar to what is named “intertexture” by Vernon Robbins, and explored further in later chapters) is one utilised by John in Revelation to call to mind both Jewish and Greco-Roman allusions, allowing him to subvert or make ambiguous references to well-known imagery.

Excavations throughout Asia Minor have revealed the existence of a large number of theatres in most towns of significance,\(^{23}\) indicating that both John and his audience would certainly have been familiar with some form of performance.\(^{24}\) It also seems probable that the performance and retelling of stories were an important part of early


\(^{22}\) Bergman, “The Roman House as Memory Theater,” 225-256.

\(^{23}\) See Frank Sear, *Roman Theatres: An Architectural Study* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010). The existence of theatres in the seven cities will be discussed at length in subsequent chapters.

\(^{24}\) Valentina di Napoli argues that theatres had a key role in public life, and that their presence often indicated interest from the emperor or imperial family. See Valentina di Napoli, “The Theatres of Roman Arcadia, Pausanias, and the History of the Region,” in *Ancient Arcadia, Papers from the Norwegian Institute at Athens VIII*, ed. Erik Østby (Athens 2005), 510-511.
Christian worship. However, very few commentators have chosen to apply a full dramatic approach to Revelation—perhaps, as we shall see later, due to the anti-theatrical views espoused by the early church fathers (and presumably the early church). As later chapters will demonstrate, many who have attempted to interpret Revelation this way have not methodically engaged with the full suite of dramatic approaches available in the first century. A common error, for example, is mentioning the idea of understanding the text as performance as a useful framework without exploring the full implications of doing so.

Many have recognised the performance markers within Revelation, and many scholars refer to Revelation as “dramatic” without further reflection on the word’s meaning and its ramifications for the text. We will therefore embark on an exploration of precisely what it might mean to call Revelation a “dramatic” text. In keeping with past scholarship, which has generally chosen not to make fine distinctions between these terms, the expressions “drama,” “dramatic performance,” and “performance” are used interchangeably in this thesis. As we shall see, “dramatic performance” in the Greco-Roman world could stand for a large array of quite different types of performance (from risqué street theatre and pantomime, to spectacular events like the naumachiae, or triumphs)—the contemporary understanding of “drama” as a type of play for a particular setting is anachronistic when applied to the ancient world, and so the catchall terms of “drama” and “performance” apply equally well.

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26 As we shall see in Chapter 2, this is a relatively common practice among scholars, who argue that Revelation is “dramatic” or “performative” but go no further in exploring the implications of such comments.
3. Why interpret Revelation as performance?

As we have discussed, Revelation has been subjected to a great deal of abuse and misinterpretation. An interpretation of the text that understands Revelation as a single artistic entity that is firmly grounded in both historical-critical context and contemporary scholarship could go a long way towards addressing such issues. I suggest that a reading of Revelation that understands the text from the perspective of Greco-Roman performance could provide one such interpretation. Understanding the text from the perspective of dramatic performance acknowledges the text as a whole entity that must be read and understood as a single, continuous piece. In other words, the text should not be subdivided into separate pieces according to the demands of genre or literary style, but must be understood as a unified, singular piece of art.

An overwhelming majority of the dramatic arts in the context of Revelation’s audience are Greek and Roman performance traditions (or are at any rate informed by them), and so it is important for any dramatic approach to the text to take its Greco-Roman context seriously. There exists a long history of engagement with certain Greco-Roman aspects of the text, and the various Jewish perspectives on Revelation have already been thoroughly covered by scholarship. Scholarly approaches that specifically engage with the visual aspects of the culture of Greco-Roman performance that lie behind the text are relatively recent, and are still being developed. Even setting aside the dramatic perspective, there exists a clear and distinct need for some sort of approach that is able to draw out and understand the wide variety of Greco-Roman visual allusions in


29 See Chapter 2 for some examples.
Revelation,\textsuperscript{30} and attempt to bring them together in a cohesive way. Engaging Revelation with a diverse theatrical paradigm holds promise in this area.

Given the prominence of theatre buildings in the seven cities that Revelation is addressed to, and their importance as one of the primary meeting points for the residents of each city,\textsuperscript{31} it is reasonable to assume that Greco-Roman performance would have been the first of the “memory theatres” in Revelation. In other words, John assumes a shared visual and cultural knowledge among his audience, and that they would immediately have envisioned much of the imagery of Revelation within the context of Greco-Roman performance. It also seems reasonable to assume that many Christians in Asia Minor in the first century CE were Gentile converts,\textsuperscript{32} who would have had extensive engagement with the background of the text and therefore would have understood John’s references; that being said, it also seems that the Jewish population in Asia Minor were active participants in Greco-Roman culture, or at least in the theatre.\textsuperscript{33}

Although the extent of the Jewish people’s engagement with the theatre remains contested (mostly due to its extensive religious connotations and perceived idolatry), it seems as though they too were familiar with some of its conventions, as exemplified by

\begin{footnotes}
\item[30] As we shall see, there are numerous examples; an immediate and obvious example might be Revelation’s depiction of the Whore of Babylon as mimicry of the Roman goddess Roma.
\item[31] We will discuss this further in Chapter 3. For now, the story of Paul and the silversmiths’ riot in Acts 19:23-41 serves as an excellent example of the theatre’s importance as an assembly point in Ephesus.
\item[32] A few pieces of evidence point at this conclusion: John himself indicates that the Christians are facing opposition from the Jews in Revelation 2:9 and Revelation 3:9. Paul’s lack of success in the synagogues in Acts 19 also seems indicative of Jewish opposition to Christianity. Finally, Martin Goodman points out that Jewish proselytization in the first century CE was extremely unlikely, which lends credence to the assumption of a mostly Gentile Christianity. See Martin Goodman, \textit{Judaism in the Roman World: Collected Essays} (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 91-116. Of course, without further definitive archaeological evidence, the debate remains an open one.
\item[33] Philip Harland, for example, points out that Jewish participation in the daily Roman life of Asia Minor is well attested to, including attending the theatre. Philip A. Harland, “Honouring the Emperor or Assailing the Beast: Participation in Civic Life Among Associations (Jewish, Christian and other) in Asia Minor and the Apocalypse of John,” \textit{Journal for the Study of the New Testament} Vol. 77 (2000): 107-110. John Barclay cautions that “evidence for Asian Jews in the first century CE is... paltry,” but notes that Jews were looked upon more favorably in the first century CE than in the previous one. John M.G. Barclay, \textit{Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora: From Alexander to Trajan (323 BCE-117CE)} (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), 279.
\end{footnotes}
the Synoptic Gospel writers’ depiction of Jesus calling the Pharisees “hypocrites,” a word used to describe masked actors in tragedies or comedies.\textsuperscript{34} It is also important to remember the contrasts between Jewish and Greco-Roman imagery; although Jewish ideas are clearly important and influential to John, the Jewish people did not as a rule produce imagery of humans or animals,\textsuperscript{35} whereas Greco-Roman imagery was prevalent throughout the Empire in the form of mosaics, statuary, pottery, architecture, numismatics, and of course embodied in performance.\textsuperscript{36} Residents in Asia Minor during the first century CE would have been confronted with Greco-Roman imagery on a daily basis, and this imagery would naturally have formed an important frame of reference for them, regardless of their levels of literacy.\textsuperscript{37} Although understanding the Jewish textual allusions in Revelation is important and necessary, we will focus on Greco-Roman performance and imagery for the reasons listed above.

The question underlying this thesis is therefore simple on the surface, but is upon further reflection highly nuanced and complex, "What does it look like to read the book of Revelation in a way that includes, acknowledges, and seeks to understand its various Greco-Roman allusions, and interprets it in the context of the dramatic and visual culture it is rooted in?" Such an approach sits alongside and is also informed by the existing scholarship on both Jewish and Greco-Roman approaches to the text.

\textsuperscript{34} For examples, see Matthew 6:2, Matthew 15:7, the extended discourse in Matthew 23, Mark 7:6, or Luke 11:44. Although each gospel is written to a different audience, each of them places the term \textit{hupokrites} in Jesus’ mouth, suggesting that each gospel’s audience (Jewish, Gentile, or otherwise) was familiar with the term. The proximity of Nazareth to the large cultural centre of Sepphoris also suggests that Jesus would have been aware of theatrical conventions, to an extent.

\textsuperscript{35} The creation of “images” is expressly prohibited in the Ten Commandments and was taken very seriously; see Exodus 20:4, Deuteronomy 4:16-18. Whilst Jewish representations of animals do exist (for example, Jewish zodiac mosaics in synagogues), they are overwhelmingly dated between the fourth and sixth centuries CE and are therefore not relevant to this discussion. See Rachel Hachlili, "The Zodiac in Ancient Jewish Synagogal Art: A Review," \textit{Jewish Studies Quarterly} Vol. 9 (2002): 219-220.

\textsuperscript{36} As we shall see, the first Roman Emperor Augustus was strongly aware of the power of imagery and so encouraged the creation of images, statuary, and buildings in order to promote his reign across the Empire—a practice followed by most subsequent Emperors in the first century CE. This argument is set forth by Paul Zanker, \textit{The Power of Images in the Age of Augustus} (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1990).

\textsuperscript{37} The numerous surviving dwellings and artifacts from the early Roman Empire are decorated with popular imagery (depicting myth, gods, families, and popular performances), and so it is safe to assume that the ancients' engagement with imagery was extensive and widespread.
To interpret Revelation from the perspective of performance achieves a number of things. Firstly, it brings the text into contact with recent methodologies that are being developed by Biblical scholarship, specifically visual exegesis and performance criticism. It acknowledges the orality of the text (a growing trend in contemporary scholarship), and argues that the entire text can—and should—be understood as oral performance. As the text was originally intended to be read to the seven *ekklesiai* of Asia Minor, this is how it should be perceived and received as a starting point for interpretation. Understanding the text as both visual and performative helps to develop what contemporary scholarship is discovering about many of the other texts in the Biblical canon, and this in turn strengthens our understanding of both the ancient world and of the text. Doing so also acknowledges the importance of visual imagery and brings this to the forefront of interpretation, as scholars are doing with other texts.

The images presented by the text are references to the cultures that exist in the background the text (the *Sitz im Leben*), and we must first understand them from this perspective before applying our own interpretations.

Secondly, interpreting Revelation in this way reinforces the importance of reading the whole text for itself. Being able to approach the text with multiple hybrid interpretive lenses—to understand the drama of the text—opens up many possibilities for engaging with the experiential cultures of the ancient world. To do so allows readers to appreciate the nuances and the subtleties, the ebbs and flows, to notice the references and the very real humanity (the eternal struggle between good and evil, and the question of theodicy) that lie embedded at the heart of the text. A theatrical perspective on Revelation understands that the text was intended to be read out loud, and doing so adds yet another dimension to understanding the text by drawing one’s attention to the themes, the markers and the cycles that John emphasises. It draws out the

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38 The fields of rhetorical analysis and performance criticism will be discussed at length in Chapter 2.
39 Examples include, but are not limited to, the Gospels (especially Mark), the Prophets, and of course the Epistles. This will be discussed further in Chapter 4.
40 For example, the field of visual exegesis and socio-rhetorical criticism, which I will engage with in Chapter 4.
41 The majority of scholars argue that the Gospels were orally performed, and that the various epistles were similarly read out loud to congregations. Revelation is no different.
multisensory experience of Revelation, which brings together imagery, word, tradition, mythology, and apocalyptic motifs.

Thirdly, this approach helps to provide some context for, and justification of, a postcolonial reading of the text. Revelation can be read and understood as a “hidden transcript,” an anti-authoritarian piece of writing aimed at attacking the dominance of the Roman Empire and bringing hope to those suffering under its rule, in the guise of apocalyptic drama, whose message is best understood when performed. When Revelation is understood in this way, as John’s audience would have interpreted it, its message denouncing the evils of empire becomes potent to those who share in its subversive perspective, and this helps us in understanding its references, to “expose” the transcript. Of course, as keen readers will discover, the transcript itself does not remain “hidden,” but becomes exposed to those who understand its nuances. It is important for us to remember John and Revelation’s context—as a controversial text written to the members of a relatively small sect. Like many hidden transcripts, Revelation was not widely known or transmitted, and would have stayed hidden in the margins until at least the middle to late second century CE. Despite this, John writes in code in order disguise his true message—protecting the recipients of his text from being accused of anti-imperial sentiment.

In the ancient world, the medium of performance was known to be an area open to subversive political debate, gestures and commentary. Performance defined the way people thought about, reacted to, and understood a variety of issues. Theatres were arenas of spectacle where worlds could be inverted—not just the worlds of the performance, but the worlds of the spectators too. Norms could be challenged, and expectations could be upended. Not all of these were immediately obvious; that is to say, many of these performances were “hidden transcripts” in their own way, as we

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42 Postcolonial engagement with Revelation will be discussed at length in Chapter 4.
43 As we shall see in subsequent discussions of Roman theatre in Chapter 3, performances at theatres were fertile grounds for political commentary—especially from actors.
shall see in later chapters. By writing Revelation with performance characteristics, John conveys his message within his audience’s context, and demonstrates the flaws of empire through a critique embedded in performance, as did many other writers of the time.

Reading Revelation from a postcolonial perspective recognises and understands John’s use of genre and allusions within the culture of its audience. Approaching Revelation as performance acknowledges the multiplicity of interpretations inherent in the text, and its ambiguous use of the images of empire—as satire, as mockery, as resistance. Revelation does indeed use the language of empire to denounce empire, but its goal is not to upend established structure through direct confrontation, but rather to provide a critique that encourages its audience to imagine different structures and to live by a different ethos. This returns some of the nuance and ambiguity to our reading of the text, countering interpretations that tend to construct the text as binary and oppositional.44 This approach understands John as visionary, artist and prophet, not a revolutionary leader.

Overall, this thesis aims to provide a grounded reading of the text that strongly considers its context—its background, its contemporaries and its influences. Only by first doing this can we begin thinking about contemporary interpretation and meaning. Revelation is indeed open to all those who “hear what the Spirit is saying.”45 Such an understanding of the book of Revelation can only come about with a number of important reading strategies, which we will now briefly discuss.

44 For example, many premillennial readings of the text construct a dualistic framework whereby God and Satan are placed diametrically opposed to one another. Other readings construct this in more subtle ways; Stephen Moore’s postcolonial reading, for example, directly asserts that Revelation is a binary text that is locked into its own dualism (Moore’s interpretation of Revelation will be discussed in Chapter 4).
4. Developing an approach to Revelation: important reading strategies

4.1 Revelation is performance art, rather than literal prophetic writing

Firstly, interpreting the text via the medium of dramatic performance allows the reader to understand the violence and lurid imagery of the text of Revelation as highly stylised and indeed as performance art. The over-the-top nature of the performance mocks the excesses of Roman society whilst pointing clearly at its true message—the Christ who redeems and rules over the entire earth. Reading the text of Revelation in this way demonstrates its imagery as performance—that is, as both non-literal and open to interpretation. It also reminds us as readers that the text relies heavily upon symbolism and allusion, and that it depicts a reality that is understood to be removed from that of the reader. This shifts the focus away from any literal interpretation of the images and language found in the apocalypse, to the redemption that lies at its heart, whilst retaining the unique contextual commentary of the book.

Why is this important? Firstly, the violent acts in Revelation have drawn heavy critiques from scholars of different traditions. Most argue that Revelation’s seemingly violent passages both empower violence and break away from the pacifist traditions of Jesus. Whilst a dramatic understanding of Revelation does not remove this violence, it does bring a different perspective to it—it demonstrates the violence as “over-the-top” precisely because it is to be understood as performance. It also contextualises it,

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47 Another helpful perspective is that of Raymund Schwager, who argues that the gospels present a “theological drama” that represents Jesus as “the non-violent image of the Father in the face of human violence,” and therefore empowers the followers of Jesus to reject the “way of violence.”
recognising that theatrical violence “can act as a catalyst for the coming together of that audience in defence of humanity, a togetherness in the act of defying the truth mimicked by the theatrical violence represented on stage.”

This does not excuse the violence, but understands it as symbolic and purposeful, as deliberate in achieving a specific aim—allowing for catharsis among John’s audience, reversing the violence of the Roman Empire to demonstrate both its futility and God’s power.

Another arena where the issue of violence in Revelation becomes especially evident is the various eschatological approaches to the text. It is apparent that certain denominations of Christianity have a tendency to place an undue emphasis on the “end times” or the application of eschatological theology—theology that is often simplistically based on a literalistic surface reading of Revelation. Examples range from unique denominational beliefs to more generalised interpretations. Of course, this is not unique to contemporary Christianity—in a particularly well-known example, the Apostle Paul himself writes to warn against an undue emphasis on eschatology in 1 Corinthians. Such theology can be manipulated for overtly evangelistic purposes—or


The violence in Revelation (or in drama) works as cathartic hidden transcript by showing the downfall of the oppressor. This is roughly analogous to how the Roman *ludi* provide a “pressure release valve” by allowing spectators to vent their frustrations. This is further discussed in Chapter 4 as part of hidden transcript theory. In a similar vein, Hylen argues that Revelation should be read and understood as multiple metaphors, demonstrating that violence is not the only metaphor being used by John. Doing so allows the text to have multiple meanings and interpretations, allowing it to speak into situations of oppression. See Hylen, “Metaphor Matters,” 777-796.

For example, the Seventh-Day Adventist Church’s beliefs on the Second Coming, Millennium and New Earth as encoded within their 28 Fundamental Beliefs.

Such as the *Left Behind* series by LaHaye and Jenkins.

sometimes for less altruistic reasons.\footnote{For a helpful survey of premillennial interpretations of Revelation (and the possible consequences of such a view), see W. Howard-Brook and A. Gwyther, *Unveiling Empire: Reading Revelation Then and Now*, (New York: Orbis Books, 1999).} The overall outcome is a Christianity that justifies violence as long as it is used for “good”—good, of course, that is defined strictly by those who define the theology.\footnote{For example, Barbara Rossing details many of the problems with the *Left Behind* series and its worldview and assumptions. Barbara R. Rossing, *The Rapture Exposed: The Message of Hope in the Book of Revelation* (New York: Basic Books, 2004), 37-42, 86-88.}

Perhaps the most popular example of such theology is the *Left Behind* series of novels by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins. As Rossing points out, much of *Left Behind* is pure escapist fantasy,\footnote{Rossing, *The Rapture Exposed*, 14.} and is quite clearly centred on a highly wealthy capitalist understanding of both the individual and society. Biblical scholars of course tend to recognise the absurdity of the theology proposed by the novels, but there is no denying the fact that the novels, and by extension their theology, have captured the imagination of the wider public,\footnote{The *Left Behind* series is self-reported as having sold over 63 million units over its published history.} promulgating a particular form of potentially harmful premillennial dispensational theology. It is quite clear that an alternative reading is required.

This is where the average reader might encounter some issues. The text of Revelation is neither simple nor straightforward to read; there are great difficulties involved in both interpretation and applying the text to contemporary Christian life, and so there exists an inherent suspicion of the text. To put it simply: very few Christians feel that they are equipped to read the text, either because of the bewildering array of theories that surround its interpretation, or because of the text itself—and so very few actually read it. Michael Gorman’s book *Reading Revelation Responsibly* illustrates why the average reader feels overwhelmed. Gorman lists a huge range of titles of books focusing on Revelation before asking a very simple question, “What is Revelation, and what is it
about?" In line with the argument made earlier, Gorman highlights the need for a “responsible” reading of the text, given its “hyper-canonisation” by those who would use it to further their own agendas. The words of the text can be, and often are, twisted by eschatologically focused movements for a variety of purposes. For example, a common approach is to draw out from the text a time frame that posits that the final judgment of God is at hand and coming soon—despite the fact that “people in practically every generation from John’s own to the present have understood Revelation to be predicting the last days of the world in their own time.”

Not all of this is inevitably detrimental: interpretations like *Left Behind* may directly spark a greater interest in eschatological theology in their readers. It is unfortunate that most readily available literature points readers toward the same poor theology; those interested in eschatology are often restricted (or directed) to a somewhat biased set of interpretations. Within many circles, the premillennial perspective (being the best known and most widespread) can often dominate these discussions, and most debate may be centred around, for example, whether the rapture is pre-, mid-, or post-tribulational! In any case, it is unsurprising that there is a fascination with the logical next step past the future—the inevitable end of all things, the τέλος. Hence, many turn to Revelation, hoping to unlock clues or prophecy that spell out what the end of the world looks like; and perhaps how they can avoid it, or stop it—or at least be prepared for it. Once again, however, few feel that they are sufficiently equipped, or alternatively approach Revelation with preconceived ideas or agendas that cause them to misinterpret the text.

An interpretation of Revelation as dramatic performance promises to be helpful. Much like watching a movie with an ambiguous ending, perceiving the visual imagery of the

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61 Rossing also points this out; the *Left Behind* novels “wake [readers] up to a sense of urgency about God.” See Rossing, *The Rapture Exposed*, 86.
text within its context empowers audiences to draw out their own contextually appropriate interpretation of the text. Such an approach is also historically and culturally appropriate given that the text would have only been heard read aloud in John’s day. Understanding the text as a performance also allows audiences to approach the text with the conventions of drama in mind—which places a certain structure and expectation around the text, but also explains the language of the text. The creatures surrounding the throne, for example, do not have to be understood as “real” creatures but a composite of different allusions, designed to point John’s audience towards a particular understanding. John clearly intends for his reader to understand them as otherworldly and different, and also to represent certain things. They are a construct of the text that helps the audience understand the author’s point. Understanding the text and the conventions (and limitations!) of John’s audience also helps us to understand the reasoning behind some of the text’s conventions—for example, the purely auditory medium of recitatio (reciting the text) explains John’s use of repeated motifs (such as the repeated cycles of seven introducing further tragedies) as a guide to aural comprehension and retention.

Most importantly, understanding the text as a performance removes any requirement for its words or imagery to be understood from a literalistic point of view. In the same way that some films are understood to contain allegories and themes, so Revelation becomes a great story—or parable—that points toward the saving power of God and the glorious plan that God has for humanity. The violence in the text can be understood to be satirical, a mockery of the Roman Empire’s lust for “glorious battle”; the plot that emerges clearly shows that God stands above and beyond human power structures, and that the evils of empire are replaced by the Kingdom of Heaven. This is a message that continues to speak into contemporary contexts; it calls its audience to an examination of

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62 Hylen reaches a similar conclusion with regards to reading Revelation as metaphors: that the text must be open to a variety of different interpretations. This requires interpreters to “give an account of why their interpretation is ethical,” requiring the interpreter to “reflect on [their] own political and social context.” See Hylen, “Metaphor Matters,” 792-793.

human governance and dominance and highlights the inequality, oppression and violence inherent in some systems. John’s prophecy, although seemingly a failed prophecy if limited to the context of Rome, continues to be a prophecy that is being fulfilled today.

4.2 *Revelation can be open to multiple interpretations*

Secondly, a theatrical perspective on the text promises to demonstrate that a strictly binary interpretation of the text is an unhelpful imposition, given that the very nature of dramatic performance is open to a multiplicity of interpretations. We need to make an important distinction here between original interpretation and contemporary interpretation: Revelation is clearly grounded within a particular context, and an understanding of its *Sitz im Leben* aids us in understanding how John’s audience would have initially understood and interpreted the text. The task of the historical-critical scholar is to discover as much as possible about such an original interpretation of the text.

Once contemporary readers have a grasp on original interpretation, this should inform contemporary interpretations of the text—of which there could be multiple, depending on the reader’s (or readers’) context. There should be no definitive outcomes in the identification of (for example) the Whore of Babylon, or the City of Heaven, but rather identifications should deliberately be left ambiguous and somewhat polyvalent, able to be defined by the imagination and interpretation of the viewer. This returns to the text a richness and breadth that has been lacking in interpretations that treat the text as literal
prophecy, whereby a single interpreter’s understanding of the text is held to be the only acceptable understanding.\footnote{The premillennial, dispensational theology of \textit{Left Behind} is a good example of such an approach; adherents to this theology can be quick to dismiss other eschatological understandings.}

This method of approaching the text also frees Revelation from being anchored in any particular setting—like all good prophecy, it remains relevant and important to every generation that reads it. Rather than focusing on the specific details of the text, the audience is able to search for the themes and deeper meanings behind each action. These become apparent through John’s use of literary and performative devices like chiasms, repetition, and his use of extensive imagery.

Most importantly, this approach recognises that there cannot be any one, overriding contemporary interpretation of Revelation, but rather seeks to embrace a variety of approaches, both to and of the text. In this thesis, I will approach Revelation initially from a historical-critical perspective (understood as including narrative and rhetorical approaches), and will base further observations and interpretations on the collected results of such methods in contemporary scholarship. This perspective acknowledges that John is making allusions to imagery and events rooted in the context and background of his audience, and forms a foundational basis from which other interpretations and perspectives can be derived. In chapter four below, I will go on to explore three conceptual perspectives, drawn from recent dimensions of biblical hermeneutics, that will help to sensitise us to the implications of first century performance and visual imagination as we hear Revelation in dramatic mode: visual exegesis, performance criticism, and the hidden transcripts, hybridity, and ambiguity of postcolonial approaches. As hearing readers, we should acknowledge that the text speaks differently to everyone who approaches it, much like movies, artwork or novels in the contemporary world. The text must remain open to interpretation, but must also first be understood within its own context.
4.3  *Revelation is a text that subverts paradigms and speaks against empire*

An understanding of Revelation from the perspective of performance encourages a much closer engagement with social resistance theory and James C. Scott’s theory of hidden transcripts, showing that the text can take on a new dimension as performance art that serves as resistance literature. Friesen states that the book of Revelation is a “classic text of symbolic resistance to dominant society” that turned known practices and ideals on their heads. Dramatic performance (whether theatre, mime, opera or even a puppet show) speaks on multiple levels of meaning, often with hidden messages that only a select audience could interpret. Take, for example, the symbolism inherent in many contemporary films that many choose to interpret as subtle representations of Messianism (ranging from the *Matrix* films to the *Lion King*)—or, alternatively, the various claims of Satanic messages being inserted into the very same! The medium of performance is ideal for conveying the hidden transcript—as Scott himself notes:

> By the subtle use of codes one can insinuate into a ritual, a pattern of dress, a song, a story, meanings that are accessible to one intended audience and opaque to another audience the actors wish to exclude. Alternatively, the excluded audience may grasp the seditious message in the performance but find it difficult to react because that sedition is clothed in terms that also can lay claim to a perfectly innocent construction.

However, much of this carefully planned double meaning can be lost in translation when the text is understood outside of its original context. Understanding the text of

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Revelation as if it were being performed, whether in a theatre or being read aloud, brings us one step closer to a possible original understanding of the text. It also helps to draw out some of its carefully hidden messages, such as any visual or aural cues that would not be apparent from a silent, individual reading. A subsequent postcolonial reading of the text provides a helpful platform from which these messages can be interpreted.

Using a different example, Andrew Simmonds posits that the trial of Jesus in Matthew and Mark is to be read and understood as a pantomime of an actual Roman trial, an interpretation that uses the genre of dramatic performance to draw attention to the pericope’s message—the exposure of injustice behind the parody, thus demonstrating the illegality of Jesus’ trial.67 In the same way, a reading of Revelation from the perspective of dramatic performance has potential to draw out new interpretations of the text. Because dramatic performance is inherently ambiguous and open to dynamic interpretations, there is a need for an interpretive framework that moves beyond simple binary opposites. Such a framework can be found in postcolonial theology. Given postcolonial theory’s focus on exploring and applying the concepts of cultural hybridity, mimicry and hidden transcripts (resistance theory), it is a helpful method in approaching both Revelation and the interpretation of Revelation as drama.

To understand something of how Revelation would have been understood in its first century setting, postcolonial sensitivities must be brought into dialogue with a plausible historical-critical understanding of the text’s contexts and background. Doing so allows us more fully to understand the possible intentions lying behind the text. The better our understanding of history, archaeology, and the practices prevalent across the cities and people groups comprising the Roman Empire, and particularly Asia Minor, the better our understanding of John’s allusions and references. Such an understanding both assumes and makes clear that Revelation is about empire, and so the perspective of

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postcolonial sensitivities is vitally important in helping contemporary readers draw out plausible meanings from the text.

Revelation is arguably one of the most powerful anti-Imperial texts in the Biblical canon, yet all the while avoiding any mention of either Rome or Empire. As such, its implied message decrying the Roman Empire is all the more obvious when it is performed or read as a drama. Indeed, to those who recognise its language and references, the text can barely be termed a “hidden” transcript! As the text itself points out, “let anyone who has an ear listen”—yet it seems that spiritual discernment is rare. John’s message was dangerously controversial, and so its language is coded or disguised, much like the songs and stories of the slaves in the American South. Much like other resistance literature, it can also be seen as uncomfortably violent, and is remarkably open in its reversal of roles between oppressed and oppressor. Of course, at the time of Revelation’s writing, Christianity was a small, relatively secretive cult spread thinly across the Roman Empire, and so the term “hidden transcript” applies in the sense that the text was not publicly available for viewing, but rather existed in a hidden space.

Whatever the language used, it is clear that Revelation is a text that posits the reign of the kingdom of God over against earthly kingdoms and empires, and against evil. This forms the backbone of the story depicted in Revelation, but is itself subject to interpretation. The lessons and the morals of the text are open to being applied by interpreters, whether to the Roman Empire or their own context. The hybrid perspectives posited in this thesis will create a platform that will allow us to begin the process of interpreting and understanding Revelation as drama, providing an approach

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70 Mark Neal, for example, argues that the development of the “Black Public Sphere” (including space, music, and culture) is a continuation of the hidden transcript traditions first created by black slaves in the “antebellum South” of the United States of America. See Mark A. Neal, *What the Music Said: Black Popular Music and Black Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge Press, 1999), 1-3.
that draws out the meaning of the text through an understanding of its performative allusions; doing so will affirm life and peace, rather than reinscribe death and violence.

5. Moving forward

Chapter 2 will highlight and discuss previous authors’ contributions to an understanding of Revelation as drama, and will begin to engage with some of the approaches used in this thesis. Chapter 3 lays an important foundation by outlining the wide variety of performance arts in the Roman world (Revelation’s *Sitz im Leben*), and begins to demonstrate how performance might be alluded to in, or evoked by hearing, the text of Revelation. Building on the understandings of the previous chapters, Chapter 4 describes and brings together the three different but important hermeneutical perspectives that are helpful for understanding Revelation as drama (visual exegesis, performance criticism, and the sensitivities of postcolonial theory). Chapter 5 begins to draw all of the suggestions of the previous chapter together, demonstrating how these approaches engage well with a wider, macro reading of selected texts. Chapter 6 builds on the work begun in Chapter 5, bringing together the approaches with a closer, more methodical “exegetical” reading of Revelation 19-20, and finally Chapter 7 presents the conclusions.
Chapter 2

The Revelation of Jesus Christ: a brief literature review

In the ancient world, texts were generally written to be read aloud—the concept of “silent reading” was uncommon—and often specialised staff (generally educated slaves) were employed to read to those who could afford to own books, or to members of the wider public.¹ Such readings would happen at private parties or even to a single person—to many people or to a few.² Almost every performance of narrative was dramatic and bombastic, as performers sought to convey the emotional weight of the story and took on the role of various characters.³ Of course, private reading (or rather, being read to in a private setting) was considered the provenance of the rich, as few could afford books. However, we must remember that recitations of poetry and other literature were also common at festivals and other events,⁴ and so the oral performance of text was by no means an uncommon method of dissertation.⁵ The public reading of texts was deeply embedded in Greco-Roman culture, and many scholars argue that a similar culture existed within Judaism—certainly in the reading of the Prophetic literature, and of course the Psalms.⁶ Deuteronomy 31 and Nehemiah 8 both

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¹ See the argument set forth by Pieter Botha: Pieter J.J. Botha, *Orality and Literacy in Early Christianity* (Oregon: Cascade Books, 2012), 125. This does not, however, completely preclude the existence of the practice of silent, private reading—evidence seems to suggest that both practices existed contemporaneously and were used according to circumstance.


⁴ Such as the readings of epistles within house churches.

⁵ The next chapter will explore practices such as *recitatio*, the oral performance of a written text.

⁶ For example, Robert Miller posits that “oral-and-literate Israel probably had performance settings that were standardized for its oral narrative literature.” See Robert D. Miller II, “Orality and Performance in Ancient Israel,” *Revue des sciences religieuses* Vol. 86 No. 2 (2012), 194. To give a further indicator of the contemporary appeal of performative readings of Hebrew Bible texts, I was privileged to sit in an International SBL session in Seoul, 2016, where Athalya Brenner-Idan presented on "Lamentations as a (Public? Cultic?) Performance." (paper presented at the international meeting for the Society of Biblical Literature, Seoul, South Korea, July 2-7). See also Ernst R. Wendland, *Orality and the Scriptures: Composition, Translation, and Transmission* (Dallas: Sil International, 2013).
demonstrate public readings of the Torah, and Deuteronomy suggests that such a practice was performed once every seven years. It is clear that the practice of public reading continued through to the first century CE, as Jesus is depicted as standing up to read from the scroll of Isaiah in Luke’s gospel.7

This extends similarly to the context of the early church, where letters from writers such as Paul would most likely be read aloud to a congregation.8 Performance elements were deeply embedded within the various Biblical texts—from their origins as oral reports or narratives, to their reading in public settings, many of the texts within the Biblical canon lend themselves particularly well to oral recitation.9 Revelation is no different—the words of Revelation 1:3, “Blessed is the one who reads aloud (ἀναγινώσκων) the words of the prophecy”10 show a clear expectation on John’s behalf that the text is to be read aloud to the assembled ekklésia. Philip Ruge-Jones notes that performing the text out loud rather than silently reading it produces an entirely different result: “The audience enters the story with their whole being. Not only do their minds get addressed, their bodies and spirits are engaged.”11

There is a growing understanding among scholars of the Biblical canon that orality and performance existed as part of the culture of both Hebrew Bible and New Testament, and that “storytelling,” for example, was of vital importance in retaining, producing and

8 Botha, Orality and Literacy, 204.
9 Perhaps the best introductory primer to the field is the collection edited by Holly E. Hearon and Philip Ruge-Jones, The Bible in Ancient and Modern Media: Story and Performance (Oregon: Cascade Books, 2009), which consists of a number of essays about the performative aspects of various Biblical texts by leading scholars in the field of performance criticism.
10 David Aune discusses the translation of ἀναγινώσκων as “the one who reads aloud,” arguing for it because “ancient texts were nearly always read aloud.” He goes on to briefly discuss the rarity of silent reading, and the significance of reading aloud in the ancient world. David Aune, Revelation (Texas: Word Books, 1997), 20-21.
For a person living in the ancient world, oral communication was understood to be the truest form of communication, and this was made all the more evident by the heavy emphasis placed on rhetorical skill by many ancient cultures, with Greek and Roman being just two of the more obvious examples. To the Greco-Romans, even a written speech was seen as inferior to a ‘live’ performed speech. As Isocrates puts it in his letter to Philip of Macedonia,

καίτοι μ’ οὖ λέληθεν ὅσον διαφέρουσι τῶν λόγων εἰς τὸ πείθειν οἱ λεγόμενοι τῶν ἀναγιγνωσκομένων, οὔδ’ ὅτι πάντες ὑπειλήφασι τοὺς μὲν περὶ σπουδαίων πραγμάτων καὶ κατεπειγόντων ῥήτορεύσαθαι, τοὺς δὲ πρὸς ἐπίδειξιν καὶ πρὸς ἐργολαβίαν γεγράφθαι... ἐπειδὰν γὰρ ὁ λόγος ἀποστερηθῇ τῆς τε δόξης τῆς τοῦ λέγοντος καὶ τῆς φωνῆς καὶ τῶν μεταβολῶν τῶν ἐν ταῖς ῥήτορείαις γιγνομένων... ἀπερ καὶ τὸν νῦν ἐπιδεικνύμενον μάλιστ’ ἂν βλάψει καὶ φαυλότερον.

I do not fail to realize what a great difference there is in persuasiveness between discourses which are spoken and those which are to be read, and that all men have assumed that the former are delivered on subjects which are important and urgent, while the latter are composed for display and personal gain... for when a discourse is robbed of the prestige of the speaker, the tones of his

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voice, the variations which are made in the delivery... it should make an indifferent impression upon its hearers.\textsuperscript{14}

1. **A brief excursus: Revelation as apocalyptic**

Although it has already been stated that this thesis primarily places Revelation within the broad genre of “performance art,” it is important to briefly touch on its role as apocalyptic literature. Richard Horsley argues correctly that the Bible is “not just about religion, but about politics and economics as well”\textsuperscript{15}—and this is all the more relevant for apocalyptic literature. Unfortunately, the term “apocalyptic” can often be a nebulous one, and so some degree of clarification is necessary.

Gordon Fee describes apocalyptic as a genre of writing that looked to God to bring about “a cataclysmic end to history, which also ushered in a redemptive conclusion for God’s people.”\textsuperscript{16} Apocalyptic literature, however, is more than a distant longing for a far-flung redemption—it is grounded firmly in the earthly realities and situations faced by its hearers. Anathea Portier-Young suggests that the writers of apocalypses were in fact developing and encouraging a theology of resistance among hearers and readers.\textsuperscript{17} Thus stated, apocalyptic could be termed resistance literature—or, to use the terminology


\textsuperscript{17} See Anathea E. Portier-Young, *Apocalypse Against Empire: Theologies of Resistance in Early Judaism* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2011).
developed by James C. Scott, a “hidden transcript,”18 a work composed by those under oppression as a response to domination and hegemony that uses codes and symbols to convey its anti-authoritarian message. Although it may seem counterintuitive to call such a public text “hidden,” we must remember the context of the first century Christians to whom the text was first written—a relatively small cult spread across a wide geographical area, each with a different subset of key texts, practices, and teachers. Such a small cult’s writings would not have been considered to be in the mainstream at all, and so their writings remained “hidden” until Christianity truly began to coalesce in the following years.

Portier-Young notes that one of the common traits of apocalyptic literature is the use of “mythical images rich in symbolism”19 that directly confront and counter imperial dominant hegemonies, challenging the oppressive rule of empire with the Kingdom of God—often by turning imperial propaganda on its head and transforming the symbolism of the dominant group. This corresponds closely with Amos Wilder’s argument that apocalyptic literature creates a sense of “anomie,”20 an instability caused by a breakdown in the social bonds between individuals and community—or to frame it in Portier-Young’s terms, instability caused by a change in the social order. This could be said to be the defining characteristic of apocalyptic—its subversion of symbolism and norms to convey a message. In short, apocalyptic serves the function of subversive religious literature—that which on a surface level teaches and upholds spiritual truths, but on a hidden deeper level can act as anti-imperial propaganda. To read it on this level, however, requires proper knowledge of its use of language and symbolism. In this, the reading of Revelation as performance art comes to the fore—as we shall see, approaching John’s writing from a Greco-Roman theatrical perspective gives us a means to understand the language and symbolism of Revelation.

19 Portier-Young, Apocalypse Against Empire, 44.
Of course, we still have not defined apocalyptic literature. J.J. Collins notes that the vast differences between apocalyptic texts (in both emphasis and function) create a number of problems with narrowing down a definition for apocalyptic literature. He argues that the defining feature of apocalyptic literature in the Jewish sense generally serves the purpose of “exhortation and consolation” through its depictions of heavenly power, manifested primarily by judgment upon the wicked, with each apocalypse being grounded within its historical and social setting. This is helpful, although of course many genres serve the purpose of “exhortation and consolation.” As Klaus Koch argues, it is best to understand apocalyptic literature as both a literary phenomenon and as “the expression of a particular attitude of mind.” Perhaps the most useful explanation is Koch's classification of apocalyptic literature as “a complex literary type which has absorbed into itself several component genres.” Such an understanding best allows us to continue with our treatment of Revelation as performance art whilst also acknowledging the other genres it encompasses.

Finally, it is vitally important to recognise Ryan Hansen’s comments that the utterance of apocalyptic “makes the apocalyptic event present among its hearers,” and that the “language of apocalypse is not so much referential and representational as it is participatory and poetic.” This helps us to recapture the sense of both immanence and imminence conveyed by the book of Revelation, and to understand that for ancient hearers of the Apocalypse of John, the words they were hearing were very much intended to speak into their present reality. It reminds us of the richness of the text, and acknowledges the variety of interpretations that are possible and indeed necessary in forming a conversation around the text and its meaning.

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This leaves us with a disparate set of ideas to be assembled. So far, apocalyptic literature:

- Is grounded in earthly reality
- Encourages resistance against dominant structures
- Is subversive in its teaching against empire
- Both exhorts and consoles its hearers
- May include multiple genres
- Is written in poetic, highly visual language
- Is invitational and participative

Hence, apocalyptic literature might be summarised as eschatological subversive resistance literature, written to exhort and console groups suffering oppression by a dominant power. Apocalyptic literature often subverts or utilises the imagery and language of the dominant power in order to fulfil its goals. It is grounded in, and makes reference to, the cultures it is immersed in, and encourages its audience to participate in some sort of activity in forming resistance (whether active or passive).

Let us juxtapose this against the Society of Biblical Literature Apocalypse Group’s “comprehensive definition” of apocalypse, as per J.J. Collins:

“Apocalypse” is a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial insofar as it involves another, supernatural world.26

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Collins’ definition of the genre is generally accepted by most scholars, and it is helpful to include David Hellholm’s qualification that apocalypses are written “for a group in crisis with the purpose of exhortation and/or consolation by means of divine authority.”  

This definition, whilst academically workable, fails to capture the full essence of the idea of the apocalypse; the desperation, the hiddenness, the undertones that colour each work. On the other hand, the definition I have pieced together above is altogether too non-specific to be useful for categorisation.

An exploratory attempt at bringing the two together would utilise the SBL’s definition (with Hellholm’s qualification), but also include the idea of apocalypse as subversive resistance literature. This is especially important as it helps readers to think beyond the text itself into its context, remembering that many apocalypses are formed in situations of great turmoil and oppression. To put it all together, one might argue the following:

“Apocalyptic” is a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, often incorporating cultural references contemporary to its context. In it, a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a reality that is transcendent but also rooted in the everyday. This revelation is written for a group in crisis with the purpose of exhortation and/or consolation by means of divine authority supplanting earthly dominance and revealing a supernatural reality of divine rule, and salvation for the faithful. At the same time, apocalyptic literature is intended to be both imminent and immanent, representing a change in all those who hear its words.

This definition remains open to debate, but for the purposes of this thesis it sufficiently conveys the depth and complexity of apocalyptic literature. Beyond simple categorisation, it begins to draw out an understanding of the text’s purpose and audience, helping to create context. It also recognises that apocalyptic texts can

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continue to speak powerfully into many or most situations, influencing those who
approach the texts. It also recognises that apocalyptic texts are grounded in the context
of their audience. We will return to the discussion of apocalyptic literature in Chapter 4,
where we will explore its meaning, purpose and use within its context.

2. The current literature: Revelation as Drama

The idea of interpreting the book of Revelation with reference to, or relying on, the
conventions of dramatic performance has been explored before, but not extensively.
Scholarship has often touched on the idea but very few have expanded upon it, and
fewer still have used it as the framework for organising interpretive approaches. Many
understand the text as dramatic, but do not choose to engage it as a drama from a
serious scholarly or interpretive perspective, instead, as Wright encourages, choosing to
“settle in our seats, put other concerns out of our minds, and wait for the curtain to
rise.”\(^\text{28}\) Such an approach provides benefits in appreciating the text, but there is great
value to be found in a more methodical, careful exploration of Revelation as
performance.

That the text of Revelation forms a single cohesive narrative is no longer questioned by
scholars. M. Eugene Boring helpfully notes that

\begin{quote}
Revelation was designed to be read aloud and heard all at once... the
Apocalypse must be grasped as a whole, for it simply cannot be
understood verse by verse. It is a narrative, a drama with action and
\end{quote}

\(^{28}\text{N.T. Wright, Revelation for Everyone (Louisville: John Knox Press, 2011), 5. In this popular commentary,}
\text{Wright frames the opening of Revelation as a performance in an auditorium.}\)
movement that conveys the message of each part within the context of
the story in its totality.29

Like many with a similar interpretive inclination, however, Boring does not take this as
a statement of methodology. Although he chooses to structure his interpretation of the
text as a drama, he does not interpret the multiple elements of the text as such. The idea
of hearing Revelation as a single, deliberate narrative, however, is one that is echoed by
many other scholars, and indeed is a very appropriate idea to apply to the text.30 deSilva
helpfully notes that the text requires what he calls a "contemporary-historical
approach" in order to be understood, positing the importance of a reading that takes
into account John's audience and their culture, expectations and understanding.31 He
uses rhetorical analysis to demonstrate the importance of a narrative approach to the
text, reminding his readers of two key points: that John's apocalypse was to be read
aloud in a single sitting, and that the narrative of the text is made all the more obvious
through an awareness of the rhetorical conventions of the first century CE.32

Stephen Horn's textual exploration of Revelation notes that it is helpful to view the text
as a drama as it "puts due emphasis on seeing the lead actors and props as the keys to
understanding the story's most important themes," but he does not develop the idea any
further.33 Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart suggest that the text can be interpreted as a
drama, and briefly sketch a structure beginning with Rev 6-7 and ending in Rev 22.34
Their attempt is of more use as a brief survey (as is indeed the purpose of their book)

30 See, for example, Aune, Revelation 1-5, xci-xciii; G.K. Beale, The Book of Revelation (Grand Rapids:
Revelation (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993), 1-37.
31 David A. deSilva, Seeing Things John's Way: The Rhetoric of the Book of Revelation (Louisville: John Knox
Press, 2009), 6-7.
33 Stephen N. Horn, "Let the One Who Has Ears: Hearing What the Spirit Says to the Church Today!" in
(Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2010), 177.
34 Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth (Grand Rapids: Zondervan,
and so intentionally does not delve into the matter more systematically or thoroughly. I. Howard Marshall similarly alludes to a dramatic understanding of the text with his designation of “principal actors” and of plot. What Horn, Fee and Stuart and Marshall have in common, however, is their assertion that such a reading or understanding is particularly helpful in allowing the text’s key themes to emerge. Reading the text through the lens of genre studies, Newton writes that the text has a “definite and complex storyline with plot and characters, resembling a Greek play for example.”

Newton instead understands the text as a love story in the form of an Ancient Romance novel, noting also the similarities of novels to dramas in their construction of plot, characters, climaxes and other elements.

David L. Barr’s study of Revelation’s plot divides the text into three distinct yet interconnected plots: John’s vision on Patmos (Revelation 1-3), the actions of heaven (Revelation 4-11) and the battle on earth (Revelation 12-22:15). Barr points out the importance of a plot to a story, noting that the use of three distinct plots with a similar framework allows John to reinscribe mythic tradition in order to engage his readers (or listeners) at a different level. Whilst he correctly identifies the recurring motifs as central to the plots of Revelation, his insistence on isolating each story as independent is somewhat baffling, as he himself identifies each plot as having virtually identical frameworks and as sharing key elements. Nevertheless, his division of the text into three distinct plots is a helpful device for understanding the importance of plot to the text.

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Schüssler Fiorenza examines the idea of Revelation as both liturgy and drama, concluding that although the text contains elements of both, it cannot be categorised into either genre as “it is not written in the dialogue form of a drama just as it does not represent a liturgical formulary.”\(^{39}\) She concludes that Revelation is instead to be understood as a work of Christian prophecy constructed to include elements of drama, liturgy, myth, prophetic and Christian patterns, whose epistolary framework is not accidental but a deliberate choice by the author. Specifically, she interprets the hymnal aspects of the text as functioning much like a Greek chorus—an assertion with which Ben Witherington disagrees, instead likening them to divine commentary or a “court reporter putting things in perspective.”\(^{40}\)

Arguably, Schüssler Fiorenza is correct in her assertion that the text of Revelation is not structured in the traditional sense of a dialogue, and indeed her conclusion that the text is a composite of various genres cannot be refuted, and neither can her assignment of a choral role to the hymns of Revelation. This demonstrates the applicability of dramatic conventions to the text of Revelation, and Schüssler Fiorenza does briefly touch on the idea of a greater connection between Revelation and drama.

She does not, however, go much further in developing the idea of a greater dramatic understanding of Revelation. She does argue for a symmetrical structure for Revelation (ABCDC’B’A’, with Rev 10:1-15:4 forming the centrepiece) and notes that “it is especially interesting to note the affinity of the structure of Revelation with that of Greek drama.”\(^{41}\) She finishes by arguing that


\(^{40}\) Ben Witherington III, *Revelation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 19. Witherington’s comment is especially helpful as it draws parallels with the idea of a narrator, a common device in Greco-Roman theatre.

\(^{41}\) Schüssler Fiorenza, *The Book of Revelation*, 176.
The structuralist and architectonic analysis of Revelation confirms the assumption that the author intended to write a work of prophecy in the form of the apostolic letter. Moreover, it underlines the dramatic character of Revelation... the author has fused his materials, patterns, and theological perspective into the unique form-content configuration of Revelation.42

Her imposition of the epistolary form, however, is based only upon Rev 1:1-8.43 Given that she chooses to interpret the letters to the seven churches as prophecy rather than direct address, and that Revelation does not end in the traditional epistolary form, this argument is tenuous at best. It seems far more likely that the hybrid nature of Revelation that Schüssler Fiorenza so adeptly highlights is best showcased through applying some sort of a dramatic understanding, the “performance mode of thought,” to the text.

One of the earliest attempts to interpret Revelation in the form of dramatic performance comes from Raymond Brewer, who asserted that John of Patmos sought to “heighten the dramatic power of his Revelation by giving it the setting of a Greek theatre.”44 Brewer notes that at least six of the seven cities addressed in the opening of Revelation had theatres, and indeed that the widespread worship of Dionysus throughout Asia Minor would have ensured that inhabitants of the region were familiar with Greek theatre: “there is no compelling reason for denying [early Christians] familiarity with the theatre,” given that theatre was extensively performed as part of the liturgy of festivals honouring Dionysus. He suggests that many of the features of Revelation correspond to that of the theatre at Ephesus, and points out that the scenes of heavenly worship in Revelation 4-5 can be staged quite accurately in a reconstruction of the Ephesian theatre. Brewer pioneered many of the early suggestions for connecting the text to

43 Strictly speaking, Schüssler Fiorenza argues for an understanding of Revelation as epistolary in nature based only on Revelation 1:4-6 functioning as a prescript similar to Pauline epistles. See Schüssler Fiorenza, *The Book of Revelation*, 170.
drama, such as its archaeological and choral associations. Aside from its brevity, the only issue with his work is his insistence upon using the Greek form rather than the Roman, an anachronism shared by many.

The next approaches we will examine take a stronger stance towards interpreting Revelation from a dramatic perspective, whether through structuring Revelation as drama or interpreting from the perspective of Greco-Roman theatre.

### 2.1 John Wick Bowman and The First Christian Drama

The seminal work in this field is that of John Wick Bowman, who proposed an entirely new interpretation of the text as a dramatic performance, calling Revelation “a drama quite artificially constructed of seven acts in each of which occur seven scenes.”\(^{45}\) Bowman’s book imposed a somewhat rigid structure upon the text, showing that it could be divided and interpreted as drama, but more importantly, Bowman was one of the first to flesh out the details of how Revelation could be interpreted using the conventions of Greek drama. Bowman posits that the purpose of such a deliberate and artificial structure was to allow the author, John of Patmos, to communicate his message better. This message is identified as “the ‘Christian Theology of History’," and is well presented through Bowman’s structure and commentary.

Bowman’s treatise on Revelation is, in his own words, “an endeavour to provide a wholesome guidebook to the most abused writing in the Christian Scriptures.”\(^{46}\)


Presented as a simple structure and commentary with a few brief directions for staging, this work is clearly designed to guide the reader through Bowman’s suggested theatrical structure for the Apocalypse of John, allowing the reader’s own imagination to fill in any gaps—and, of course, allowing John of Patmos’s own words to illuminate the path of the reader. One senses that Bowman simply wishes to honour John’s work by presenting it in a format more easily understood and less likely to be misinterpreted.

John of Patmos is seen by Bowman as being both prophet and artist, intimately familiar with the layout and purposes of the dramatic form; unafraid both to utilise and disregard the rules of the theatre. John has thought through and crafted his work in order to evoke fully the desired response in his reader (or, perhaps, listener). As Bowman argues, however, this does not mean that his visions are a fictive construct or sham. Rather, the text is representative of the vision that he received, carefully ordered and structured in order to make the most sense for those with whom he will share it. In this way, John is seen as working as an artist, seeking to propagate his prophetic message through a medium that recreates and conveys the depth and colour of his own visions.

To that end, John requires an audience. As Bowman states, “John knows himself in possession of a message urgently needed by the Church,”47 and so he chooses to address his work to seven specific ekklesia, including an opening salutation and closing benediction as though the drama were a letter in the vein of Paul. Bowman identifies Rev 1:1-6 and Rev 22:21 as part of this superimposed structure and discounts these

47 Bowman, The First Christian Drama, 4. Note that Bowman’s understanding of a single, unified “Church” is now seen as somewhat archaic or anachronistic, and refers to the greater body of ekklesia who are followers of Christ.
verses from the main body of text, opening the drama with Rev 1:7-8. Bowman then structures Revelation as follows:48

Prologue (Rev 1:7-8)

**Act I: Vision of the Church on Earth** (Rev 1:9-3:2)
Setting: The Seven Golden Lampstands (Rev 1:9-20)
- Scene 1: Letter to the Passionless Church: Ephesus (Rev 2:1-7)
- Scene 2: Letter to the Persecuted Church: Smyrna (Rev 2:8-11)
- Scene 3: Letter to the Tolerant Church: Pergamum (Rev 2:12-17)
- Scene 4: Letter to the Compromising Church: Thyatira (Rev 2:18-29)
- Scene 5: Letter to the Dead Church: Sardis (Rev 3:1-6)
- Scene 6: Letter to the Missionary Church: Philadelphia (Rev 3:7-13)
- Scene 7: Letter to the Arrogant Church: Laodicea (Rev 3:14-21)

**Act II: Vision of God in Heaven** (Rev 4:1-8:1)
Setting: The Throne of God (Rev 4:1-8a), The Odes of Creatures and Elders (Rev 4:8b-11), The Book and the Lamb (Rev 5:1-7), The Three Hymns (Rev 5:8-14)
- Scene 1: The Rider on the White Horse: Conquest (Rev 6:1-2)
- Scene 2: The Rider on the Red Horse: Civil War (Rev 6:3-4)
- Scene 3: The Rider on the Black Horse: Famine (Rev 6:5-6)
- Scene 4: The Rider on the Yellow Horse: Death (Rev 6:7-8)
- Scene 5: The Prayer of the Martyrs (Rev 6:9-11)
- Scene 6: The Eschatological Events
  - Cosmic Catastrophes (Rev 6:12-17)
  - Sealing of the Martyrs (Rev 7:1-8)
  - The Martyrs in Heaven (Rev 7:9-17)
- Scene 7: Silence in Heaven (Rev 8:1)

**Act III: Vision of the Seven Angels of the Presence** (Rev 8:2-11:18)
Setting: The Altars and the Angel with the Prayers of the Saints (Rev 8:2-6)
- Scene 1: Hail and Fire Fall on the Earth (Rev 8:7)
- Scene 2: A Mountain Cast Into the Sea (Rev 8:8-9)
- Scene 3: A Great Star Falls on Rivers and Springs (Rev 8:10-11)
- Scene 4: Heavenly Bodies Darkened (Rev 8:12)

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48 This structure has been adapted slightly from Bowman’s *The First Christian Drama*, but has not been changed in any significant way.
An Eagle Announces Three Woes

- Scene 5: (Woe 1) The Pit of the Abyss Opened (Rev 9:1-12)
- Scene 6: (Woe 2) Calamities on Earth (Rev 9:13-11:14)
- Scene 7: (Woe 3) Worship in Heaven (Rev 11:15-18)

Act IV: Vision of the Church Triumphant (Rev 11:19-14:20 and 15:2-4)
Setting: The Ark of the Covenant (Rev 11:19)
- Scene 1: The Woman and the Dragon (Rev 12:1-18)
- Scene 2: The Beast Arising from the Sea (Rev 13:1-10)
- Scene 3: The Beast Arising from the Land (Rev 13:11-18)
- Scene 4: The Lamb with the 144,000 Martyrs (Rev 14:1-5)
- Scene 5: The Angel with an Eternal Gospel (Rev 14:6-13)
- Scene 6: The Son of Man on a White Cloud (Rev 14:14-20)
- Scene 7: The Hymn of the Lamb Chanted by the Saved (Rev 15:2-4)

Act V: Vision of the Seven Angels of God's Wrath (Rev 15:1, 5-16:21)
Setting: The Sanctuary of the ‘Tabernacle of Testimony’ (Rev 15:1, 5-8, 16:1)
- Scene 1: The Plague to the Earth: Boils on Men (Rev 16:2)
- Scene 2: The Plague to the Sea: Blood (Rev 16:3)
- Scene 3: The Plague to Rivers and Springs: Blood (Rev 16:4-7)
- Scene 4: The Plague to the Sun: Burning Heat (Rev 16:8-9)
- Scene 5: The Plague to the Beast’s Throne: Darkness (Rev 16:10-11)
- Scene 6: The Plague to the Euphrates: Drying Up (Rev 16:12-16)
- Scene 7: The Plague to the Air: Devastation (Rev 16:17-21)

Setting: One of the Angels of the Seven Plagues Issuing From the Sanctuary (Rev 17:1-2)
- Scene 1: The Woman on the Scarlet Beast (Rev 17:3-5)
- Scene 2: The Beast at War with the Woman (Rev 17:6-18)
- Scene 3: The Final Cosmic Oratorio (Rev 18:1-19:10)
- Scene 4: The Word of God on the White Horse (Rev 19:11-16)
- Scene 5: The Angel Standing in the Sun (Rev 19:17-18)
- Scene 6: The Battle of Armageddon (Rev 19:19-21)
- Scene 7: Satan Cast Into the Abyss (Rev 20:1-3)
Parenthetical Prophecy on His Limited Authority (Rev 20:7-10)

Act VII: Vision of the Church in the Millennium (Rev 20:4-6, 20:11-22:5)
Setting: The Church Enthroned with Christ (Rev 20:4-6)
- Scene 1: The Old Heaven and Old Earth Disappear (Rev 20:11)
The First Christian Drama has both great flaws and great benefits. Bowman is both a student and lover of Greco-Roman drama, with an understanding of its conventions and its ultimate purposes, and able to work within its rules and confines. This allows him to discard any wooden idea of literalism in his interpretation. For example, Bowman notes that the thousand years of Christ’s rule on earth is not to be taken literally (and is in fact impossible to enact within a drama), instead stating that John “employed the materials he found at hand to further spiritual ends and not for the solving of riddles of interest to the curious-minded.” 49 This approach allows him to set aside such issues, which would trip up any other commentator, in order to focus on the overall message that John is trying to convey. He is not fazed by the occasional absurdity of the images that John presents, understanding that they are intended as metaphor rather than to be interpreted strictly as fact.

Despite being seminal in its approach, his structure has its flaws. Although Bowman clearly understands the concept of drama, his limited engagement with, or reference to, either Greek or Roman dramas as a basis for understanding is rather telling, and his attempt at a grand unified structure feels incomplete and occasionally rushed. His choices for scene and act breakdowns are sometimes forced and artificial, and his insistence upon maintaining a numerical coherence of seven scenes within seven acts is an obvious numerical imposition of rigid structure to the text, at times constricting the flow of the drama.

However, there is no doubting that Bowman’s approach was unique and important. Bowman cannot have been the first to envision Revelation as a drama, but he was certainly one of the first to flesh out the details of how it would be presented. Arguably, Bowman’s most important contribution was his understanding of John of Patmos as a prophet and artist who sought to communicate through a particular medium; this has challenged subsequent scholars to re-evaluate their interpretive approach to the text, choosing to read it not as a literal transcription of John’s vision but rather as a prophetic work carefully designed to evoke the imagination and bring hope to those who heard it.

2.2 Other approaches to Revelation as drama

Another important contribution in this field is the work of James L. Blevins, whose research sought to expand upon and improve that of Bowman. Blevins identified Revelation as being written in the genre of drama, calling it a “true syncretistic vessel, bringing together the Greek and Hebraic worlds, theatre and temple, cult and drama” as an “innovative adaptation of Greek tragic drama.” Blevins also states that Revelation can only be understood within the context of the seven-windowed Great Theatre at Ephesus, calling it “both a landmark and cultural centre” with which John of Patmos must have had deep experience. He also notes the close relationship between drama and divine worship in the ancient Greco-Roman world, and argues that an understanding of the text as drama provides an alternative to the “sensationalism” of dispensational premillennial theology—and presumably other literalist readings of the text.

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Blevins’ work is problematic because of his insistence on engaging with Greek drama—an anachronism that is unfortunately common to most scholars, perhaps due to the perception that limited historical sources are available for understanding Roman theatre, or alternatively the basic error of assuming that these theatres’ Greek origins of construction meant an exclusivity of Greek performance. Whilst Greek theatre was both popular and common throughout the Roman Empire, the Romans had their own playwrights, and developed a form of theatre that was distinct from the Greek forms. As we shall explore in the next chapter, the Romans had their own performance styles and imagery, with distinct methods, expectations and approaches. Both approaches are important, but to neglect one is a clear historical-critical error.

Subsequently, Mills and Watson have mused about the possibility of the text being set imaginatively within the Great Theatre in Ephesus, noting that there are “many similarities between Revelation and the extant Greek tragedies” before going on to detail the role of the chorus in Greek tragedy. This interpretation equates the elders in Revelation to the chorus in the function of narrator. Mills and Watson arrive at the conclusion that Revelation “was meant to be seen and heard,” and so the people who heard it would picture it against the backdrop of the theatre, especially given the specific mention of Ephesus at the outset of the text.

Most recently, Sylvie T. Raquel has expanded upon Bowman’s work by fashioning a contemporary approach to setting Revelation as a drama, designating characters and settings in order to “reveal the multi-dimensional facets of the vision.” Distinctive in Raquel’s work is her understanding and usage of a mixed Greco-Roman style of theatre as opposed to the more common, anachronistic use of classical Greek theatre. Perhaps most importantly, Raquel understands that the audience to a narrated Roman play “had

to base their understanding solely on verbal cues,” and argues that such a “visual limitation” explains John’s use of repeated motifs as a guide to comprehension.55

Another intriguing approach is Harry O. Maier’s. Although Maier never takes a systematic approach to understanding Revelation as dramatic performance, his commentary on the text makes it clear that he views it as inextricably performative. By engaging with the text from a variety of angles (aural, visual, temporal, ironic), Maier convincingly demonstrates the need for an understanding of Revelation that will unveil the text’s true focus, a “decolonizing doubled view... [that] rehearse[s] empire so as to expose it, replay[s] exploitative tyranny to dethrone it.”56 Although Maier never systematically sets out an exegesis of Revelation as drama, it is clear that such an understanding permeates and underpins his entire approach. Maier understands the power of visual imagery, and it is no surprise that he is a strong proponent of visual exegesis, a field that we will explore later.

All of these approaches have attempted to use a classical Greek theatrical structure (with the exception of Raquel and Maier) or language to describe the book of Revelation, with the underlying assumption that such a method is appropriate and even required to gain a full and thorough understanding of the book. Indeed, one could speculate that if it were to be structured, cast and performed, such a drama could prove to be a definitive interpretation of Revelation. None of these approaches, however, has fully engaged with the breadth of Greek and Roman performance, instead limiting their scope to deal with particular aspects such as Greek theatre. This is clearly a problem within scholarship, and so the next chapter will specifically address Greco-Roman performance, and particularly different Roman performance styles.

55 Raquel, “Revelation as Drama,” 161.
3. Early Christian approaches to the theatre

As we have discussed, few scholars have chosen to approach Revelation from the perspective of theatre, which is surprising given the clear associations between both theatre and text, and Revelation’s history of interpretation. Perhaps one reason why such an approach to Revelation (or indeed to any Biblical text) seems innovative is due to the early Church fathers’ influential views on the theatre. Donnalee Dox argues that the theatre’s central role in the life of all subjects of the Roman Empire caused it to be “one of the most visible demonstrations of pagan culture at which a zealous Christian might launch a critique,” and indeed Augustine of Hippo goes to great lengths to do just that. Augustine dedicates space in four of his texts to discuss the theatre and its inappropriateness for a moral Christian life, arguing that theatrical performances encouraged bad behaviour and interfered with a Christian’s ability to know God.

Dox identifies that Augustine’s feelings against the theatre are strongly tied to his criticism of his earlier life, but also that Augustine was not able to visualise a distinction between the theatre and the culture that it came from—a culture that he had rejected in favour of Christianity. Because of the theatre’s strong links to Greco-Roman religion, Augustine argued, any and all products of the theatre, including the emotion and feelings generated from a performance, were illusions of the false gods. Therefore, to attend the theatre was tantamount to embracing the culture that Augustine had

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57 Thankfully, the field of Biblical performance criticism and those who choose to interpret the text from a performance perspective continues to grow—branching into an exploration of most texts of the Biblical canon.
59 Augustine argues against the theatre in Confessions 3.2, City of God 6.6, Concerning the Teacher, and On Christian Doctrine 1.30.
60 For a thorough and enjoyable discussion on Augustine’s motives and thoughts behind condemning theatre, see chapter 1 of Dox, The Idea of the Theater, 11-42.
abandoned after his conversion. Ironically enough, he makes the theatre the site for his Confessions, recognising the space as being perfect for a theatrical retelling of his failures.\(^6\) Other scholars have pointed out that Augustine’s criticisms are rather more practical, condemning the theatre because of its effect on the church rather than ontological differences.\(^6\)

Whatever his reasons, it is important to note that Augustine’s views represent just the tip of the iceberg; there exists a plethora of early church writers who attacked both the theatre and its role in Roman society. Schnusenberg identifies their key disagreement as idololatria—that is, idolatry—and argues that their understanding of the Roman gods as apostate angels fuelled their uncompromising stance against Roman culture.\(^6\) Just as Augustine viewed the theatre as a site for depravity and immorality, many of the early church writers saw the theatre as a propagator of idolatry, and wrote strongly against it. To them, attending the theatre meant participating in pagan practices, and on a subconscious level, affirming the Roman imperial mythology and its claims. Schnusenberg traces a clear lineage of attacks on the theatre by early church writers, beginning with the Apology of Artistides and slowly waning after Augustine. This includes a wide range of influential figures including Justin Martyr, Tatian, Athenagoras, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Tertullian, Cyprian, Novatian, Arnobius, Lactantius, Ambrose, Prudentius, Cyril of Jerusalem, Gregory of Nazianzen, Gregory of Nyssa, John Chrysostom, and Narsai.\(^6\) Theatre was performed as part of religious ceremony up to around 600CE, meaning that the conflict between the Christians and the theatre lasted around 500 years.

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\(^6\) Other scholars argue that Augustine’s stance on the theatre is much more nuanced, and that he recognised both its positives and negatives. His overall stance, however, reads more generally as being opposed to it, and most would agree that this negative stance is the more influential one.


\(^6\) For more details, see Schnusenberg, The Church and the Theatre, Chapter 1.
Schnusenberg is also careful to point out that the condemnation of the theatre by church writers is not limited to the Western church, but is also a popular theme among the Eastern Church writers.65 In particular, writers attacked the theatre for its strong ties to Greco-Roman religion, and argued that any who attended the theatre were paying tribute to the gods of the Romans. The theatre was also seen as a place rife with temptations for the Christian, and a place where immorality was perpetuated and taught. A false world was presented in the theatre, one that held great enticement for the average person, not only because of its accurate depictions of everyday life, but also because of the depth of feeling and emotion it was able to generate in its audience.66

Another potential point of contention with the theatre, of course, could be the fact that at times, “the theatre which provoked the condemnation of Ambrose and Augustine was a circus in which the Christians themselves were liable to provide the show.”67 Whilst this view reflects a somewhat outdated understanding, it does have a ring of truth to it. It is certainly true that by the time of the early church fathers, some degree of systematic persecution of Christians had begun. Whilst the level of persecution of Christians in the first century CE is hotly debated,68 it is John’s (and his audience’s) perception of persecution that is important. The early Christians would indeed have seen death occurring in the theatre, and some of these deaths may have been Christian martyrs, as we will discuss in subsequent chapters. John of Patmos’ reimagining of the theatre in Revelation acknowledged these deaths even as he, like Augustine, used the theatre as a medium through which he could critique the Roman Empire.

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65 Schnusenberg, The Church and the Theatre, 40-41.
66 For a further, comprehensive account of historical animosities towards the theatre (not just by Christians), see Jonas Barish, The Anti-Theatrical Prejudice (California: University of California Press, 1985).
Despite these polemical writings, it seems that Christians nevertheless continued to attend the theatre—most likely due to its importance as part of the social fabric of the empire, as we shall see in the next chapter. Although the church itself could not alter the theatre or its meaning, even during its reign as the official religion of the Empire following the ascension of Theodosius I, church services did eventually become “a counterpart of the pagan meeting place” in a successful way. Early church liturgy was imbued with a sense of the dramatic, much like the ritual of the Hebrew Bible, to the point where “there developed a Christian drama... grouped around and emerging from the First Liturgical Act of Jesus, the Last Supper.”

To that end, Speaight argues, “theatrical recreation evolved out of spiritual need,” and by the time of the Middle Ages, Christian thought had grown to accept the theatrical and indeed claim it as its own, creating Christian plays which formed an important part of Christian liturgy. Speaight differentiates between several different kinds of plays that were developed in the Middle Ages: liturgical dramas, miracle plays, mysteries, and moralities. Ironically enough, Barish notes, theatre in the Middle Ages was most likely preserved only due to being endorsed by the church as a teaching tool. From there, a wide variety of theatrical works developed, although of course the theatre would “continue to be what it has so often claimed to be—the servant of the public.”

Moving forward to the contemporary church, we see that many (predominantly Evangelical) church movements in the Western world enthusiastically embraced dramatic performance as part of church services and liturgy coming into the twenty-first century CE, only to abandon them more recently in favour of “filmed” drama. There has also been a resurgence of performances of gospel texts, often the book of

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Mark, and scholarship in performance criticism and related fields has increased. As performance art continues to flourish through traditional and contemporary mediums, this interest in understanding the great mystery of faith through performance will only grow. As we have already seen, performance and the Biblical text are not necessarily mutually exclusive; opportunities abound for those willing to begin an exploration of texts as dramatic performance.

4. **Ring Theory and Revelation**

Of particular importance when discussing Revelation is the concept of chiastic structures, or ring composition. The theory of ring composition posits a circular literary form that guided composition of ancient works, whereby a story unfolds in a way that expands from a beginning, arrives at a turning point, then comes to a conclusion that references, mimics, or reflects the beginning. Mary Douglas defines it as a “construction of parallelisms that must open a theme, develop it, and round it off by bringing the conclusion back to the beginning.” The terms “chiasmus” or “pedimental” are also used to describe ring composition; I agree with Douglas that “chiasms” and “pediments” should be reserved for shorter pieces of writing, whereas “ring composition” describes much longer texts. “Chiastic thinking,” however refers to a system of thought that is familiar with these structures, and integrates them into everyday life. We will return to this argument shortly, but for now, let us briefly explore the idea of chiasmus.

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74 A quick glance at the SBL meeting programs over the last few years, for example, shows an increase in papers related to performance criticism.
The first explorations of chiastic structures in texts originated in Biblical studies. Nils Lund is acknowledged as being the first Biblical scholar to advance the study of chiasmus in the 20th century, working extensively toward “applying the principle of chiasmus to the study of the Bible” in his book *Chiasmus in the New Testament*. In recent times, it has become increasingly clear that many texts in the ancient world were composed around chiastic structures (as ring compositions) and that both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament were no different.

Chiastic thinking was important for a number of reasons—each of which is highly contextual to the ancient world. McCoy notes three major factors contributing to the widespread use of chiasmus in antiquity: Firstly, chiasms helped create structure and organisation in writings that “did not make use of paragraphs, punctuation, capitalisation and other synthetic devices to communicate the conclusion of one idea and the commencement of the next.” Secondly, chiasms functioned as an aid to memorisation, an important learning method in the ancient world. Breck notes that “chiasm facilitated this process [memorisation] by repetition and by focusing on a central theme. Once the student had in mind the first half... it was a relatively easy matter to recall the rest.” Finally, scholars such as Breck and Stock argue that Greek and Latin education encouraged children to “learn the alphabet forwards, then backwards, then from the extremities towards the middle... they proceeded to analyse texts in the same manner, in order to detect their inverted parallelism and chiastic

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82 John Breck, *The Shape of Biblical Language: Chiasmus in the Scriptures and Beyond* (New York: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1994), 60.
structure.” John Welch argues that this was a common pattern in Greco-Roman rhetoric known as *hysteron-proteron*, “last-first.”

Breck points out two other important reasons for the continued use of chiasmus: the focus it places on the core of the author’s message, and the simple aesthetic value of the form. By reading a text chiastically, or “concentrically” as Breck puts it, the reader is “drawn into its circular flow, as an object is drawn toward the center of a vortex.” The centre was significant, and to be aware of a text funnelling you towards its key message enables a reader fully to focus on that message and its significance. Chasms are also symmetrical, complete and whole. They possess a sophistication that can be missed by a linear approach to text; and, as Welch points out, “more then than now, beauty was synonymous with form.”

As mentioned earlier, to speak of chiasmus is to speak of inverted parallelism; yet it is much more complex than simple inversion. A chiasmus can be “employed by a skilful composer to elevate the importance of a central concept or to dramatise a radical shift of events at the turning-point.” At the same time, the rest of the composition is often utilised as a framework which mirrors events on either side of the system, and intensifies them as they draw closer to the turning point. For example, Welch demonstrates the use of chiasmus in Psalm 3:7-9:

A    I do not fear the arrows of people Who have set themselves against me round about.
B    Arise,

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86 Breck, *The Shape of Biblical Language*, 60.
89 Taken from Welch, “Introduction,” 10.
When laid out as a chiasm, the balance, mirroring and intensification of the passage become clear and evident, and demonstrate the thought and care taken in the composition of the psalm. The structure of the text is laid out so as to bring the reader (or listener) on a metaphorical, guided journey to a particular destination and back—in this case, from an appeal to YHWH to the act of his vengeance and a return to praising YHWH. It is by no means a linear path, but a clearly circular journey. The “people around about” referenced in A have been defeated by D’, and so the writer returns in A’ to YHWH’s own people.

Chiasmus is seen throughout the New Testament as well, and undoubtedly so in the book of Revelation. A helpful example from Revelation 10:9-10 below illustrates that chiasmus does not have to be strictly linear or precisely reflected, but rather that the repetition of words and ideas is important:90

A’ I took the little scroll from the angel’s hand and ate it.
C’ It tasted as sweet as honey in my mouth,
B’ But when I had eaten it, my stomach turned sour.

Whilst a relatively simple example, it demonstrates effectively that a great degree of thought and care went into the composition of passages in Revelation. Of course, many others have applied chiastic or ring structures to Revelation—for example Schüssler Fiorenza, who, as we briefly explored earlier, argues for a symmetrical structure of Revelation with Revelation 10-15 forming the centrepoint of the text.91

Before going any further, it is worth pausing briefly to remind ourselves that the idea of chiasmus and rings were not constructs or methods of composition in the ancient world, but rather part of an integrated worldview. To draw them out artificially as we have done here would be unthinkable to one steeped in such a worldview; to them, life (and therefore history, stories, and so on) simply revolves and turns as a multitude of cycles. As someone who has grown up in such a culture, it is difficult to describe such a mindset to Western scholarship. This is due to the lack of scholarly understanding of chiastic thinking as integral to culture and the Western insistence on linear thought. Chiastic thinking is a worldview, a lifestyle, a system of thinking; one either knows it intrinsically, or finds it inexplicably foreign. Chiasms have been found and demonstrated in a variety of cultures—from Japan92 to Indonesia.93 One senses the frustration in reading Anthony Paul and Boris Wiseman’s introduction to Chiasmus and Culture:

91 Schüssler Fiorenza, The Book of Revelation, 176.
Chiasmus, here, has a quite different status than in the western rhetorical tradition evoked above. It is an integral feature of an ancient poetics, albeit one unfamiliar to the majority of western readers...\textsuperscript{94}

As with kabuki, [Eisenstein’s] ambition, he explains, is to allow the spectator to “perceive light vibrations as sound” and “hear tremors of air as colours.” He wants us to hear light and see sound. This provides a fitting metaphor for the view of the world we would like to invite our readers to provisionally adopt.\textsuperscript{95}

For many, chiastic thinking is particularly problematic, and indeed may not make sense. Despite this, we must make some effort in understanding chiastic thought given its integral importance to the ancient world and particularly to John’s audience.

So far, we have seen chiasmus applied to relatively short passages and to smaller texts. What about longer compositions—entire works, perhaps, or even groupings of works? As alluded to earlier, larger works reflect an increase in complexity in their composition, and whilst the simple rules of chiasmus can be applied, it is more helpful to utilise the more advanced ideas of ring composition, which we will discuss below. Such ideas are frequently seen in the ancient literature—for example, in Homer’s Iliad, or in Virgil’s Aeneid. They are also found in the Hebrew Bible—for example, Jacob Milgrom has demonstrated that the Torah and the book of Joshua together form a biblical ring which begins and ends with the “land of promise” (promised to Abraham in Genesis, then fulfilled in Joshua), which mirrors the events in Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and

\textsuperscript{95} Paul and Wiseman, Chiasmus and Culture, 15.
Deuteronomy, and which has at its turning point the Theophany, or revelation of YHWH's presence, in Exodus 33.\textsuperscript{96}

Douglas has laid out a set of rules or conventions that govern ring compositions; appropriately for the subject of this thesis, there are seven rules. Douglas does note that these rules are not strict, but act more as guidelines for composition, helping authors to achieve "balance and proportion."\textsuperscript{97} Douglas's seven rules, greatly shortened and summarised, are as follows:\textsuperscript{98}

1. Exposition or prologue: An introductory scene that states the theme and introduces the main characters.

2. Split into two halves: The composition must be clearly divisible into two halves.

3. Parallel sections: The composition's halves should be paralleled; that is, events or motifs in one half should be correspondingly found in the other.

4. Indicators to mark individual sections: The various units of structure possess indicators that help separate them from other sections. Often, this is achieved by way of key words, motifs or signals.

5. Central loading: The central point, or the middle of the chiasmus, should be unmistakable, and have some sort of concordance with the beginning and end.

6. Rings within rings: There is not just one large, overarching ring structure, but internal structures may form rings of their own.

\textsuperscript{96} Jacob Milgrom, \textit{The JPS Torah Commentary: Numbers} (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1990), xix. Although Milgrom's ideas do not reflect current scholarship on the authorship of the texts, it is still helpful to note as it demonstrates the importance of rings in cultural thought.

\textsuperscript{97} Douglas, \textit{Thinking in Circles}, 73.

\textsuperscript{98} The following seven points are summarised from Douglas, \textit{Thinking in Circles}, 36-38.
7. Closure at two levels: The ending joins up with the beginning, not just structurally but also thematically. This indicates a deliberate composition.

Without going into too much detail, it is very clear that Douglas's analysis of ring composition indicates a great depth to this style of storytelling. It allows ideas to be repeated, themes to be played through time and again, and motifs to dominate expression. It is, perhaps, as filmmaker George Lucas expresses, “a musical idea... a lyrical refrain... that changes every time you rehear it. It's the same note played differently.”

Ring composition also creates familiarity and direction for those who are aware of its characteristics—hence John's repeated use of the phrase, “Those who have ears, let them hear.” Thus, Douglas argues, the Western interpretation of the story of Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac is flawed—a mindset that is familiar with ring theory would understand that the story casts both YHWH and Abraham as fathers who love their sons, and that in so doing makes it clear that “YHWH will provide,” and that this action forms the midpoint of the story. Those who are aware of the beginning are therefore familiar with how the story will end.

To write a story using ring composition implies that the author is effectively locked into a particular ending, or at least particular rules that govern the ending of the story. Douglas lists them as follows:

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100 Douglas, Thinking in Circles, 22-23.
101 The following three points come from Douglas, Thinking in Circles, 126.
1. The ending must evoke the beginning; it should close the ring by touching on the topics that were opened by either the exposition, or the section following it, or both, using some of the same words.

2. To have followed the first rule automatically evokes the mid-turn, which has itself been designed to connect with the ending as well as the beginning.

3. It may make a double closure... in this case, the first ending will finish the immediate business, conclude the story, or round off the laws. The second ending will set the text as a whole in a larger context, less parochial, more humanist, or even metaphysical.

Douglas also discusses the idea behind ring composition and its purpose. Intriguingly, she compares it to the external circumstances and pressures faced by a playwright, factors such as time, physical constraints on actors, costume changes and so on. She concludes that “there is no saying whether a closed ring serves as a philosophy of closure and fixed endings, or whether the circle is seen as one of a cyclic series that always returns to the same place,”102 leaving it open to cultural interpretation.

A key issue with many literary approaches to rings or chiasms is the nature of Western scholarly thought. Chiastic thinking, as indicated above, is by no means intended as a tool for composition, but is a way of thinking. Given this internalized way of thinking about chiasms, one might suspect that approaching such compositional characteristics with the aim of applying logical, consistent rules will inevitably prove to be a foolhardy task. Ancient authors did not set out to write chiasms so much as chiasms naturally occurred in their writing as an expression of their patterns of thought. This is displayed in the repetition of chiastic structures throughout Johannine literature;103 in the Gospel

102 Douglas, Thinking in Circles, 73.
103 This, of course, makes the assumption of some level of unity of authorship among the Johannine works. There is not space to delve into the arguments here, but I take the side of scholars like Thomas who
of John, \(104\) 1 John, \(105\) 2 John, \(106\) 3 John, \(107\) and of course Revelation. \(108\) As Thomas points out, chiasms tend to “indicate a desire for the reader to reflect upon the connections between different portions of the text.” \(109\) Alternatively, Wall points out that chiasms “call the reader’s attention to the vortex of the pattern... where one finds what is most important for the author.” \(110\)

Many, if not most, of Douglas’ criteria that apply to ring compositions can be successfully applied to the Book of Revelation. A preliminary look at the text demonstrates that the text lends itself well to being structured in a chiastic way, as Welch argues. \(111\) Welch’s proposed structure, however, is problematic, not least because of its uncritical engagement with other proposed structures of Revelation which are not widely accepted by scholarship. \(112\) Given the previous attempts to do so, it seems that any close, “grand” structure of Revelation that attempts to break the text down to smaller chiasms will not be able to do so successfully; a broader, more general structure may be more appropriate. The “concentric” structure proposed by Schüssler Fiorenza is


\(108\) Thomas, “The Structure of 1 John,” 372.


\(110\) From Welch, “Chiasmus in the New Testament” in *Chiasmus in Antiquity*, 244-245.

\(111\) Mark Wilson critiques Welch’s use of Farrer, arguing that their suggested order seems “problematic” and does not contribute much to understanding the text. Mark Wilson, *The Victor Sayings in the Book of Revelation* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2007), 12-13.
defended on the basis of its affinity with Greek drama and the “compositional rules of tragedy,” and so is an appropriate template for examination here.\footnote{Schüssler Fiorenza, \textit{The Book of Revelation}, 176.}

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<td>B’</td>
<td>Revelation 19:11 – 22:9</td>
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<td>A’</td>
<td>Revelation 22:10-21</td>
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A quick look at Schüssler Fiorenza’s structure makes it abundantly apparent that the composition of Revelation adheres to the rules and requirements of ring composition. As mentioned earlier, given the understanding that chiasmus was not so much a literary tool as a way of thinking, there is no expectation that the text will form precise parallels. Instead, wider themes are re-emphasised, and motifs appear and are repeated.

1. Exposition or prologue: Revelation 1:1-8 covers John’s opening prologue. It introduces the protagonist (John) but also establishes the scene for the rest of the drama to come.

2. Split into two halves: Revelation is clearly divided into two halves, with a central, unparalleled plot section occurring in Revelation 10:1-15:4.

3. Parallel sections: As is immediately evident, there are parallel sections running through the text of Revelation—Revelation 1:1-8 parallels Revelation 22:10-21 and so on.

4. Indicators to mark individual sections: Revelation is filled with a variety of motifs and markers that denote sections within the text. The series of seven
objects, the worship hymns and the angels each serve to mark specific sections of the text.

5. Central loading: Revelation 10:1 – 15:4 covers the central portion of the story (the “small scroll of prophecy”), forming the turning point of the grand narrative.

6. Rings within rings: There are a number of smaller rings or chiasms—for example, in both the introduction and conclusion, or when the seven seals are opened in heaven (Revelation 4:1-7:17) and correspondingly when the seven angels survey the judgment on earth (Revelation 17:1-20:10).

7. Closure at two levels: Revelation begins and ends with its narrator, John. More specifically, as we see, John encounters an angel (Revelation 1:1-3 compared to Revelation 22:8-9), hears the words of the coming Jesus (Revelation 1:9-20 compared to Revelation 22:10-13), and writes a commission to the churches (Revelation 2-3 compared to Revelation 22:14-19). The beginning and ending are clearly intended to mirror one another, and do so in both chronological sequence and thematic order.

Revelation conforms to all seven of Douglas’ rules for ring compositions, and it forms a clear chiasm with repeating motifs and elements throughout. This is obviously a deliberate move by John in composing a work in a way that is familiar to his audience. Lund notes that the use of chiasmus in literature seems to be a particularly Hebrew expression, and that “the chiasmus seems to be part of Hebrew thought itself, whether expressed in poetry or in prose.” This does not necessarily mean that it was unfamiliar to Greeks or Romans, for whom chiasmus was just as familiar, as we have

114 Of course, this does not preclude the chiasm from being used and found in other cultures’ literary works; Lund’s argument is simply that it seems to be particularly prevalent in Hebrew thought.
already discussed.\textsuperscript{116} Instead, it demonstrates the fundamental importance of chiastic thought for the Hebrew people, in a way that may have been subtly different to their Greco-Roman neighbours. Chiastic thinking, however, does operate with an assumption of familiarity on the part of the readers; that is to say, John would have assumed his readers or hearers to be familiar with ring composition, creating certain boundaries and limits for him to work within, as well as set expectations.

This, of course, includes the ending of Revelation; one of the most important distinctive traits of ring composition is the creation of an ending that is foretold by the beginning (and returns to the beginning to form a ring). This cyclical story is one that is familiar to John’s audience and therefore is predictable; given the prevalence of apocalypses in the first century, John’s audience would have been prepared for an ending they would expect, one that paralleled the beginning and closed off any ambiguous remaining narrative threads.

Let us briefly revisit Douglas’ rules for endings, and discuss them in relation to the text of Revelation.

1. The ending must evoke the beginning; it should close the ring by touching on the topics that were opened by either the exposition, or the section following it, or both, using some of the same words.

We have already seen that Revelation 1 and Revelation 22 share a great deal in common; quite aside from their shared chronological sequence (John – angel – commission), they also repeat key phrases, such as “the words of the prophecy,” “I am the Alpha and Omega,” and the “testimony” for “the churches.”

\textsuperscript{116} For example, Schüssler Fiorenza notes the use of \textit{chiasmus} in both ancient Greek drama and Roman poetry and narratives, particularly Vergil and Herodotus. Schüssler Fiorenza, \textit{The Book of Revelation}, 176. See also Augustine Stock, who argues that portions of Cicero’s \textit{Atticus} are arranged chiastically in honour of Homer’s use of chiasmus. Stock, “Chiastic awareness,” 23-27.
2. To have followed the first rule automatically evokes the mid-turn, which has itself been designed to connect with the ending as well as the beginning.

At first glance, Revelation 12 is not easy to connect directly to Revelation 1 or Revelation 22. It is undeniably the middle point of the story regardless of what type of structure is imposed on the text, yet the language and themes are very different to both the beginning and the end. However, when we take the commonly held view that the Woman (or Mother) of the story represents the church, Revelation’s story becomes a prophetic tale about the church and its role, just as Revelation 1 and 22 each commission the church to action.

3. It may make a double closure... in this case, the first ending will finish the immediate business, conclude the story, or round off the laws. The second ending will set the text as a whole in a larger context, less parochial, more humanist, or even metaphysical.

Here, it is possible to distinguish two separate endings for Revelation: Revelation 22:7 forms the “first ending,” concluding the story. Revelation 22:8-21 therefore forms a “second ending” which re-engages John’s audience, drawing them into its conclusion

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118 Tavo, *Woman, Mother and Bride*, 235-236. Tavo demonstrates a variety of ways of understanding “the church,” but in this case it is arguably more of a semantic difference, given we are interested more in the language of “the church” than the representation.
and reminding them of their duties as followers of Christ. They are re-commissioned into living out the story of the text, and called to go forth.\textsuperscript{119}

Although ring theory and chiasmus can be speculative and occasionally controversial methods of structuring a text, understanding Revelation as structured using ring theory is particularly helpful given this thesis’ aims of understanding Revelation as performance literature. I am not seeking to elevate the importance of ring theory, but rather utilising it as an explanation for the motifs and repetition of the text. Ancient audiences were familiar with ring-style stories, and an awareness of this is key to a thorough understanding of the text.

From the cycles of seven to the repetition of phrases, ring theory provides an explanation for some of the unique attributes of John’s text, and grounds any contemporary understanding of the text in an ancient worldview. From the perspective of performance, ring theory and chiastic thinking were important tools for creating markers of significance for the audience. The centre of each chiasm represented a turning point, a change or an event that had no parallel. This helped the audience to recognise the points that the writer deemed significant (according to a chiastic structuring of the text, the turning point of the text would be Revelation 12, the casting of the Dragon out of heaven)—this is argued by Welch\textsuperscript{120} and broadly supported by both Schüssler Fiorenza’s structure\textsuperscript{121} and Adela Yarbro Collins’ conclusions on the structure of the text\textsuperscript{122}). The rings were also important mnemonic devices that helped the audience to remember the events of the text. Chiasms were embedded in the literature, rhetoric and patterns of thought in the ancient world, and to ignore them is to miss fully grasping their context.

\textsuperscript{119} Some argue that Revelation has not one, but three beginnings; the two endings may be referencing two of these “beginnings” (e.g. Revelation 1:1 and Revelation 4:1).

\textsuperscript{120} From Welch, “Chiasmus in the New Testament” in \textit{Chiasmus in Antiquity}, 244-245.

\textsuperscript{121} Schüssler Fiorenza, \textit{The Book of Revelation}, 176.

5. **The curtain falls: summarising the chapter**

Revelation is commonly interpreted by contemporary scholarship as prophetic literature, as epistle, and as apocalyptic. An important question needs to be asked of our current definition of apocalyptic—does the SBL definition, widely accepted by the majority of scholarship, fit? I suggested that whilst the SBL definition is helpful in creating categorisation, it does not fully capture the purpose and depth of apocalyptic literature, and I have proposed a modified working definition, one that takes into account a wider framework for apocalyptic texts, including the texts’ audience and context.

There exist a wide range of approaches that can be applied to the text of Revelation. Of particular interest to this thesis is the exploration of the text as related to performance art—whether interpreting the text as performance art, or as alluding to it. With a few key exceptions, this seems to be an area largely neglected by scholarship, though often alluded to. Nevertheless, it is important for us to acknowledge the contributions of those who have gone before—their efforts and hard work have created a platform for us to build upon. Scholars like John Wick Bowman, James L. Blevins and Sylvie T. Raquel have begun the task of framing and envisioning Revelation as a dramatic performance; there is much that remains for those who follow after. Of particular importance is the era of drama that is explored, as many scholars have anachronistically applied Greek texts to the first century context of the Roman Empire. As we will see in the next chapter, the Roman Empire had its own unique forms of performance, and whilst the Greek dramas were certainly well represented, they were certainly not the only form of performance alluded to in Revelation.

A question that arose over the course of this literature review was simply “why?”—why has it taken so long for scholarship to begin exploring the Biblical text from a
performance or theatrical perspective? One possible explanation is the early church fathers’ influential anti-theatrical viewpoints, many of which equated attending the theatre with idolatry or apostasy. As a result, the church may have been unwilling to explore this viewpoint until recently. Ironically, some suggest that the theatre itself was only preserved because of its later use by the church as a teaching tool.

Finally, of particular interest is ring theory—an important structural idea that informs many, if not most, texts and performances written in the ancient world, and continues to be employed today. Many of the cultures in the ancient world were familiar with chiastic thinking, and in fact thought in terms of rings and chiasms. Ring theory helps to explain many of the parallels and inversions found in Revelation, and aids in exploring how the themes and ideas are outworked in the text. An understanding of ring theory particularly highlights the centrality of Revelation 12, a particularly dramatic text, and the chiastic structure of Revelation draws a number of parallels surrounding the events depicted in Revelation 12, demonstrating its importance to the audience. Revelation 12, it seems, is central to John’s message—that the Dragon, a representation of empire, is ultimately cast down by God. It is also vitally important to have an understanding of ring theory in order to immerse ourselves fully into the cultural background of the text.

The next chapter will begin our engagement with the wide varieties of Roman performance styles, from the dramas that were found widely across the entire territory of the empire to the pantomimes performed in the streets. There will be a particular focus on Asia Minor as the context of John’s audience, but it is important to recognise that one of Rome’s primary exports to its colonies and conquered territories was its culture, and was particularly transmitted through its performances and visual culture.
Chapter 3

Roman Performance: “Bread and circus games”

1. Rome or Asia Minor?

A survey of the history of performance throughout the Roman Empire in the first century CE brings to light two immediate issues. The first problem lies with defining the boundaries of the topic; the second in drawing together sufficient evidence to create an accurate portrayal. These issues are closely interlinked, and together result in the need for a degree of educated guesswork and for careful extrapolation to fill in the gaps in our historical knowledge.

The Roman Empire covered a vast geographical area, and incorporated a wide variety of cultures. This creates some difficulties for historians—simply put, speaking of practices in “the Empire” in a general sense is both simplistic and incorrect; what may have been considered to be common practice in one part of the Empire may not have existed in another. In particular, determining which portions of the Empire were representative of early Christianity is a difficult decision. Should Rome be included, for example, or North Africa? What about Gaul, or Britain? Given this thesis’s focus on Revelation, most examples will come from Asia Minor. Even with this clarification, the question remains complex. Some practices that were commonplace in first century Rome might have taken some time to migrate across Asia Minor (or vice versa!), and some might have not caught on. This thesis will refer to Rome as the capital of the Roman Empire, and will assume (where there is sufficient evidence) that the practices in Rome were familiar to those in Asia Minor, and in many cases were also practiced there.
Another issue is the question of “Greco-Roman” practice. It is well documented that the Roman Empire embraced and integrated many Greek customs and practices whilst at the same time remaining wary of others.\(^1\) The degree to which this happened, and the time frame in which it happened, however, remains problematic—for example, many of the various theatres across Asia Minor began as Greek theatres that were “Romanised” at some point between the first and third century.\(^2\) It would be almost impossible to state definitively when this process began or ended at each theatre—most often, it was a large architectural project that spanned years, or decades. The same holds true for many practices across Asia Minor, where Roman customs and practices gradually became the norm. The flow of culture was not entirely unidirectional; the program of Hellenization that the Greek Empire instigated centuries earlier also introduced many new elements that were enthusiastically taken up by the Romans.

This means that for us to use the term “Greco-Roman” liberally can be a misleading task, and yet we are often left with little to no choice given the scant archaeological evidence. Throughout this thesis, I will use the term “Greco-Roman” to refer to blended or mixed Greek and Roman practices, and will attempt to distinguish between Greek and Roman wherever possible. Of course, there will be many instances where this simply will not be possible, or we do not have the space to explore the intricate, nuanced differences between Greek and Roman. We must remember that this was a complex relationship, especially in regions like Asia Minor and Judea that had been remotely governed by both Greek and Roman Empires.

This poses a complex problem as we try to reconstruct the history of performance in the cities in Asia Minor, especially given the relative lack of recent scholarship from some of

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\(^1\) As we shall see, the Romans adopted many Greek theatrical practices, as well as Greek religion and philosophy to an extent.

\(^2\) The “Romanising” of a theatre often involved putting up a wall to separate spectators from the orchestra—in the Greek custom, the seats extended right to the floor, whereas the activities held in Roman theatres were often much more dangerous to the spectator, hence the separation. We shall further explore this later in the chapter.
these locations. Fortuitously, there is much that can be discerned from the existing scholarship on the cities of Asia and their relationship with Rome. Of course, any picture painted will by its very nature be an incomplete one, especially given that archaeological works continue at many of these sites. As with any historical endeavour, we are relying on primary evidence coupled with educated guesswork in order to gain a sense of life in the ancient world.

One pressing issue is determining the depth of Romanisation in each city—especially when one takes into account the relative independence of each city and the distance between Rome and Asia Minor. It is likely that each major urban centre was Romanised to some degree, but it is hard to pinpoint this with any precision given the lack of archaeological evidence. Some commentators assert that the cities of Asia Minor were “far more under the influence of the Hellenistic heritage than mainstream Roman,” but lack the evidence to substantiate this claim to within a particular timeline. It seems likely that a hybrid culture of sorts existed given the longstanding nature of Hellenism within the region of Asia Minor—and it is worth remembering Friesen’s argument that Revelation is addressed to a number of social settings facing a variety of issues. Nevertheless, there is evidence that can be interpreted to demonstrate that Roman culture was indeed a strong influence on the various cultures of Asia Minor.

One important factor is the Roman diaspora in Asia Minor. After serving in the Roman military, soldiers were awarded Roman citizenship and a sum of money sufficient to purchase a plot of land within the Empire. Some veterans were settled into specific

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3 Roland H. Worth Jr., The Seven Cities of the Apocalypse and Roman Culture (New York: Paulist Press, 1999), 57.
5 I am not arguing for Roman culture over above Greek culture, or indeed the various unique regional cultures of Asia Minor (which John of Patmos arguably recognises and acknowledges), but simply that Roman culture had a strong influence on the region.
6 This applied only to peregrini (non-citizen inhabitants) enlisted in the Roman military, as legions would only recruit citizens.
colonies—one example of a military diploma states that the recipients were to be settled in a colony at Paestum. This resettlement of veterans achieved a number of objectives: it ensured the loyalty of ex-soldiers, as well as allowing the Empire to create communities of seasoned veteran fighters in every part of the Empire. It also ensured that Roman culture was exported to all parts of the Empire, and seeded in these communities—and, of course, emulated, reproduced, and transmitted. This Roman diaspora would also promote the construction of temples honouring Roman deities, ensuring that locals were familiar with honouring Roman gods (and thereby participating in Roman culture). This was particularly effective in Asia given the establishment of temples to the cults of Divus Iulius and Roma, representing Julius Caesar and the city of Rome respectively.

The Empire also maintained administrative control over its provinces and territories, and often administrators would hold festivals or games to honour dignitaries. It seems that of these, gladiatorial shows proved particularly attractive to the Eastern part of the Empire. These served as an important way of transmitting Roman religious culture and performance arts. Another important reminder of the influence of Rome is found in the numismatic field—coins minted in Roman provinces generally carried the image of the Emperor or his wife alongside various deities, reminding everyone of Rome's rule.

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7 Napthali Lewis and Meyer Reinhold, eds., *Roman Civilization. Selected Readings, Volume II: The Empire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 484. The colonisation of various locales by veterans is discussed in a variety of literature—Asia Minor is covered, for example, by Benjamin B. Rubin, *Re)presenting Empire: The Roman Imperial Cult in Asia Minor, 31BC—AD68*, (PhD. diss., University of Michigan, 2008). Paestum is located in the south of Italy, on the southern coast.

8 Veterans were not always resettled—for example, Augustus instead paid out money to veterans in 13BCE: see Shimon Applebaum, *Judaea in Hellenistic and Roman Times: Historical and Archaeological Essays* (New York: Brill, 1989), 75. Nevertheless, it seems that Augustus' manoeuvre was the exception rather than the rule.


Finally, the spread of the Imperial cult across Asia Minor shows the degree to which Rome was embraced—Howard-Brook and Gwyther describe temples to various Roman Emperors and institutions in Pergamum, Ephesus, Smyrna, Sardis and Laodicea. These cities in Asia Minor were renowned for their devotion to the emperor, embodied in the Imperial cult of worship. These cults were well established in many cities by the late first century CE and had been adapted from the Hellenistic ruler cults of Greek rule, ensuring that the people of Asia Minor were both familiar with and accustomed to worshipping a ruler as a god. It must be noted, however, that the cities of Asia Minor were as varied and different as any two cities in the contemporary world, and so the degree to which the Imperial cult was embraced is highly debated. The development of the various Imperial cults in Asia during the first century CE was a highly complex process, and although the extent of the cult is often disagreed upon, it is important to note that the establishment of a cult worshipping the Emperor was specifically requested of Augustus by the Hellenes, and a temple was approved to be constructed in Pergamum from 29BCE. By the time Revelation was written, the imperial cult would have been well entrenched, at least in Pergamum. Given the intense rivalry between cities and their competition for imperial honours, it seems likely that the imperial cult and emperor worship would have been well established by the time of Revelation’s writing.

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13 Howard-Brook and Gwyther, Unveiling Empire, 103.
14 An excellent survey of the topic can be found in Wes Howard-Brook and Anthony Gwyther, Unveiling Empire: Reading Revelation Then and Now (New York: Orbis Books, 1999).
17 Friesen includes a fascinating discussion of the politics involved in the establishment of this cult in Steven J. Friesen, Imperial Cults and the Apocalypse of John: Reading Revelation in the Ruins (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 25-29.
18 Harry Maier discusses the inter-city rivalry briefly. See Harry O. Maier, Picturing Paul in Empire: Imperial Image, Text and Persuasion in Colossians (Sydney: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2013), 107-108.
19 Sviatoslav Dmitriev points out that Domitian successfully expanded the imperial cult by “entangling imperial veneration with ancient local cults,” initiating changes in the civic makeup of the city. These changes might have prompted John’s writing of Revelation. Sviatoslav Dmitriev, City Government in Hellenistic and Roman Asia Minor (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 316-317.
Valentina di Napoli points out that “the connection between the theatre and festivals of the imperial cult was very strong in Greece” because of such festivals being held in theatres, and it seems reasonable to assume that a similar arrangement existed in Asia Minor. Given the evidence so far for the depth of Romanisation in Asia Minor, and remembering the Roman penchant for both importing culture from and exporting culture to its territories, we are able to assume that many of the cities of Asia Minor experienced most, if not all, of the performance arts that were regularly on display in Rome. To that end, we will now explore the variety of performance arts that existed in Rome during the first century CE.

2. The Dramatic Arts of the Roman Empire

As stated earlier, the evidence that might assist historians in formulating a history of performance during the time of the Roman Empire is patchy at best. Like the Empire itself, the dramatic arts evolved and changed from ruler to ruler, decade to decade. Often, the various types of performances that composed much of the fabric of everyday Roman life were not recorded by those writing at the time, and much of what is known is speculation and highly educated guesswork. A sense of frustration is keenly felt by those wishing to delve deeper:

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21 Mario Erasmo points out that “reconstructing aspects of Roman culture can be difficult with the best of evidence, and the problem becomes magnified when dealing with scant production notices of plays and fragments from tragedies... in essence, the evidence is a limited sample of the already partial extant fragments.” in Mario Erasmo, Roman Tragedy: Theatre to Theatricality (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004), xi.
Drama in late antiquity and beyond continues to pose serious obstacles to those wishing to write a single, unified account of its development. The relevant sources remain sparse and do not combine to give a clear picture. Nevertheless, there remains sufficient evidence to collate some sort of survey that provides a snapshot into some aspects of the performance arts of the Empire. It is also evident that the prior Hellenization of various cities around the Empire meant that most were familiar with the theatre—indeed, there exist an abundance of decorations, artworks and pottery with theatrical motifs, and John Richard Green argues that “the theatre was a major point of reference in society at large.”

There existed a large variety of activities that one could classify as “performance art” or “dramatic art” during the time of the early Roman Empire and indeed throughout history, necessitating a broad view on the subject. As Donnalee Dox helpfully notes, contemporary expectations for drama assumes a theatrical, formal structure in which dramas are performed; however, an “increasingly wide range of human behaviours” are now recognised as being “overtly performative,” expanding the scope of “performance” beyond formal theatre.

This allows for a much greater scope, giving theatrical studies much more depth and recognising the possible interplay between different types of dramatic performance. In the Roman Empire and throughout its provinces, most performances were intended and designed to entertain the masses; from performances in theatres deliberately built to host such plays, to the gladiatorial displays that recreated Roman myth and stories, to...
street mimes who would perform for passers-by, and even the orators for which Rome was famous. Each of these contributed in their own way to the rich tapestry that was Roman performance art—often occurring together as part of the regular religious festivals (ludi), they were an integral part of Roman life, offering Roman citizens a “festive respite from the harsh realities of their normal existence” and helping to “regulate the rhythms of Roman time.” These forms of entertainment were celebrated beyond temporal performances; they were captured in everyday imagery in and around the Empire, whether on mosaics, pottery, sculptures, paintings, and so on. It is not within the scope of this thesis to attempt a comprehensive account of each type of performance; instead, I will outline a range of well-attested examples from the first century CE that provide plausible analogues to scenes from the book of Revelation.

2.1 Roman theatrical arts

The very concept of the theatre possessed a mixed and varied history in the Roman Empire. In antiquity, the theatre was most famously embraced by the various Greek city-states, with theatrical performances reaching their pinnacle during the fifth and fourth centuries BCE. Performances were mostly held as part of religious festivals honouring Dionysus, god of wine; thus, theatrical performances were associated with worship of the divine. Here, writers offered four different plays as part of a

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27 For a comprehensive look at the engagement of Roman performance with “art,” see Katherine M.D. Dunbabin, Theater and Spectacle in the Art of the Roman Empire (Cornell University Press, 2016).
29 Whilst it is tempting to apply strong religious connotations to the practice of drama and theatrical performance (remembering that actors in dramas were the only people outside the religious orders to assume the aspect of a god), evidence suggests that by the time of the Roman Empire, drama had lost many of these connotations and become a form of pure entertainment. Nevertheless, there were still
competition, and competed for the great honour of being awarded a laurel wreath upon their victory. Plays by writers such as Sophocles, Aristophanes and Euripides were premiered at such festivals; some have survived and continue to be performed today. Many of the plays developed by the Greeks were later performed in Rome, peaking in popularity during the time of the Roman Republic; audiences were familiar with the conventions of Greek comedy and tragedy, and famous plays were adapted to suit Roman audiences. It is, however, difficult to pinpoint the origins of the theatre in Rome; indeed, Edith Hall points out that “controversy surrounds nearly every dimension of the theatre of the Empire” and much has been lost to time.

The ancient historian Livy writes that the Romans first experienced theatre through a performance by a troupe of Etruscans in the mid-fourth century BCE. Scholars remain sceptical of his claims, noting that the Romans had most likely already been “familiar with some sort of theatrical activity” for some time. Beacham suggests that elements of performance such as gesturing and vocal “colouring” could be found in everyday Roman life; for example, in the art of oratory, in the telling of Rome’s foundational stories and myths, in the rituals surrounding religious ceremonies and in dance—or in the artistic expressions of neighbouring cultures, and as such Livy’s claims seem to be ill-founded. The exact origins of Rome’s theatre are lost to time, and it is unwise to speculate further without concrete evidence. In any case, the historical evidence suggests that by the time of the mid to late Republic, Rome had developed its own unique sense of theatricality that relied heavily upon the Greek plays from before them, adapting these plays to make them intelligible to a Roman audience. Of course, Roman

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34 Beacham, *The Roman Theatre*, 3.
writers such as Seneca also produced their own plays, although few full manuscripts of distinctly Roman plays have survived through to contemporary times.

Unlike the Greeks, the Romans were hesitant about fully embracing the theatre. Much like their forebears, plays and performances were most often performed as part of regular religious festivals called *ludi* (games), a practice that began early in the Republic and lasted through to the end of the Empire.\(^{36}\) Unlike the Greeks, however, plays were not limited to these festivals. As Erasmo helpfully comments,

> The Roman context of performance, which differed significantly from Greek practice, gave greater access to the stage (and more importantly, to an audience) to more people on more occasions for a variety of purposes, in particular political exposure... individual Romans could also stage scenic entertainment at occasions such as triumphs, votive, and funeral games.\(^{37}\)

Initially, plays were performed on a temporary stage, as Roman statesmen held misgivings about constructing a more permanent structure due to the “potential danger to public order and the possibility of political abuse.”\(^{38}\) Given the public nature of the games and similar spectacles, and the potential attendance of all prominent citizens of Rome, the theatre could be a powerful tool for swaying political opinion.\(^{39}\) The moratorium on a permanent theatre was ended in 55 BCE when Pompey the Great built a large stone theatre in Rome.\(^{40}\) This act of munificence—to be emulated by many later emperors—helped Pompey to consolidate his power among the masses, and marked the beginnings of what Rome would become, a city filled with spectacles and

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\(^{38}\) Beacham, *The Roman Theatre*, 159.

\(^{39}\) For example, see Beacham, *The Roman Theatre*, 159-160.

entertainment. Of course, this moratorium was not an issue outside Rome itself, as many of the cities outside Rome had pre-existing Greek theatres, and these were often later adapted to suit the Roman theatre.

It was not until the time of the first emperor, however, that this evolution in Roman thought became truly apparent. Augustus, a skilled politician who was adept at manipulation and control, established the Roman Empire following years of civil war sparked by the assassination of his adoptive uncle Julius Caesar. More than any of his contemporaries, Augustus understood how much the career of a would-be emperor resembled that of a performance, and fashioned many of his actions in office to be a dramatic spectacle that the Roman people would remember. Suetonius' account of Augustus' final days has him asking those arrayed around his bed if he had played life's mime well, and saying: “Since the part has been played to perfection, all clap and send me off with applause.”

Augustus sought to maintain a firm grip on his empire and especially on its citizens, and to that end he began to rally popular support behind him through an extensive building program in the city of Rome. Among other things, new theatres were constructed around Rome, and the emperor was prominent in leading this new artistic vision of mass entertainment both by building amphitheatres and attending performances, sponsoring lavish games and hosting spectacular battles. Given the tension and instability that had plagued Rome throughout the civil wars of the previous decades, Augustus' program of mass entertainment was a welcome distraction that quickly became an institution in its own right. The number of days allocated to festivals, games and entertainment increased, as did the sums of money allocated to hosting them, creating spectacles that grew larger and more impressive as time progressed.

41 Beacham, The Roman Theatre, 158-164.
42 Suetonius, Divus Augustus, 99.1.
Within the space of a century, the theatre had firmly established itself as a vital part of Roman culture and society, both as a public space and as entertainment. Arguably every person that participated in the Roman Empire would have had some sort of interaction with the theatre, regardless of social status. Mosaics of scenes from popular theatrical productions have been unearthed in private dwellings dated to the first and 2nd centuries CE,\(^{44}\) as well as lamps fashioned in the shape of theatrical masks.\(^{45}\) It is recorded that both Julius Caesar and Augustus attempted to write dramas themselves; Julius Caesar writing *Oedipus*\(^{46}\) and Augustus writing *Ajax*.\(^{47}\) It is thus no great exaggeration to state that the theatre and performance became the cornerstone of Roman entertainment, representing for some the gradual decline of Roman society. In 100CE, Roman satirist Juvenal would famously remark upon this perceived decline:

> The mob that once bestowed *imperium, fasces*, legions, everything, now concerns itself no more, and reveals its anxiety for just two things: bread and circus games.\(^{48}\)

As an intriguing aside, actors in Roman plays were viewed with a great deal of social unease, as were the plays themselves. The craft of the actor shared many similarities with the noble Roman art of oratory, and it was these similarities that gave Romans cause for concern. Edwards notes that


\(^{46}\) Suetonius, *Iulius* 56.7.

\(^{47}\) Suetonius, *Augustus* 85.2.

\(^{48}\) Juvenal, *Satires*, 10.81.
The words of an actor were necessarily feigned, archetypally untrustworthy, lacking in fides—a particular offence in Rome, where the legal system accorded the spoken word special weight.49

This meant that actors held the status of infamia, which denied them certain civic rights and put them on a level with prostitutes, gladiators and criminals, and as such actors were often either slaves or freedmen.50 Members of the equestrian and senatorial classes were barred by several emperors from performing on the stage. Actors were not permitted to vote or to join the army, and were not able to stand for public office. Despite this, there was a fascination of sorts with actors, much like gladiators, and they remained an important part of society. Writing several decades after Juvenal but in a similar vein, Marcus Cornelius Fronto pointed out that

It was the height of political wisdom for the emperor not to neglect even actors and the other performers... since he knew that the Roman people is held fast by two things above all, the grain supply and the shows; that the success of the government depends on amusements as much as on serious things.51

There were ample reasons for emperors to keep a close eye on actors. In order to keep plays contemporary and relevant, actors were instructed by troupe leaders to incorporate offstage allusions into the theatre and into the plays themselves.52 This was often achieved through “emphasising certain lines, by looking at certain persons, or even by adding new passages.”53 Some actors went so far as to direct soliloquys toward

50 Moore, Roman Theatre, 19.
51 Marcus Cornelius Fronto, Elements of History, xvii in Lewis, & Reinhold, Roman Civilization, 143.
52 Erasmo, Roman Tragedy, 3.
Given the wide-ranging audience to whom actors often performed, it is no small wonder that they (and their words) carried great influence with the citizens of the Empire.

The line between actors and audience members could also be blurred; famously, the emperors Caligula and Nero of the later Julio-Claudian dynasty would take to the stage on separate occasions (holding private performances in the case of Caligula). These acts were, of course, frowned upon by the nobility of Rome—especially given the reputation of actors and the ban on the noble classes from performing. Nero’s theatrical exploits in particular are well documented by ancient historians, and form the basis of his reputation of being loved by the common citizenry but hated by equestrians and senators.

The politicisation of the theatre was not limited to the actors and their patrons. For instance, politicians entering the theatres might meet with cheers or boos from the assembled audience depending on their actions in the Senate. Acclamations were common, as was jeering; the Roman audience could be very dangerous to those it despised. One notable example is that of the silversmiths of Ephesus, who were threatened with the charge of rioting if they did not stop protesting the actions of Paul. The text of Acts notes that they assembled in the theatre, indicating its use as a public forum. The theatre was one of the few places where people were able to express their

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54 Beacham, The Roman Theatre and its Audience, 159-160.
55 Beacham, The Roman Theatre, 145-147.
56 For examples on Nero see: Suetonius, Nero; Dio Cassius 62.29.1. Other ancient sources that refer to Nero’s performances include Tacitus (Annals 14.1) and Juvenal (8.219-230).
57 Beacham, The Roman Theatre and its Audience, 159-160.
59 Acts 19:40. Although strictly not an “audience” for a theatrical performance, Potter notes that this specific example demonstrates the danger of “an uncontrolled demos” in Roman society. Potter, “Performance, Power and Justice,” in Roman Theater and Society, 130.
60 More importantly, this example also implies that such disagreements and near-riots were commonplace and associated with the theatre. Murphy-O’Connor notes also that “the ‘assembly of the
opinions and feelings directly to those who governed them—a marked change from the time of the Republic where the average citizen's voice was accorded more respect by the governing institutions. Violence was also expected at public spectacles like the circus or the theatre, and in the east represented particular "socio-political conditions peculiar to late antique cities." 

Aside from the plays, the theatre also functioned as an arena of spectacle. The politicization of the theatre meant that all who entered were subject to scrutiny. Parker points out that the ruling elite who attended the theatre were faced on both sides by potentially hostile gazes—in front, the actors on the stage who could alter lines and deliver cutting repartee, and the audience behind them who could respond with jeers, cheers, catcalls or applause. The physical space of the theatre represented an area of transformation and reversal, where the rich and powerful were subjected to the scrutiny of those who were normally their inferiors. As we shall see, Revelation also represents an inversion that upsets and destabilises the power structures of the Roman Empire, and so setting Revelation in the space of the theatre (or at least imagining it as such) is an appropriate move.

Of course, not all plays were performed before a public audience—or performed by a troupe at all. In discussing the plays of Seneca (a first century CE writer), Frederick Ahl notes that plays of the time may have been performed in houses at private functions rather than being performed in public (despite being designed to be performed in public). On the other hand, there are many indications that the dramas of Seneca were

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both “staged in the theatre and... presented through reading to nontheatrical audiences” as part of a practice known as recitatio, a dramatic reading of a text.

Such a reading would, for example, commonly occur at dinner parties, and relied on the audience using their imaginations as a slave read each part out loud. Botha argues for recitatio as being the “medium through which an author’s work came to be experienced by others,” and notes that such a practice was common, and had a great effect on how the average Roman author would write their works. The simple fact that dictation to a scribe was the most common method of writing demonstrates the Romans’ preference for orality—and let us not forget that rhetorical ability was considered an especially important trait for young Romans to possess. Given the Roman preference for orality, it makes sense that even plays and performances were orally recited rather than acted out—and presumably held in esteem.

Recitatio in its purest, most original form was even more austere. Dupont argues that the practice was deliberately staged in such a way that would prevent writers “not only from staging his text, but even from making use of such gestures as an orator might legitimately employ.” The performance was therefore focused exclusively on the content of the text, making it somewhat more “academic” in that the audience was expected to both analyse and respond to the text being presented to them. Because of its closed, private nature, recitatio could also “serve as an expression of political opposition” that implicated all present. In other words, recitatio could function as a hidden transcript—a term we will explore at length in later chapters. The practice served to reinforce old republican values and elitism whilst allowing for political

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69 Dupont, “Recitation,” 52.
dialogue and hidden transcripts—a practice that, tweaked slightly, could well be describing the early church.

Whilst earlier scholarship on Roman culture attempted to make a sharp distinction between “literary drama” and the stage, contemporary scholarship points out that some degree of hybridity must have existed. This is reflected in the fact that the performance of plays did not always require a troupe of actors, or a large public setting—plays could just as easily be performed by a single person reading aloud. Intriguingly, David Rhoads notes that his own contemporary performance of Revelation takes around an hour and forty-five minutes, and adds that the experience of hearing Revelation performed caused fellow scholars’ views of the text to be “fundamentally transformed.”

Given the hybrid nature of the theatre, and the various tensions that existed under its surface, it is not difficult to see why scholars such as Bowman and Raquel have situated Revelation within the context of a theatrical performance. Such a structural decision makes all the more sense when we apply James C Scott’s theory of hidden transcripts to the book of Revelation, positing it as a hybrid text that uses mimicry, specifically of both the religious overtones of the theatre and the structures of empire, to deliver its message against the Roman Empire. This will be discussed in a later chapter; for now, let us continue to delve into the various performance arts of the Empire.

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70 For example, Beare states that there was “an almost complete divorce between literary drama, written for reading or recitation, and the stage, almost monopolised by mime and pantomime.” William Beare, The Roman Stage: A Short History of Latin Drama in the Time of the Republic (London: Methuen & Co Ltd, 1950), 1.
2.2 Theatres of the Empire

The theatres of first century CE Roman society were highly politicized and imbued with a deep meaning. Merely attending the theatre served to remind a Roman of their place in society, as theatres were designed with a carefully arranged seating plan that placed those esteemed in Roman society ahead of those below.\textsuperscript{73} This was first done in accordance with Augustus’ “new social order,” placing the emperor in the seat of honour, with priests, senators and magistrates around him in the front, followed by those of the equestrian class, then common citizens—with non-citizens, women and slaves sitting at the very rear.\textsuperscript{74} This is best reflected in the words of David Wiles, that

\begin{quote}
The auditorium which once symbolised and embodied the equality of all citizens of the republic would soon embody the hierarchical order of Imperial society.\textsuperscript{75}
\end{quote}

Theatres were also designed to prevent any intermingling of social class—each section of the theatre had its own means of entry and exit, serving the pragmatic purpose of enabling a quicker flow of traffic, but also ensuring that senators would not rub shoulders with peasants, and so on.\textsuperscript{76} Despite this, the theatre also served to unify the citizens of Rome by bringing them all together. The audience represented every level of the Empire, a “microcosm not just of the Roman citizen body but of Roman society as a

\begin{footnotes}
\item[73] Wiles notes that this process was “completed by the Emperor Augustus,” indicating a gradual shift towards this seating arrangement. See David Wiles, \textit{Theatre and Citizenship: The History of a Practice} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 57.
\item[74] Zanker, \textit{Images in the Age of Augustus}, 149-150.
\item[75] David Wiles, \textit{A Short History of Western Performance Space} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 178-179.
\item[76] Zanker, \textit{Images in the Age of Augustus}, 150.
\end{footnotes}
whole.”\textsuperscript{77} It is hardly surprising, then, that the theatre quickly became an arena of politics in its own right.

Of course, theatres were not exclusive to Rome itself, but were spread throughout the Empire. Many cities in the East had been Hellenised to some degree, and most were intimately familiar with the theatre and its customs—for example, the city of Ephesus regularly held the \textit{Epheseia}, a panegyris honouring Artemis that included theatrical performances.\textsuperscript{78} The theatre in Ephesus was well known as “the obvious place in Ephesus for a large crowd to assemble,”\textsuperscript{79} as attested to by both the book of Acts and the writing of Philostratus.\textsuperscript{80} As well, it is worth noting that many theatres in the East were modified to accommodate the Roman \textit{ludi} (which were traditionally held in amphitheatres).\textsuperscript{81} Di Napoli also argues that these theatres had “a leading role in civic life” and, given their location in wealthier, more important cities, implied “the presence of an active civic elite and, in some cases, also a direct interest from the emperor and/or the imperial house.”\textsuperscript{82} Whilst her argument is focused on Roman Arcadia, it is highly likely that a similar arrangement existed in Asia Minor.

Greco-Roman theatres are scattered across Asia Minor—in fact, most cities with a strong Roman presence had a theatre of some sort. It is, however, a complex and often frustrating task to reconstruct the history of theatre buildings throughout the Roman Empire. Whilst some remain intact, many were destroyed, or pillaged throughout the

\textsuperscript{77} Edmondson, “Dynamic Arenas” in Slater, \textit{Roman Theater and Society}, 86.

\textsuperscript{78} William J. Slater, “Inscriptions von Magnesia 192 Revisited,” \textit{Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies} Vol. 37 (1996): 195-204. Slater is here referring to the first performances of pantomime in the East, but it is noteworthy that he dates the 517\textsuperscript{th} pentateris of the \textit{Epheseia} to around 170CE, indicating its continuing existence from Early Antiquity through to after the latest possible date for Revelation.

\textsuperscript{79} Jerome Murphy-O’Connor, \textit{St Paul’s Ephesus: Texts and Archaeology} (Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2008), 171.

\textsuperscript{80} Philostratus, \textit{The Life of Apollonius of Tyana}, 4.10. Philostratus records Apollonius as curing Ephesus of a plague by assembling its citizens in the theatre and stoning a disguised demon, then erecting an altar on the spot it was vanquished.


\textsuperscript{82} Di Napoli, “The Theatres of Roman Arcadia,” 517.
centuries in order to build other structures. Finlayson notes the difficulties surrounding the Roman East in particular:

Many of the Hellenistic urban centers of Syria were extensively overbuilt during the Roman, Byzantine, and Islamic eras, with quarrying of these sites being a major factor contributing to the destruction of classical buildings, especially during the era of the Crusades. Additionally, Tamerlane’s invasion of Syria was also incalculably destructive. The Ottoman period also saw massive quarrying and overbuilding of numerous classical sites, especially extant theaters.83

Archaeological evidence is also limited in being able to provide precise dates for construction. For example, current scholarship allows three possible ranges of dates for the construction of the theatre at Sepphoris (the early first century CE during Herod Antipas’ rule, the late first century CE when Sepphoris became a regional capital, or the 2nd century CE after an increase in its pagan population).84 Further complicating this is the fact that many theatres were continually renovated, updated or restored throughout their lifespan,85 resulting in a variety of layers of architecture that could potentially span centuries.86 Of course, simple neglect, natural disasters, geological / environmental factors and more mundane issues (such as a lack of funding for research, or sites being

85 For example, a marble block bearing an inscription to Trajan, dated to 101CE, was discovered to have been reused in the Hadrianic period in the rebuilding of the scaenae frons of the theatre of Corinth. Mary C. Sturgeon, “Dedications of Roman Theaters,” Hesperia Supplements, Vol. 33, ΧΑΡΙΣ: Essays in Honor of Sara A. Immerwahr (2004), 412.
86 This becomes evident following any amount of reading into the history and archaeology of Greek and Roman theatres, but for a specific example, Small notes that “some of the columns of the early theater at Volterra date from the Augustan period, while some are later, yet the stage building itself seems to have retained its initial form.” David B. Small, “Studies in Roman Theater Design,” American Journal of Archaeology Vol. 87, No. 1 (January 1983): 63.
located in active war zones) have also played their part in ensuring great difficulty for archaeologists seeking to uncover the secrets of the theatres.87

Yet another complication arises when we realize that many theatres, especially those in the east of the Roman Empire, were not constructed by the Romans but rather were converted from existing Greek theatres to suit Roman use.88 There were often two phases to this conversion: the first converted the orchestra into a “shallow raised stage” and added a permanent skene; the second phase added the “Roman barrier,” a “low stone wall topped by an inward curving and sharply barbed metal grillage surrounding the orchestra,” intended to protect the audience from gladiators, animals and the like.89 Not all of these conversions occurred contemporaneously, nor were they instant, often taking place over a number of years and depending on a variety of factors. For example, the theatre at Pergamum is commonly dated to the third century BCE, initially as a Greek structure, but is also acknowledged to have undergone construction work, including the building of the “Roman barrier,” at some point in its history.90

These complications mean that any exploration into the theatre buildings across the Roman Empire involves different degrees of educated guesswork alongside constantly evolving archaeological evidence. Nevertheless, there is a great deal that is already known; for example, Ephesus, Smyrna, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea all contain excavated theatres, dated to before John’s writing of Revelation.91 Pergamum’s theatre, as we have seen, existed well before the Roman Empire, and Thyatira’s theatre has not yet been discovered (assuming it exists). Judea was not excluded; Josephus records that

87 Finlayson notes, for example, that the theater of Apamea had become “a wonderful haven for massive spiders (some more than 20cm across), Levantine vipers and other snakes, and innumerable scorpions of all sizes, colors, and venom ratings.” Finlayson, “The Great Roman Theatre at Apamea,” 287.
88 For an in-depth discussion of the conversion of Greek theatres to Roman forms, see for example di Napoli, “Architecture and Romanization”, 365-380.
Herod the Great honoured Augustus with games in theatres and amphitheatres in both Jerusalem and Caesarea.\textsuperscript{92}

It is very clear that John and his audience would have been familiar with the theatres, given their prominence (both geographically and metaphorically) and their importance in social settings. Evidence suggests that even Jesus and his disciples would have been aware of the theatre and its conventions; Herod’s construction would have been unavoidable (as noted above), and the Synoptic Gospels depict Jesus calling the Pharisees “hypocrites,”\textsuperscript{93} a theatrical term. Attendance of Jews or Christians at the theatre, however, is more dubious given the extensive religious connotations of attendance.\textsuperscript{94} Despite that, it seems unreasonable not to assume that a majority of Christians in the first century CE (especially Christian converts) were familiar with the theatre buildings and the variety of entertainments held within. All other subjects of the Roman Empire certainly were.

2.3 \textit{Mime and pantomime}

Perhaps the most stereotypically Roman form of performance enjoyed by citizens of the Empire was the genre of mime, a type of play that was much more physical, satirical and risqué than its literary counterparts.\textsuperscript{95} Given the Roman love of the “rhetorical and

\textsuperscript{92}Josephus, \textit{Antiquities}, 15.268 and 15.341.

\textsuperscript{93}As discussed in Chapter 1. See for example Matthew 23, Mark 7:6, or Luke 11:44. Sepphoris, just 6 kilometres from Galilee, also held a Roman theatre.

\textsuperscript{94}Although, as we have seen, the presence of Jews at the theatre in Asia Minor is attested to by inscriptionary evidence. Philip A. Harland, “Honouring the Emperor or Assailing the Beast: Participation in Civic Life Among Associations (Jewish, Christian and other) in Asia Minor and the Apocalypse of John,” \textit{Journal for the Study of the New Testament} Vol. 77 (2000): 107-110.

spectacular and a liking for the ridiculous, for homely farce, satire and repartee,” it is not surprising that mime quickly became one of the most common and popular forms of performance throughout the Empire. Simmonds writes that satire, mockery and parody were all intrinsic parts of Roman culture, gradually “devolving into mime as the most popular theatrical form.” Mime was seen as low-brow and vulgar by ancient writers, yet it held strong appeal to the Roman people and was even favoured by some of the powerful, being strongly promoted by Augustus after his rise to power.

Much like mime in Ancient Greece, Roman mime mainly sought to evoke laughter, and as such it was often farcical and ridiculous. According to Plutarch, two key types of mime existed: the hypothesis, involving a lengthy and complex plot, and the paignion, a “low form of buffoonery not even fit for slaves.” Unlike the higher-brow comedies and tragedies, women were allowed to perform in mimes—the only time that women were allowed on stage—which contributed to the scandalous reputation of both mime actors and mime itself. Actors did not wear masks, and plays were infamous for their “staging of sexual activity and display of female nudity.”

Despite being primarily a physically acted comic work with a range of stock characters familiar to the Roman audience (such as wives, courtesans, slaves and so on) involved in plots detailing relationships and conflicts, mime also existed in a literary form, much like comedies and tragedies. Regardless of the form, plays were renowned for being

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96 Beare, The Roman Stage, 7.
100 Csapo and Slater, The Context of Ancient Drama, 377.
104 Manuwald, Roman Republican Theatre, 180.
crude and risqué, yet offered cutting political satire that acted as a commentary on Roman life. Most notably, Mark Antony obtained the services of a mime actor to play the part of Julius Caesar at Caesar’s funeral; this combined with Mark Antony’s own oration served to drive the crowd into a frenzy and turned them against the conspirators who killed Caesar.

One allusion to mime in Revelation might be the Whore of Babylon in Revelation 17 and 18. Given that mime was infamous for allowing women to act and for its lewd nature, it is possible that the intended depiction of the Whore of Babylon is as a mime actress, clothed in purple and scarlet in imitation of nobility (and perhaps alluding to the emperors’ sponsorship of mime). Far more likely, however, is the accepted scholarly treatment of the text linking it to a coin produced during the reign of Vespasian. Nevertheless, the possibility for such a visual link deserves to be mentioned.

Pantomime, on the other hand, was quite different. Csapo and Slater categorically state that “if mime was the successor to comedy, pantomime was the natural successor to tragedy,” indicating pantomime’s similarities to and differences from mime. Pantomime was a relatively recent innovation compared to many of the other dramatic forms of entertainment available during the early Empire, emerging at the end of the Republican period to achieve prominence during the reign of Augustus.

The pantomime was a dance that described a narrative, undertaken by a single, silent, masked male dancer (playing many parts) who was accompanied by music and a troupe

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106 Appian, The Civil Wars, 2.146-147, Cassius Dio 44.36-50
107 This coin depicts the goddess Roma reclined on the Seven Hills of Rome. For a detailed treatment, see David Aune, Revelation (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 920.
109 Manuwald, Roman Republican Theatre, 184.
of singers and/or a narrator. Pantomime was considered an important form of entertainment by Augustus and his successors; the emperors would provide training establishments and organise performances of pantomime performers in both Rome and the provinces. Like mime artists, pantomime dancers were immensely popular in Rome, but for somewhat different reasons:

It was the dancer’s skill in communicating through movement and gesture, and in transforming himself from one role to another assisted by little more than a change of mask, which thrilled antiquity’s enthusiastic pantomime fans.

Ancient historians noted the degree to which pantomime transcended many levels of the Roman social hierarchy through its broad appeal. Libanius wrote of goldsmiths learning Greco-Roman mythology through pantomime, and of a slave singing songs from a pantomime as he ran his errands; Seneca wrote that pantomime dancers were honoured by the clamour and applause of the common folk; and Dio Chrysostom alleged that pantomime dancers would perform and teach in the street, heedless of whatever was going on around them. Even if their claims are exaggerated, there can be no denying the popular appeal of pantomime and the effect that it had on Roman society.

The writers of pantomime often sought to convey mythical material and stories, as seen in Nero’s desire to dance in a pantomime version of the Aeneid. It fell to the dancers to make this material both understandable and memorable without uttering a single

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111 Manuwald, Roman Republican Theatre, 185.
112 Hall, “Pantomime” in Performance in Greek and Roman Theatre, 451.
113 Libanius, Orations 64.112.
114 Seneca, Epistles 29.12.
115 Dio Chrysostom, Orations 20.9 As noted in Hall, “Pantomime: Visualising Myth in the Roman Empire” in Performance in Greek and Roman Theatre, 455.
116 Hall, “The singing actors of antiquity” in Greek and Roman Actors, 27.
word—no easy task, yet one that by all accounts was often accomplished with great skill. The more famous pantomime dancers often amassed a large following of fans, granting them enough influence that various emperors sought to reduce or control them, often in vain. Indeed, groups of fans were known to have caused riots and civil unrest when their favourite dancers were censured, hence the nobility’s unease surrounding pantomime.

Whilst it is difficult to pinpoint any obvious link to pantomime in Revelation, it is undoubtedly one of the more important forms of performance in the Roman Empire and so is worth noting. One possible allusion is that of the two witnesses in Revelation 11:3-13—they are not provided with any lines of dialogue, and their performance can be envisioned as being encapsulated in a dance. Similarly, the role of the dragon in Revelation 12:3-18 and 13:2-4 could also be performed in pantomime. Important too is pantomime’s strong links to myth and story—is the narrative of Revelation perhaps to be interpreted as the script to such a pantomime? This seems unlikely, given that archaeological evidence suggests that pantomime did not spread to Asia Minor until after the first century CE, and was not accepted into Greek theatrical festivals until the end of the second century CE.

It is also worth noting that the popularity of both mime and pantomime grew to eclipse that of “conventional” dramas like tragedy and comedy, and as such became the focal point of contention by writers in the early church period (such as Augustine and John Chrysostom), who wrote warning Christians of the perils of the theatre. Intriguingly, there also exists a reasonably sized list of mime actors who became Christian martyrs.

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118 Green, “Roman Bronze Lamps,” 37-38.
120 For example, evidence points to both pantomime and mime being the most popular forms of performance; from T.D. Barnes, “Christians and the Theater” in *Roman Theater and Society: E Salmon Togo Papers I*, ed. William J. Slater (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1996), 168-169.
up until the early fourth century; Puchner lists eight separate instances, and briefly sketches out the story of St Gelasinos, a mime actor who parodied the baptismal rite in a performance but converted to Christianity in the process—and was subsequently stoned to death by the audience.\footnote{Puchner, “Acting in the Byzantine Theatre” in \textit{Greek and Roman Actors}, 307. Gelasinos is also found spelled as Gelasinus.}

3. \textbf{The games of Rome}

Augustus’ \textit{Res Gestae}, a text detailing Augustus’ achievements, provides us with a detailed look at the accomplishments of the first emperor, and insight into the varied forms of entertainment that formed a part of Roman life:

Three times in my own name I gave a show of gladiators, and five times in the name of my sons or grandsons; in these shows there fought about ten thousand men. Twice in my own name I furnished for the people an exhibition of athletes gathered from all parts of the world, and a third time in the name of my grandson... In my own name, or that of my sons or grandsons, on twenty-six occasions I gave to the people, in the circus, in the forum, or in the amphitheatre, hunts of African wild beasts, in which about three thousand five hundred beasts were slain. I gave the people the spectacle of a naval battle beyond the Tiber, at the place where now stands the grove of the Caesars, the ground having been excavated for a length of eighteen hundred and a breadth of twelve hundred feet. In this spectacle thirty beaked ships, triremes or biremes, and a large number of smaller vessels met in conflict. In these
fleets there fought about three thousand men exclusive of the rowers...\textsuperscript{122}

Perhaps the most famous form of entertainment of the Roman Empire was that of the \textit{munera}, shows that were put on by noblemen for the benefit of all. Although strictly not “dramatic entertainment,” the \textit{munera} incorporated many elements of drama, and often recreated historical battles; the Romans displayed a great love for the spectacular, and the \textit{munera} were often precisely that—spectacular, over-the-top displays. The \textit{munera} served to demonstrate the power of the Empire (and by extension, the Emperor) through their sheer scale and size, and to win over the citizens of the Empire. The above quotation from Augustus’ \textit{Res Gestae} displays the magnitude of the games held during the early years of Empire—games which would be surpassed in subsequent years and decades as noblemen and emperors sought to outdo one another.

3.1 \textit{Gladiatorial Contests}

One of the most popular forms of \textit{munera} was that of the gladiatorial contest. These contests, though not unknown to the Republic, became a regular occurrence from the reign of Augustus.\textsuperscript{123} Gladiatorial combat was often preceded by two other types of show: the \textit{venationes}, involving the display and often slaughter of animals (usually exotic animals from far-flung lands) and the \textit{noxii}, the public execution of non-citizen...
criminals. The bloodlust that this instilled in the Roman citizenry—ostensibly in the name of justice—is evident in Seneca’s account of one such game:

In the morning men are thrown to the lions and the bears, at noon they are thrown to their spectators... “But one of them was a highway robber, he killed a man!” Because he killed he deserved to suffer this punishment, granted...

The noxii in particular served a dual purpose; quite aside from executing criminals, they served once again to remind all present of the authority and power of Rome. Generally speaking, such punishments were relatively mundane; often criminals were simply ordered to fight one another to the death with no protection. Alternatively, the condemned were forced into a beast hunt—against two different types of animal bound together, or to hunt a herbivore alongside other animals, or even single combat against a ferocious animal.

Occasionally, however, a far greater spectacle was required, such as for the grand opening of the Flavian Amphitheatre (now known as the Colosseum) in 80CE. With the help of ingenious engineering and a dose of imagination, legends and myths could be re-enacted or turned into twisted reflections of themselves. Martial’s account of the opening speaks of some gruesome executions—for example, the story of Pasiphae mating with a bull, re-enacted by means of a female prisoner being bound inside a

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126 Potter, “Entertainers in the Roman Empire,” 308.
device, placed in an amphitheatre with a bull in heat,\textsuperscript{127} or of a male prisoner crucified then torn apart by bears in a recreation of the stories of Laureolus and Prometheus.\textsuperscript{128}

The gladiatorial contests themselves are well documented in contemporary history and fiction, and are arguably one of the best-known entertainments from Roman times. There is no great need to re-examine all the gory details, but it is useful to note the attitudes of both spectators and gladiators. Paul Plass asserts that the purpose of these contests was “renewal of the community’s vigor through furious discharge of energy,”\textsuperscript{129} much like contemporary sporting events. As such, they served an important role in Roman society: to distract the Roman populace from its problems and to provide an outlet for frustration and anger. They also allowed the populace to project gratitude, fear and anger upon the fighters, especially in times of war or victory. This meant that spectators were often passionately involved in the outcome of these contests, and it is unsurprising that emperors and officials were careful to heed the will of the audience during these games.

When gladiators were defeated, often after a long and bloody contest, the vanquished would appeal to the sponsor of the munera (the munerarius) and to the audience for mercy. The munerarius held the ultimate decision over a gladiator’s fate, and would indicate either life or death to the victor, often after a brief consultation with the audience. Gladiators were expected to fight bravely and skilfully, but also to die courageously: to “show oneself master of the slightest movement when face to face with death”\textsuperscript{130} in order to satisfy the Roman virtue of honores. Gladiators died with their helmets on, never letting the audience see their face. This allowed audiences to project identities—whether of friends or foes—onto the gladiators; to remove their helmets

\textsuperscript{127} Martial, Liber de Spectaculis, 6 (5).
\textsuperscript{128} Martial, Liber de Spectaculis, 9 (7). In Greco-Roman myth, Laureolus was a robber who was crucified, whilst Prometheus (who stole fire from the gods) was chained to a rock and destined to have his entrails devoured by an eagle every day.
\textsuperscript{129} Paul Plass, The Game of Death in Ancient Rome: Arena Sport and Political Suicide (Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1995), 30.
would bring the audience back to reality, to “break a complicity which was doubtless the indispensable spice to the emotions felt during the spectacle.”

There are some tenuous links that can be made between Revelation and the games; every account of battle and fighting in Revelation could serve as an allusion to these games and gladiatorial contests. The average member of the Roman Empire would not have seen the Roman Legions do battle; therefore, a gladiatorial fight would be the closest thing to an armed struggle that many would have experienced or witnessed. Similarly, the visions of Revelation were not beyond the means of Roman engineering to reproduce on a stage, and could be allusions to punishments that existed in the first century CE—or written to allow audiences to imagine them as such.

3.2 Naumachiae

Another interesting form of combat entertainment is that of the naumachiae, the naval display battles. First given by Julius Caesar, and continued on by emperors throughout the first century CE, the naumachiae involved prisoners of war sailing ships and fighting to the death in recreations of sea battles. Augustus’ Res Gestae attests to the sheer scale of his own sea battle: an artificial lake measuring 1800 by 1200 Roman feet (532.8m x 355.2m) was built on a bank of the Tiber, and three thousand male prisoners and at least thirty large ships took part in the fighting. Some amphitheatres could be flooded to host such battles, such as in Verona and Merida, but it seems that this was a form of entertainment largely restricted to Rome—with the notable exceptions of Jerash.

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131 Auguet, Cruelty and Civilisation, 51.
132 The Roman foot, or pes, is currently understood to measure 296mm (compared to the contemporary international standard of 304.8mm or 12 inches). William L. Hosch (ed.), Math Explained: The Britannica Guide to Numbers and Measurement (New York: Britannica Educational Publishing, 2011), 206.
(Gerasa) in Jordan, where at least one such battle was held,\footnote{Hazel Dodge, “Amusing the Masses: Buildings for Entertainment and Leisure in the Roman World” in \textit{Life, Death, and Entertainment in the Roman Empire}, eds. David S. Potter and David J. Mattingly (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 234-236.} and Apamea, where archaeologists have uncovered a wealth of evidence that the Great Roman Theatre could support \textit{naumachiae}.\footnote{See Finlayson, “The Great Roman Theatre at Apamea,” 292-293.} Of course, despite these being largely restricted to Rome, these would have been highly significant events given their cost. Such events would have eclipsed all other spectacles at the time; spectators’ accounts of the \textit{naumachiae} would have spread widely and quickly and have been known to many if not most people living within the Empire.

The \textit{naumachiae} (and connotations of Roman naval power) may be alluded to in Revelation 13 and its narrative of the sea-beast. Many commentators note an aversion to the sea in both John and other Jewish writings; the power of Rome’s navy and the spectacle of the \textit{naumachiae} would have been horrifying for those living in the east of the Empire. There are a few other references to the sea in Revelation—Revelation 12 shows the earth “swallowing the sea” in defence of the Mother, and Revelation 15 shows a “sea of glass glowing with fire.” There are also possible references to the lament over Babylon in Revelation 18, where the sailors and those trading on the sea weep over the wealth that had been lost. The \textit{naumachiae} were doubtless important, influential spectacles, the performances of which would have resounded throughout the Roman Empire.\footnote{The \textit{naumachiae} are not the only form of aquatic spectacle attested to in the literature—examples such as aquatic ballet can also be found. For a full reading, see Anne Berlan-Bajard, \textit{Les Spectacles Aquatiques Romain} (Collection de l’École française de Rome 360, 2006).}
4. 

Victory and Honour: the Roman Triumph

Whilst the Roman triumph was not strictly intended as entertainment, there is no denying its lasting influence and impact—even today, victors of major sporting events are greeted in the streets of their hometown with a triumphal procession that evokes Roman origins. Well-known as the ultimate honour that could be awarded to a Roman general, the triumph was a display of excess and might, demonstrating the all-conquering might of the Roman Empire and culminating in a sacrifice to Jupiter. Early in his Res Gestae, Augustus makes note of his triumphs, and the times he refused them:

Twice I triumphed with an ovation, thrice I celebrated curule triumphs... Although the Senate decreed me additional triumphs I set them aside. When I had performed the vows which I had undertaken in each war I deposited upon the Capitol the laurels which adorned my fasces. For successful operations on land and sea, conducted either by myself or by my lieutenants under my auspices, the senate on fifty-five occasions decreed that thanks should be rendered to the immortal gods... In my triumphs there were led before my chariot nine kings or children of kings.136

Intriguingly, Augustus claims only five triumphs for himself whilst refusing others, perhaps with the intention of appearing to be modest. It must be noted that the honour of a military triumph seems to have been restricted to the Imperial family from the reign of Augustus, and as such the number of triumphs decreases to just 13 in the hundred years after 29 BCE.137 Despite the relative scarcity of these triumphs, we must be careful not to underestimate their influence and importance. Spectators to a triumph included dignitaries from all over the known world, whose presence gave the proceedings an air of occasion, and helped legitimise the status of the triumph.138 Their

stories would have enthralled and warned the ancient world, especially their accounts of the triumphal ritual of the humiliation of the conquered (by parading them in front of Rome in chains).

Compared to other Roman rituals and ceremonies, the triumph is fairly well recorded, allowing for a reasonable reconstruction of the events. Perhaps the most remarkable thing about each triumph is its innate link with the city of Rome: as Östenburg notes, the nature of the triumph “defined the spectators, humans and gods, as Romans.” Below is an abbreviated account of the “stereotypical” triumph as described by Beard:

The triumphal party assembled early in the morning on the Campus Martius, from where they set off on a route that led through the “Triumphal Gate,” past the crowds in the Circus Maximus, through the Forum to culminate on the Capitoline Hill. Before entering the city, the general met with the senate outside the gates with an official request to enter the city in triumph (triumphans urbem inire).

The procession was divided into three parts: the first included the spoils (paintings and models of territory, treasure looted, golden crowns, animals for sacrifice and captives) carried on wagons or on portable stretchers. The most important captives were paraded directly in front of the general’s chariot.

The second part centred around the general: standing upon a triumphal chariot (sometimes decorated with gold and ivory), his face was painted red, and he was dressed in a laurel crown, an embroidered tunic and a purple toga decorated with golden stars. In one hand he held an ivory sceptre, in the other a branch of laurel. Directly behind him stood a slave holding a golden crown over his head, whispering to

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remind him of his mortality. Following him were his leading officers and Roman citizens freed from slavery.

Finally came the victorious soldiers, chanting the ritual cry of “io triumpe” and singing songs about the general. The procession proceeded slowly through the narrow streets of Rome—quite unlike the military parades of the 20th century. When the procession reached the foot of the Capitoline, some captives might have been taken away for execution; the rest of the procession continued to the Temple of Jupiter. There, animals were sacrificed and other offerings were made by the general, before all involved departed for a feast.\textsuperscript{140}

Whilst Beard challenges some of the inherent assumptions by historians regarding the triumph by noting that much of what is known is heavily generalised, it is not my intent to delve into the historical intricacies of the triumph. Indeed, given the setting of Revelation in Asia Minor, a generalised account seems all the more appropriate, as there would be few if any in Asia Minor who had been firsthand witnesses to a Roman triumph in Rome, much like the \textit{naumachiae}. It seems far more likely that stories would have been spread widely by travellers and dignitaries, whose recollections of the event would surely have been affected by the grandeur of it all.

Some definitive proof is offered by the practice of commemorating triumphs with monuments; that is, architecture that served to reinscribe the underlying motifs of the triumph—Roman power and might—over all who saw them. One particularly pertinent example is the Arch of Titus in Rome, built in the early 80s CE to commemorate Titus and Vespasian’s sack of Jerusalem. On the one side, Titus rides with his father in a chariot; on the other, the sacked artefacts from the Temple are carried in procession through Rome.\textsuperscript{141} This, combined with the coins minted (“IUDEA CAPTA”) after the

\textsuperscript{140} Paraphrased from Beard, \textit{The Roman Triumph}, 81-82, and Östenburg, \textit{Staging the World}, 12-14.
\textsuperscript{141} Beard, \textit{The Roman Triumph}, 43—includes pictures of the arch on pages 44 and 45.
victory, reminded all visitors to Rome just who had been responsible for the Jews’ defeat.

Much like the theatre, the triumph had its own set of rules and assumptions, but also its tensions. It seems that the triumph played an important part in shaping Roman identity—despite the ambiguity that may have surrounded it. Many of the elements of the triumph were what introduced aspects of the outside world to Rome—for example, Gauls and elephants were first made known to the Roman people through triumphs. The presentation of the “others” (that is, the defeated) meant that triumphs were also a useful method of reinforcing and reinscribing Roman identity, creating solidarity amongst the various classes of Rome against the threatening “others” who had been defeated by Roman might.

Scholars tend to find allusions to the Roman triumph in Revelation 19:11-16, and equate the depiction of the Rider on the White Horse to the role of the Roman Emperor in a triumph, noting especially the troops that follow their leader in procession. Another possible allusion exists in Revelation 18:12-13 in the text’s description of the trading goods of the world—these goods could bear similarities to the spoils of battle carried as part of a triumphal procession. These allusions will be discussed at length later in Chapters 5 and 6. A final, possible allusion is to the goddess of victory, Nike, whose representation at the triumphs is evoked by John’s use of νικάω at the end of the letters to each church.

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142 Östenburg, Staging the World, 9.
5. **Heralds, criers and auctioneers: the praecones of the Roman Empire**

An often-overlooked yet important role that occupied a space in the sphere of performance art was that of the herald, or praeco. Intriguingly, available literature shows that the use of the title praeco was not solely limited to the occupation of town crier, but was also used in both religious and dramatic contexts (albeit serving rather the same purposes). Generally speaking, it appears as though the praeco was a voice for hire, one who would work wherever and whenever needed—in “religion, theatre, funerals, auctions, and civil administration.” Much like actors, such performers would have been regarded poorly by the upper classes, yet they occupied a vital niche in Roman culture and society. However, those praecones employed in Imperial service needed to be trusted by the populace given the content of their messages, and so were afforded a high degree of respect that elevated them socially. It seems a fair assumption that those praecones employed in an official capacity were held in somewhat high regard, whereas the private freelancers were not.

Inscriptionary evidence suggests that praecones were slaves or freedmen, and so the profession was one that enabled some movement between social classes.

In Roman comedy, the praeco was responsible for a number of different actions: it seems that their primary role would have been to “silence or at least to quiet the crowd,” and to draw an audience into the proceedings. Ancient sources make mention of a praeco cum tubicine, a “herald with a trumpet,” and it seems likely that the praecones were equipped with such an instrument in order to silence the audience before making their announcements. This is especially helpful in the context of Roman

146 It is also important to note that some praeco were slaves—see *CIL* 6.1952.6-10.
147 For example, *CIL* 6.1952.6-9 notes the manumission of fourteen praecones, three by women.
ludi, where different performances would occur consecutively, requiring a master of ceremonies to keep order.

Bond speculates that the role of praeco was closely associated with that of dissignator, a person that organised ludi through hiring the required entertainers (gladiatorial troupes, musicians and theatrical personnel). It seems that both roles were often fulfilled by the same person. This means that the praeco would have been responsible not just for announcing the entertainment and drawing in an audience, but also for organising a cohesive set of entertainers to keep the games running—much like the organisers of a modern music festival.

The praecones also had a large (and similar) role to play in the religious ceremonies of Rome. They called for silence at the beginning of important cultic rites, particularly sacrifices, and would sometimes assist the priests and magisters by reading the prayers from a scroll as a prompt. Intriguingly, the praecones were also enlisted to announce funerals, and often worked closely with undertakers toward this end. Praecones could also work privately, most often as auctioneers, where they stood to earn a substantial wage (and often a less than stellar reputation). Juvenal derides praecones who worked as auctioneers, calling them “men who were once hornblowers” whose “puffed-out cheeks were known in every village.”

Of course, praecones also served as criers or heralds: disseminators of important information throughout the Roman Empire—and arguably as the mouthpiece for imperial propaganda. This is demonstrated amply in the writings of Josephus, which record the use of heralds by Roman officials in Judea. A key example is Herod Archelaus’

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150 Bond, Criers in the Roman World, 45-46.
153 Bond, Criers in the Roman World, 67.
154 Juvenal, Satires, 3.34-35.
use of heralds: after a revolt during the Passover is put down with 3000 fatalities, praecones are sent to those remaining, and “commanded every one to retire to their own homes.” Similarly, Herod the Great “commanded proclamation to be made at the wall” at the siege of Jerusalem in an attempt to convince the Judeans that he had come “for the good of the people and the preservation of the city,” and that an amnesty would be granted to his opponents. Unfortunately, his opponents “created a clamour” so that none of these proclamations could be heard. Josephus’ accounts clearly show that the praecones were employed to propagandise populations whilst also pronouncing the news of the Empire.

Regardless of its social standing or reputation, the position of praeco was an important link between the Roman Empire and its subjects, acting as a transmitter of vital information across the Empire—indeed, sometimes as the only method through which a far-flung empire received news from the capital. It was a position that could vary greatly, yet was present and influential in a number of spheres of life within the Empire.

It is very clear that there is a strong link between the angels of Revelation (specifically the trumpet-bearing angels) and the praecones. As praecones use the blowing of a trumpet to indicate progression of a ludi or a religious ceremony, so too do the angels in Revelation use trumpets to indicate the progression of God’s judgment upon the world. The angels also serve similar roles as praecones in their role as heralds who bear warnings. Many commentators, however, tend to focus on interpreting Revelation’s trumpets from the perspective of Jewish worship ritual or apocalyptic writing, noting their use in battle and liturgy, and therefore miss the connotations for an audience

155 Josephus, The Jewish War, 2.1.3.  
156 Josephus, The Jewish War, 1.15.5.  
157 For example, M. Eugene Boring argues for the association of trumpets with Jewish tradition, and notes the development of the trumpet motif in the Prophetic literature. Aune notes Revelation’s use of trumpet imagery as similar to the Apocalypse of Zephaniah, and also demonstrates the use of the trumpet in Jewish apocalyptic imagery. See M. Eugene Boring, Revelation (Kentucky: John Knox Press, 1989), 134; Aune, Revelation 6-16, 497, 510.
steeped in Greco-Roman culture. We will further discuss the praecones and their connection to Revelation in Chapter 5.

6. **Entertainment for all**

As we can see, the business of entertainment was a top priority for Rome—and this extended to all parts of the Empire, not merely the capital. Reports of mime, pantomime, comedy, tragedy, gladiatorial combat and other performances of Roman entertainment can be found throughout the Empire, especially in Asia Minor. This allows us to infer that most of the subjects of the Empire were familiar with these forms of entertainment. Given the regularity and availability of festivals, shows and munera, it seems that the average Roman citizen was not in want or need of entertaining; indeed, one could safely compare it to the proliferation of television in a contemporary context.

It is this very culture of entertainment that defined Rome and its citizens, and set them apart from the surrounding nations. It is therefore unsurprising that this was what John of Patmos sought to use in his writing against the Empire. John deliberately frames his apocalyptic vision using the markers, rituals and distinctive features of the various performances that compose the Roman culture of entertainment, creating a composite hybrid work that satirises and subverts Roman paradigms to proclaim the message of the coming Kingdom of Heaven.

In order to begin engaging the findings of this chapter with the text of Revelation, we need to be able to engage with the text in a way that brings its performative elements to the fore. Any such reading must first engage strongly with the performance styles of the Roman Empire in order to draw out John’s references and allusions. It must also be able to interpret the text’s meaning in light of these references, keeping in mind the context of Revelation’s original audience. Finally, it should be able to take into account the nature of theatrical performance—theatrical performance is open to interpretation, its imagery is fluid rather than static, and its meaning can alter depending on its audience’s
context and background. The next chapter will engage with three different hermeneutical lenses in order to develop such a perspective, and the two following chapters will begin engaging this reading style—firstly with selected passages from Revelation, then a larger portion of the text.
Chapter 4

Setting the Scene: Perspectives for Reading Revelation

This chapter will begin our engagement with a variety of conceptual perspectives, or hermeneutical lenses, that are important for our reading of Revelation. This is best described as a hybrid approach, where three diverse but overlapping perspectives will be drawn together to demonstrate the implications of the text of Revelation being read and understood from the point of view of John’s audience, particularly with regards to Greco-Roman performance.¹ It is important to remember that each of these perspectives are not, strictly speaking, “interpretive methods” in and of themselves. Stephen Moore’s description of postcolonial criticism is helpful in providing a framework for understanding these perspectives: “not a method of interpretation (any more than is feminist criticism, say) so much as a critical sensibility acutely attuned to a specific range of interrelated historical and textual phenomena.”² Such an understanding allows for a variety of readings of the same text; as each interpreter’s background (and critical sensibilities) differs, so too does their reading of the text. Understanding each of these conceptual perspectives guides us toward a particular way of reading the text, and in turn affects our exegetical approach.

A helpful example of how one such perspective can illuminate exegetical method can be found in Harry Maier’s writing on Revelation. Maier concludes his reading of the text by arguing for a “cruciform irony”³ that engages with the visual spheres of public life

¹ As discussed in Chapter 1, this thesis acknowledges the presence of strong Jewish links and intertextual references in Revelation, but focuses on the Greco-Roman visual references as being of primary importance to John’s audience.
(particularly public performance) in order to discover “the resurrected Jesus Christ.” Maier defines “cruciform irony” as a “focus imaginarius expressing and calling forth a particular form of communal self-storying at the end of Christendom,” therefore “exhorting the church to a renewed theatricality on the multiple and complicated stages of contemporary secular society.” In other words, “cruciform irony” uses the idea of theatricality (to which the Biblical texts lend themselves particularly well) to offer a Christocentric commentary on contemporary affairs.

Maier sees Revelation as intrinsically performative, and understands the text as one that is careful and deliberate in its inversions and its mimicry, a “hybrid text” that inverts roles and expectations in order to highlight its message. To Maier, John is a careful author who has engaged deeply in a visual way with the variety of cultures that form the context of his audience, with the intention of critiquing those cultures, providing an alternative through his depiction of the coming kingdom of God. Maier’s concepts are helpful as they begin to move our thinking towards exegeting, accepting, understanding, and finally interpreting the text’s performative aspects. Maier’s reading of Revelation is one that understands the text similarly to this thesis, and provides a helpful parallel to the reading that we are about to undertake.

We will explore three main conceptual perspectives, each of which will draw out different aspects of performance in Revelation. Firstly, visual exegesis assists us to explore the visual allusions to existing performative imagery and other artefacts; secondly, performance criticism helps us to engage with the oral performance markers within the text, and finally, postcolonialism and hidden transcript theory help us to understand the audience’s aural reception of the text, unveiling the message embedded

5 Maier, *Apocalypse Recalled*, 203.
6 Maier, *Apocalypse Recalled*, 78.
7 For full details, see see Maier, *Apocalypse Recalled*. We will shortly re-encounter Maier through his work on visual exegesis, which unfortunately for my purposes does not focus on Revelation to the same extent as *Apocalypse Recalled*. 
within Revelation. Such an experiential approach to Revelation is helpful as it is not purely text-based, and therefore takes into account the varying literacy rates of John’s audience. Revelation is a text that engages the imagination of its hearers, and so it is important for us to be able to imagine it as its original audience might have, understanding their context and the imagery they were familiar with.

Each of these conceptual perspectives will be outlined in detail, with accompanying examples drawn from the text of Revelation. In the next chapter, we will begin weaving these together to demonstrate how they assist our interpretation of the text.

1. Visual Exegesis: Imagination and the text of Revelation

The relatively new field of visual exegesis is developing a helpful framework for understanding the use of language and imagery in the text of the book of Revelation. Visual exegesis draws together fields such as iconography, archaeology, exegesis, semiotics, and art history, and has therefore arguably always been a part of the interpretive approach to any ancient text. Michel Foucault, for example, argued the importance of understanding the relationship between image and text when

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9 Visual exegesis is relatively new to Biblical Studies – it is well attested in the art world.
interpreting text from the ancient world. Given its relative infancy as a Biblical discipline, visual exegesis currently incorporates a number of developing approaches, including interpretation through the “semiotic square” (a tool that maps binary oppositions, providing a visual illustration of the relationships between concepts) and socio-rhetorical analysis.

As Maier points out, visual exegesis is beneficial for readers, helping them to “recognise the vivid aspects of biblical texts, how they invite imagination, and the ways they seek to persuade by creating pictures in the minds of listeners through evocative speech.” It is, according to Rosemary Canavan, a method of interpretation that “relies on the analysis of visual material such as statuary, coins and monuments which operate in a network of meaning… to communicate the power of the empire.” Simply put, visual exegesis utilises knowledge of the visual language of the culture surrounding a text in order to examine how the text redeploys the imagery of the culture—how it “evokes these images and reuses them for its own purpose.”

Recently, Canavan has assembled a helpful brief history of visual exegesis and its use in the interpretation of the New Testament. Canavan traces the development of visual exegesis from its earliest form as an offshoot of socio-rhetorical interpretation through to its present state as “groundbreaking scholarship that is engaging as many levels of

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the research and interdisciplinary expertise as is possible.” Of particular note is the field of socio-rhetorical analysis developed by Vernon Robbins. Robbins, one of the key leaders of the visual exegesis working group, demonstrates the variety of “textures” embedded within a text—Robbins describes text as being like a “thick tapestry” woven from “multiple textures of meanings, convictions, beliefs, values, emotions and actions.”

He and his colleagues are therefore creating a comprehensive approach to interpretation, centred around the idea of constructing and deconstructing the boundaries within the text to show how the aforementioned textures are interwoven and interact with one another. Robbins distinguishes three different boundaries: first, the text, then the “Mediterranean World,” then finally the world of the interpreter.

Within the world of the text, Robbins describes four “arenas of texture” which intersect, overlap and intertwine to provide a full picture of the text: inner texture, intertexture, social and cultural texture, and ideological texture.

**Inner Texture**

Inner Texture is “concerned with the way that the words are used and repeated, observing patterns and voices and structures that construct meaning.” For example, a study like this one might specifically examine words related to Greco-Roman theatrical performance. Another example of this might be the concept of “ring theory,” which, as we discussed in Chapter 2, is a structural method of composition that was familiar to readers in the ancient world which created meaning and expectation through structure, formula, and repetition.

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17 Canavan, “Visual Exegesis,” 144.
Intertexture

Intertexture is "a text’s representation of, reference to, and use of phenomena in the world outside the text being interpreted." This refers to a text’s interaction with its wider world—for example, what Robbins defines earlier as the “Mediterranean World” for Revelation—through references to various phenomena. One of the main goals of intertextual analysis is to “ascertain the nature and result of processes of configuration and reconfiguration of phenomena in the world outside the text.” This is a highly complex task—as Robbins points out, there are many ways in which a text can interact with these phenomena. For example, a text might mimic another text, or it might restate a narrative but alter its details, or invert a tradition. More commonly, a text might simply refer to existing practices or traditions, like mime, theatre, or *recitatio*.

Within intertexture, Robbins identifies four different categories: the oral-scribal, cultural, social, and historical. Oral-scribal intertexture involves “a text’s use of any other text outside of itself” (in other words, quotations and allusions), and demonstrates how these quotations are modified or altered to suit the text’s argument. The extensive allusions to Hebrew Bible material in Revelation is one clear example of oral-scribal intertexture. Robbins describes cultural intertexture as “insider knowledge”—knowledge known only to those who have some interaction with the culture from which the knowledge is derived. Social intertexture refers to the knowledge that is “commonly held by all persons of a region” regardless of culture, and

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24 This presents us with a great number of opportunities; if used correctly and carefully, visual exegesis could help illuminate liminal third spaces where hidden transcripts could be exposed.
falls into four different categories: roles, institutions, codes, and relationships. Finally, historical intertexture refers to specific historical events that are referred to or implied within the text.

**Social and Cultural Texture**

The “social and cultural texture” relates to the various socio-cultural issues at play for those living in the world of the text. For example, a study like this thesis might address both the social and cultural issues related to the various types of Greco-Roman performance arts. One specific issue might be Jewish responses to Roman mime performance, the cultural differences that arise, and the text’s view on these differences. For Revelation, the most obvious social-cultural issue at stake is John’s views on Christian engagement with empire. This will be explored further throughout this thesis using postcolonial approaches.

**Ideological Texture**

Finally, the ideological texture reflects on “the social and cultural location of the interpreter” and may include “a personal individual reflection on the location of the interpreter as well as a group orientation.” The ideological texture also takes into account “modes of intellectual discourse” and “spheres of ideology,” and as a result, lends itself well to exposing the liminal spaces where hidden transcripts may lie. In other words, ideological texture is concerned with how the text and subsequent interpreters position themselves relative to other groups.

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29 Canavan, *Clothing the Body of Christ at Colossae*, 64.
As well as these arenas of texture, Robbins also notes the use of “rhetography”—a portmanteau of the words “rhetoric” and “graphic,”—that is, “graphic images people create in their minds as a result of the visual texture of a text.” As Canavan explains, this is a key interpretive strategy for visual exegesis, and makes use of ekphrasis—“vivid language that enlivens the imagination.” Ekphrasis also refers to a structure of communication—“a context of communication through statements or signs that conjure visual images in the mind which, in turn, evoke “familiar” contexts that provide meaning for the reader or hearer.

Similar to the idea of “memory theatres” discussed in Chapter 1, ekphrasis is the highly visual language used by authors and orators to remind readers or hearers about a particular context. For example, Paul uses the imagery of armour in Romans and 1 Thessalonians to evoke an understanding of the Roman cohort and Imperial statuary (in particular, the virtues represented through these statues), and then subverts them with virtues that are in line with the Christian movement. In a similar way, the depiction of God’s throne room in Revelation 4:1-6 alludes strongly to the Roman emperor’s throne room and the Imperial court (the text’s intertexture), transforming the imagery from Roman to Christian in order to show God’s dominance and power. As we can see, ekphrasis and intertexture are often closely connected.

Maier argues that it is “impossible to understand fully Colossians, Ephesians and the Pastoral Epistles without reference to the larger iconographical world that constituted

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31 Robbins, “Rhetography,” in Words Well Spoken, 81.
33 Robbins, “Rhetography,” in Words Well Spoken, 81.
the ‘matrix of sensibility’ of their daily lives,” and it is no different for the book of Revelation. An awareness of *ekphrasis* helps identify the visual cues within the text in context of the world of the original readers, but also assists interpreters in understanding the intertextual play between the original images and their use in the text. Importantly, such an awareness acknowledges that “the ancient world was both an oral and visual culture,” an important point that can be missed by those who rely only on textual interpretation. *Ekphrastic* language is evident throughout Revelation (and many other texts in the New Testament), and a heightened awareness of *ekphrasis* helps interpreters both in identifying the various visual cues within the text, bearing in mind that the culture of the ancient world was a highly visual one, particularly given the higher incidence of textual illiteracy. Various writers in the ancient world utilise *ekphrasis* in order to allude to different visual images within their audience’s worlds (the intertexture of a text), and utilize these allusions to make specific points.

Maier argues strongly that Paul’s epistles cannot be fully understood in the context of the original readers or hearers without an understanding of the imagery that Paul employs, subverts and utilises. This is, Maier argues, an area of common ground between Paul and his listeners, and one that Paul can draw from, knowing that his audience understands his intent. To that end, Maier points out, Paul “often draws from the visual world of imperial metaphor and imagery,” and reshapes these visual cues for his Christian audience. The only limitation of Maier’s argument is in its scope; it is not just Paul who makes use of *ekphrasis* in this fashion but all of the writers of the New Testament, especially John of Patmos.

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37 Maier, *Picturing Paul in Empire*, 29.
38 Maier, *Picturing Paul in Empire*, 31.
Importantly, Maier also acknowledges that “the complexity of Paul’s context is not reducible to a static monolithic vision of empire”\(^{39}\) but is instead an “irreducibly complex civic and political world”\(^{40}\) which Paul engages using highly subversive language. John similarly uses language that mimics, subverts and recasts imagery that would have been familiar to his listeners, but on a different scale to Paul. Where Paul’s use of *ekphrasis* recasts the everyday objects of the Roman Empire, the intertexture of Revelation more explicitly targets the ruling apparatus of the Empire, subverting the throne room and the imagery of the imperial family in order to highlight the power of God over these institutions. This will be explored at length in subsequent chapters.

As we have seen, the approaches utilised by visual exegesis can be quite complex. The methods being developed by Robbins and his colleagues aim to be exhaustively comprehensive, ultimately culminating in a network of perspectives and readings with its own vocabulary and framework. Whilst I am sympathetic to this, I find it more helpful to describe a fusion of traditional and newer conceptual perspectives in order to achieve similar goals. I do not wish to engage all aspects of a visual-exegetical paradigm, but rather acknowledge two of the perspectives found in visual exegesis which are particularly helpful: rhetography (specifically the concept of *ekphrasis*), and intertexture. Both of these are important, somewhat interlinked concepts, and using both will be important in firstly identifying John’s *ekphrastic* language, then identifying the intertextual references he is making. Together, these form a set of tools that assist us in drawing out the various references to Greco-Roman performance within the text.

Intertexture, as we have discussed, is simply “a text’s representation of, reference to, and use of phenomena in the world outside the text being interpreted.”\(^{41}\) The idea of intertexture overlaps substantially with the full suite of historical-critical methods, and therefore provides a thorough methodological foundation for readings of the text. It

\(^{39}\) Janssen, “Paul’s Use of Armour Language,” 81.
\(^{40}\) Maier, *Picturing Paul in Empire*, 8.
seems, then, that the key issue with intertexture (and indeed with most historical-critical methods) is identifying references to a visual culture that is in every way removed from our own. Here, we must accept that there will be gaps in our knowledge, and that we will never be able fully to step into a first-century mindset and understand all of the references within the text. An awareness of both intertexture and a writer’s use of ekphrasis are nonetheless very helpful as both perspectives help us to remember that texts are not created in a vacuum, but are highly contextual to their audience and to their author. How interpreters understand and describe the intertexture of a text can vary greatly, and different interpreters may disagree on what the text is alluding to, and the significance of such an allusion.

This means that twenty-first century readers need to be aware of plausible contexts behind the visual scenes evoked by ekphrasis—and this is no small task. In the case of Revelation, I argue that the following limits to our hermeneutical imaginations are reasonable. The first is that John’s original hearers were familiar with a variety of Greek and Roman performance arts, and also with the visual culture of the Roman Empire. Given that Revelation is addressed to seven distinct cities in Asia Minor, each with their own civic identity, this may seem to be a big claim to make; however, even today, the remains of impressive theatres and Temples in each of these cities, and many examples of Greco-Roman statuary from the area testify to the shared material culture of Roman Asia Minor. Furthermore, given the proximity of these cities and the roads between them, it seems plausible that even all though hearers in one city (for example, Laodicea42) might not be intimately familiar with the visual culture of another (for example, Ephesus or Smyrna), some at least would have had the opportunity to travel to the larger cities and be acquainted with the ideas evoked by the text.

Implicit here is that Roman culture had spread to Asia Minor to the extent that it was well-known enough to be parodied or subverted. This is a contention which is firmly

42 Canavan, *Clothing the Body of Christ at Colossae*, 36.
based in reality, as it has been demonstrated by many scholars that by the first century CE, the elites in the cities of Asia Minor had mostly embraced Roman culture and its trappings, even to the extent of competing for the title of neokoros and hosting temples to the Imperial cult.\textsuperscript{43} As we have already seen in earlier chapters, Roman culture was often enthusiastically adopted by the elites outside of Rome, especially in the former Greek empire, and so envisioning that Roman performance was being performed across Asia Minor is entirely plausible. There is ample archaeological evidence that Roman buildings and particularly Roman modifications of pre-existing Greek temples and theatres were prevalent in many of the major cities in Asia Minor, and the proliferation of Roman statuary makes it clear that by the time Revelation was written, the cities in Asia Minor had, to varying degrees, assimilated Roman culture and its customs.

One further emphasis in this thesis is that many of John’s \textit{ekphrastic} references are to Greco-Roman visual culture (in particular the hybrid culture of Asia Minor). This is not so much an assumption as it is a perspective forced by the scope of this work. It is important to acknowledge John’s extensive use of other, non-Greco-Roman texts in the formation of the text of Revelation—John is not only informed by contemporary Roman culture, but is comfortable using allusions from the Hebrew scriptures and other writings to enhance his critique of empire. As Keith Dyer puts it,

\begin{quote}
The vivid language of the Hebrew traditions (Babylon!) and the Greco-Roman iconography of power, war and victory over sea, land and the nations, are juxtaposed and redefined in order to challenge the assumption that the gods / God must be on the side of the powerful and that peace comes only through conquest.\textsuperscript{44}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{43} For more on this, see the argument put forward by Friesen in Steven J. Friesen, \textit{Twice Neokoros: Ephesus, Asia, and the Cult of the Flavian Imperial Family} (Leiden: Brill, 1993).

John’s allusions and references to the Hebrew scriptures have been very well covered by other scholars elsewhere (unsurprisingly so, given they form the bulk of John’s writing), and a thorough survey of them would require more space than is feasible for this work.45

When engaging with visual culture and the imagination, it is also important to remember that the Jewish people did not produce imagery in the same way as the Greco-Romans.46 As discussed in Chapters 1 and 3, the residents of Asia Minor would have been confronted consistently with Greco-Roman imagery, and this imagery would have been at the forefront of their minds when hearing Revelation. Although John may have intended for his message to be understood and interpreted from a Jewish perspective, his readers would undoubtedly have also made the connection to Greco-Roman performance art. Hence, this thesis will only mention Jewish references in passing as they may relate visually, and will focus on the various clear allusions and possible allusions to Greco-Roman culture within the text of Revelation.

Finally, as we have explored in earlier chapters, it is important to acknowledge and remember that the contemporary concept of “Greco-Roman performance art” cannot be easily separated from “Greco-Roman culture” or “Greco-Roman life.” Performance art, especially the Greco-Roman kind, is highly contextual, and is both created from and given meaning by its originating cultures. At the same time, the idea of performance, public image, and everyday life were closely intertwined in Greco-Roman thought. This


46 See Chapter 1 for a more extensive discussion on Jewish engagement with the theatre and other Greco-Roman performance imagery.
means that our approach must be nuanced and careful, and therefore requires the use of these tools from visual exegesis.

2. Performance Criticism and the “Performance Mode of Thought”

Given the orality of the texts of the Biblical canon, any attempt to understand a text such as the book of Revelation in its original context will benefit from an engagement with the field of performance criticism, an approach that emphasises the aural-oral nature of first century literature, and approaches texts with an understanding that they were commonly read aloud rather than in silence. A thorough and detailed survey of the application of performance criticism to Biblical studies is found in the work of Jeanette Matthews, who states that “biblical scholars have used performance criticism haphazardly and not necessarily with much connection to performance criticism theorists.” Matthews’ own work goes a long way toward correcting these flaws, and provides a much-needed case study that illustrates the various strengths of a comprehensive performance criticism method when applied to biblical studies.

Matthews argues that the goals of biblical performance criticism are twofold: to

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47 Botha argues that “the oral, performative aspect of ancient communication, and specifically ancient rhetoric have been neglected,” highlighting the need for an approach such as that of performance criticism. See Botha, Orality and Literacy, 205.

highlight features that are unique to live performance and to recover what might have been lost when orally delivered material was committed to writing and transmitted as a static medium.\(^{49}\)

As we can see, one of the key assumptions of biblical performance criticism is that the text originates from an oral background and was later codified,\(^{50}\) but this does not appear to be the case for the book of Revelation. In fact, this thesis approaches the text from the opposite direction of performance criticism—understanding the text as written to be understood as performance, rather than as performance enshrined within a text.\(^{51}\)

This does not mean, however, that biblical performance criticism is not relevant to this thesis. I will be drawing on some of the methodologies and approaches of performance criticism in this exploration of Revelation. The most helpful of these is a conceptual perspective that Doan and Giles term a “performance mode of thought.” The “performance mode of thought” takes into account the fact that “oral performances were conveyed and compositional characteristics of which still reside embedded in the written literature.”\(^{52}\) In other words, texts that were orally performed carry certain markers or phrases that illustrate their origins as oral performances, and a performance

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\(^{50}\) Larry Hurtado has strongly opposed this view and critiques Biblical performance criticism for “oversimplifying” the role of both spoken and written word in Greco-Roman life. See Larry W. Hurtado, “Oral Fixation and New Testament Studies? ‘Orality’, ‘Performance’ and Reading Texts in Early Christianity,” *New Testament Studies* Vol. 60 No. 3 (2014): 321-340. Hurtado argues that most adherents to Biblical performance criticism have diminished the role of silent reading and the written text, and that the Roman approach was instead “a time of rich interplay” between silent and spoken, written and oral. His criticisms are very appropriate particularly when directed at the performance critical approach to narrative texts such as Mark; he notes, however, there certainly exist texts within the canon that were designed to be read aloud (the epistles, and as a result, Revelation).

\(^{51}\) That is, indirectly agreeing with Hurtado’s view—that Revelation is not the “final draft” of a performance (oral or otherwise), written down, but rather the opposite, a text intended to be understood from the perspective of performance.

mode of thought approaches the text with a view to highlighting these markers, and understanding how they affect an audience's understanding of a text.\textsuperscript{53}

The New Testament is composed of either epistles or narratives, both of which have origins in speech and oral culture—and bear the hallmarks of that orality. A growing number of scholars are beginning to recognise the usefulness of such an approach—contrary to earlier scholars, many of whom argued that the distinction between written and oral texts was “unimportant” and “immaterial.”\textsuperscript{54} The significance of the orality of many texts is a growing area of research,\textsuperscript{55} and has important implications for how texts are read and interpreted. As Leif Hongisto points out, a performance narrative-based approach has a distinct advantage: it “encompasses what other historic-critical or reader-response approaches refer to as historical reading, yet from the additional perspective of the participation of the reader.”\textsuperscript{56}

The orality of the text of Revelation is striking, and it seems only logical that such an approach to the text would be illuminating.\textsuperscript{57} To take such an approach, however, is a complex challenge given the text’s numerous, multivalent allusions to a wide variety of performance types and its multicultural contexts. It seems that very few scholars have

\textsuperscript{53} A key assumption here is that there is some interplay between the text and oral tradition, which is agreed upon by scholars from all sides — the main disagreement at this point is on how much and where this interplay occurs (see footnote 36 above). The orality of the cultures that formed the text lead us to the conclusion that oral markers can be found within the text, as long as one is looking for them.


\textsuperscript{56} Leif Hongisto, Experiencing the Apocalypse at the Limits of Alterity (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 17. Hongisto applies Fludernik’s “narratological approach,” but covers much the same ground as Biblical performance criticism.

\textsuperscript{57} A fascinating discussion of the difference that orality makes to the understanding of a text can be found in Iverson’s paper on the words of the centurion in Mark—are his words the words of a genuine believer or merely sarcastic mocking? See Kelly R. Iverson, “A Centurion’s ’Confession’: A Performance-Critical Analysis of Mark 15:39,” Journal of Biblical Literature Vol. 130 No. 2, (2011): 329-350.
attempted to apply the methodology of performance criticism to Revelation, with most
studies understandably focused on Pauline literature or the narratives in the Gospels.
With regard to Revelation, the most notable study to date is that of David Rhoads, who
suggests that Revelation may have been designed to be performed at liturgical events,
and as such it was likely circulated among many churches, especially in Asia Minor.58
Rhoads also notes that the genre of each biblical text is extremely important in
understanding how the text was performed; he argues that

The awareness of the way genre shaped performance—how it set up
expectations, how it subverted them, how it was staged, what the
audience’s responses might have been—should surely be a factor in
our interpretations of these writings in first century settings.59

Hence, Revelation, the text that “expresses intensely almost every emotion in the human
repertoire,”60 needs to be understood in the context of public performance as a text that
“bears the marks of drama.”61 A more recent study by Kayle B. de Waal argues that
Revelation was written as a single, unified work, a composition that was to be read
aloud and understood as a unified whole.62 Understanding Revelation through the genre
of performance art is vital in understanding the ancients’ view of the work. As noted at
the outset, I am arguing that Revelation is a text to be understood as performance—that
is to say, first and foremost a text, conceived and written as a performance, rather than

60 Rhoads, “Performance Criticism Part I,” 127.
the final “draft” of an oral performance or tradition that was then enshrined as text, as some proponents of performance criticism might argue.63

This is not to say that scholars of Revelation cannot participate in the conversation surrounding performance criticism, but it must be recognised that Revelation is a text very different in form and function to most of the biblical canon and so comes with its own set of challenges. For example, Holly Hearon notes that a distinction is being drawn by scholars between the two aspects of “orality”—that is, spoken discourse and oral transmission of a text.64 However, Revelation is comprised of both, creating a need for scholars to be able to distinguish between the two and to discern how and why they are being used. Therefore, applying the conventions of performance criticism to Revelation is not a simple task.

Goldman’s reflections on the complexity of drama are relevant here, especially his comments that most scholarly approaches to drama “fail to engage drama fully as an experience, an ongoing moment-to-moment process to audiences and readers.”65 Goldman goes on to make an important claim:

Everything changes, however, if we stop to think of genre as not entirely unlike rhyme, say, or ambiguity, as a feature, that is, whose primary interest for readers or audiences is as something that happens to us in a poem or play, as it happens.66

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66 Goldman, On Drama, 3.
This approach forces us to take our eyes off the text and shut them in order to experience it, to remove ourselves from the distraction of analysing the written word or the performance ex post facto and instead to undertake what Doan and Giles call a “medium-oriented discussion” that reflects on the happening of the drama, placing ourselves back in the moment.

From a scholarly perspective, this does not negate the use of tried-and-true interpretive methods or analyses, nor does it dismiss the rich multitude of exegetical interpretations of the text, but rather it refocuses our attention upon the text itself rather than the study of the text—causing us to view the text from a wider, “macro” perspective rather than the usual narrow, “micro” focus of many commentaries and articles. The placement of the text within the genre of “performance art” is not intended to be an isolating move—not that Revelation could be neatly pigeonholed into any single genre—but rather seeks to draw out a reading of the text that stands alongside the existing readings and enhances them.

From an interpretive perspective, this means that we are able to focus on the larger narrative being presented and the experience of its presentation rather than puzzle over its minutiae, to “hear with ears to listen to what the Spirit is saying...” (as the text repeatedly reminds us), to understand, for example, the description of the Land-Beast as subtle yet threatening monster, and subsequently as a representation of first-century Christian ideas of evil, rather than delving too deeply to discover a specific meaning behind its appearance. Engaging with performance criticism is therefore a necessary and important part of the overall approach in interpreting the book of Revelation as dramatic performance.

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67 Doan and Giles note this as being an “examination of the experience of audience/readers in terms of what happens to them, as it happens to them.” William Doan and Terry Giles, “The Song of Asaph: A Performance-Critical Analysis of 1 Chronicles 16:8-36,” Catholic Bible Quarterly Vol. 70 (2008): 30.

68 As stated to the angels of the seven churches; Revelation 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22.
Another significant perspective, and one often overlooked, is that of the performer. Much of Revelation’s material could only be delivered by a “prophet-performer” who was innately familiar with the text and able to use both gesture and their voice to make the text come alive. This person would have assumed the persona of John before the audience, and would have been able to convey his message effectively. Despite John’s absence, Barr argues, the audience would have taken his message seriously given the extensive blessings and curses throughout the text. This idea of a “prophet-performer” can be seen as analogous to the idea of a narrator—that is, the narrator of a Roman theatrical performance of comedy and tragedy.

As with visual exegesis, my aim is not to engage with the entire discipline of performance criticism. Instead, I have chosen to borrow one particular tool from their vast array, one that functions well alongside the tools of *ekphrasis* and intertexture. The key conceptual perspective being utilised from performance criticism is the aforementioned “performance mode of thought.” Approaching the text with a “performance mode of thought” opens one’s eyes to the embedded markers and characteristics of performance encoded within the text, allowing the scholar to draw them out and engage with them.

This approach is an oral-critical one, and one that requires the reader to be aware of the nuances of theatrical performance. The “performance mode of thought” is not a strictly defined methodology, but much like the other conceptual approaches discussed in this chapter, it is a mode of thought that governs the way one thinks about the text. There is a reliance on the reader’s knowledge of, and familiarity with, performance styles and

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71 De Waal, *An Aural-Performance Analysis of Revelation 1 and 11*, 44.
theatrical customs—the reader’s skill and attention is what draws out the markers of performance embedded within the text.

A particular strength of performance criticism is the field’s acknowledgment of what I have chosen to term the “multiplicity of theatrical interpretation”—that is, the understanding that performance is inherently open to a wide range of interpretations, by both performers and audience alike. Many scholars in the field of performance criticism recognize that the performance of any particular Biblical text has the potential to yield a number of different interpretations. This is appropriate considering performance criticism’s aims, generally defined as “the investigation of a ‘system of signification and communication’” within texts. By its very nature, any system of communication is fluid and open to interpretation by those who participate in it; this allows multiple meanings to be ascribed to words or images, and for these meanings to alter over time.

Interpretation is highly contextual, and is shaped by expectation, understanding and experience—those who perform and interpret the text without expecting alternative interpretations might never be in a position to engage with them. The multiplicity of theatrical interpretation is therefore important to performance criticism as it acknowledges the context of both performers and audience members, and recognizes that a diverse range of interpretations might arise out of a single performance depending on both performers and audience.

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73 As Shiner points out, it is only when performing the text that he realized that every passage was an interpretation in itself. Shiner, Proclaiming the Gospel, 7.

74 Examples of multiple interpretations occurring as a result of performance critical readings of the text can be found in Kelly Iverson’s “A Centurion’s ‘Confession,’” which posits two different interpretations of the centurion’s words, or in Lee Johnson’s “Paul’s Letters Reheard,” which suggests that the orator would have performed Paul’s “Letter of Tears” differently depending on the makeup of the audience. See Iverson, “A Centurion’s ‘Confession,’” 329-350, and Lee A. Johnson, “Paul’s Letters Reheard: A Performance-Critical Examination of the Preparation, Transportation, and Delivery of Paul’s Correspondence,” Catholic Biblical Quarterly Vol. 79 No. 1 (Jan 2017): 60-76.

It must also be noted that an audience’s interpretation is not always a predictable one. The words, actions, and events of the theatre hold their own mysterious power and often cannot be defined in academic terms. This is best explained in the words of David Cunningham, who writes:

In the ancient world... the audience also had a role to play, and it was not the merely passive role of a willing receiver of information. The audience was active, attributing meanings to words—sometimes meanings that were quite at odds with what we might call the "plain sense" of the speech or text, or with what the speaker or writer intended. Moreover, certain arguments could sometimes take on a life of their own, persuading audiences in ways that could hardly be explained by a close analysis of the texts. Indeed, some audiences seemed to be persuaded by arguments that could be demonstrated to be invalid by even the most inexperienced logician.76

In previous chapters, we have already examined the role of the audience, noting that the theatrical audience in particular was highly active and participatory. The theatre was a highly political place where public opinion was expressed freely,77 and it is obvious that rhetorical skill was prized highly for its ability to sway audiences (with or without the use of logical arguments).78 Any theatrical reading of Revelation must attempt to take into account the ancient audience’s potential interpretations of the text, as well as the performer’s. For example, where a performer or academic might interpret the role of the Whore of Babylon as representing the abstract concept of “empire,” an audience member might understand it as directly representing Rome, or a provincial government, or even a particular individual.

77 Acts 19:40, the silversmiths’ riot against Christianity in Ephesus, perfectly demonstrates the multifaceted use of the theatre — it is a public forum used to air grievances (often political ones). This implies that such actions may have been inappropriate in other parts of the city, such as the agora.
78 Lee Johnson points out that “the testimony from ancient writings on rhetoric confirms that minds were swayed primarily through passionate appeals.” Lee A. Johnson, “Paul’s Letters Reheard: A Performance-Critical Examination of the Preparation, Transportation, and Delivery of Paul’s Correspondence,” Catholic Biblical Quarterly Vol. 79 No. 1 (Jan 2017): 69.
This understanding concurs with current postcolonial scholarship, which relies upon contextual interpretations to discern the different messages embedded within texts. This allows us to use the tools of both disciplines together—performance criticism’s concept of “a performance mode of thought” and the multiplicity of theatrical interpretation help us to draw out varying ways of interpreting a text—for example, understanding it from a number of perspectives (those of a slave, freedmen, Greek, Jew, and so on)—and postcolonial methodologies help us to understand these interpretations in the context of empire. Naturally, such an approach is most fitting for Revelation, a text that combines a high level of theatricality with a strong subversive and sometimes anti-imperial message.79

Such an approach can already be seen in some of the scholarship surrounding other authors contemporary to John; for example, Christopher Trinacty’s study of Seneca posits that Seneca’s works are a deliberate response to the poets of the Augustan era, and that Seneca deliberately “recasts the language of the Augustan poets in his tragedies in an attempt not only to enrich his dramatic material but also to create his own intertextual poetics.”80 In doing so, Seneca positions himself as a critic of the times, speaking with what biblical scholars might call a prophetic voice. This criticism is nevertheless masked and hidden, and is not easily discerned given its volatility and the potential harm to Seneca’s position.

The key difficulty in this method is the substantial difference between contemporary scholarship and the ancient world’s worldview. It is impossible for us to clearly understand how another person might interpret or understand a given text, let alone a person from the ancient world—as Beacham points out: “They lived in a different world. Even their reasons for being in the theatre differed greatly from those motivating

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79 It is not inconceivable, however, that this approach could be applied to other texts, including non-biblical ones, such as the Greco-Roman dramas referenced in this thesis, or other “hidden transcripts.”
modern theatre-goers.”⁸¹ Nor is this always something that we want to achieve. We can, however, attempt a reading that takes into account what is known of worldviews and mindsets of the ancient world, and provide a range of possible interpretations rather than any single, definitive understanding—with a focus, of course, on Greco-Roman performance art, and a postcolonial understanding of the text. Of course, this is a daunting task, and one far too broad for this thesis to cover fully; therefore, as mentioned earlier, we will focus on key themes, texts, and imagery found throughout the text.

As we look backward to the past in search of understanding, we should look forward as well. Theatrical works written thousands of years ago continue to find new life today, whether through contemporary interpretations or faithful renditions. Beacham writes that Plautus’ *Casina* (which was discussed in the previous chapter) “2,000 years later, readily respond[s] to and reward[s] sensitive analysis and trustful respect by a director and cast.”⁸² In other words, though the work was written in a totally different time, it remains open to interpretation today, and provides new meaning for contemporary performers and audiences alike. In discussing and examining the fluidity and multiplicity of Revelation’s text, I will venture a range of possible interpretations in the language of today, and in dialogue with contemporary scholarship on Revelation.

### 3. Revelation as “hidden transcript”

Taking a step back from the “performance mode of thought,” one pressing question that needs to be discussed is: “what do we gain from reading Revelation as a performance?”

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At this point, it is important to return to the question of genre, as discussed in the literature review. Whilst this thesis has thus far focused on Revelation’s connections to Roman performance art and its interpretation from that perspective, it is very important to remember Revelation’s origin as apocalyptic literature. Portier-Young asserts that apocalyptic literature is “resistant discourse that unthinks the logic of empire and asserts in its place an alternative vision of reality”83—that is, literature that actively opposes imperial hegemonies and promotes instead a utopic vision of the Kingdom of God. Apocalyptic literature functions on multiple levels, teaching spiritual truths and hope whilst simultaneously critiquing the imperial systems by which it is surrounded.

A very helpful way to understand apocalyptic literature is to use a postcolonial perspective on text—in this case, James C. Scott’s theory of “hidden transcripts.” Scott defines hidden transcripts as works (textual or otherwise) composed by those under oppression as a response to domination and hegemony, which use codes and symbols to convey an anti-authoritarian message. Scott’s work seeks to draw out an understanding of the relationship between the powerful and powerless in its examination of both “hidden” and “public” transcripts. He explores the connections between religion and culture, and politics and economics, and so Horsley argues that his work can be applied to the field of biblical studies to draw out the “domination and resistance evident in or just under the surface of many biblical texts.”84 When applied to Revelation in conjunction with what has already been discussed, the theory of hidden transcripts will help us to discern and understand a range of meanings behind the use of ekphrastic language in Revelation, and such language’s relationship to performance in the Greco-Roman world.

83 Anatha E. Portier-Young, Apocalypse Against Empire: Theologies of Resistance in Early Judaism (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2011), 44.
Richard Horsley has engaged extensively with Scott’s work, and shows that a wide array of “transcripts” inform an awareness of the subtleties of social relations, specifically as he discusses public and hidden transcripts. Public transcripts are transparent forms of domination, used by the ruling elite for two ends: to leverage control over, and to gain materials from, the oppressed and subjugated. Examples include religious rituals, symbol, the calculated use of space (such as imperial temples or palaces), festivals and ceremony.\textsuperscript{85} From a Roman perspective, one example is the triumph, a festival designed explicitly to serve as a reminder of the Empire’s power.

Hidden transcripts, on the other hand, are more difficult to discern given their nature as sequestered acts of resistance against power and domination. Scott identifies two key requirements for identifying a hidden transcript. First is a social space “insulated from control, surveillance, and repression from above,”\textsuperscript{86} which provides subordinate people a respite from the public transcript, and creates a safe space for the hidden transcript to be created. The second is a group of agents who both “cultivate and disseminate” the transcript, often “people who have become displaced and marginalised.”\textsuperscript{87}

Scott writes powerfully that hidden transcripts are a pressure-release valve of sorts:

\begin{quote}
It is often a question of controlling what would be a natural impulse to rage, insult, anger, and the violence that such feelings prompt. There is no system of domination that does not produce its own routine harvest of insults and injury to human dignity—the appropriation of labor, public humiliations, whippings, rapes, slaps, leers, contempt, ritual denigration and so on.\textsuperscript{88}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{85} Horsley, \textit{Hidden Transcripts and the Arts of Resistance}, 10. Of course, these examples are not always forms of domination; cities in Asia Minor willingly entered into imperial cult worship practices.

\textsuperscript{86} James C. Scott, \textit{Domination and the Arts of Resistance} (London: Yale University Press, 1990), 120-123.

\textsuperscript{87} Horsley, \textit{Hidden Transcripts and the Arts of Resistance}, 10.

\textsuperscript{88} Scott, \textit{Domination and the Arts of Resistance}, 37.
Unfortunately, given the very nature of hidden transcripts, they are difficult for later
generations to discern—some remain disguised, requiring a great amount of contextual
knowledge and research to decipher, though some are well known—but many have
been lost together with the groups that produced them in the histories written by the
powerful. Hidden transcripts are often intentionally misleading and easily
misinterpreted, and it can be difficult to pin down precisely what is and what is not a
transcript of some description.

Within Scott’s conception of hidden transcripts lie degrees of nuance: Scott details four
different varieties of “hidden” transcript and discourse, each documenting an instance
of subordinates interacting with superiors. Firstly, there is discourse which adopts and
adapts the “flattering self-image of the elites,” which “exploits the elite’s ideological
justification that they rule for the benefit of the people in certain ways.” For example, a
slave might petition their owner for increased living space, appealing to their owner as
a “good and kind master” who provides for the slave. Such an appeal plays along with
the owner’s self-view as a benevolent master, and subtly forces the owner to comply in
order to prevent a discontinuation of this view (what some cultures might term "losing
face").

The second is the hidden space, where subordinates can gather and converse safely
without fear of reprisal—a form of action which, Horsley argues, eventually serves to
encourage bolder forms of resistance. This is perhaps the truest form of a “hidden
transcript.” Here, subordinates can vent their frustrations and anger freely to one
another, knowing that they are in a safe space. For example, slave-to-slave interactions
might provide one context where such conversations might occur. A market, a laundry
area, any private space where non-slaves are not expected—any of these might be
considered a hidden space where slaves might be able to freely speak their mind about

89 Scott, Domination and the Arts of Resistance, 18.
90 Horsley, Hidden Transcripts and the Arts of Resistance, 11.
their masters. It is not inconceivable that the early church of the first century CE might have been such a hidden space.

Perhaps the most fascinating of Scott’s ideas is the thought that both hidden spaces and hidden transcripts are not limited to the subjugated and dominated, but are also used by the aristocrats, the rulers, and the slave-owners in order to escape from the inevitable expectations that are placed upon them by others. Scott uses a powerful example from Orwell’s essay “Shooting an Elephant” to illustrate his point. In it, Orwell (as governor and a white man) is compelled by his status to assert his dominance by shooting an elephant that had been threatening a village. Scott argues that hidden spaces also exist for the upper class; these might include, for example, social clubs or the reserved and covered seating of the Greco-Roman theatres.

Thirdly, and arguably most relevant to the Biblical text, is a script that sits between the previous two, namely:

A politics of disguise and anonymity that takes place in public view but is designed to have a double meaning or to shield the identity of the actors. Rumor, gossip, folktales, jokes, songs, rituals, codes, and euphemism—a good part of the folk culture of subordinate groups—fit this description.\(^1\)

Such transcripts serve as public discourse that is “disguised” with hidden codes, using imagery or language that might seem innocuous but are quite the opposite. Although Scott does not explicitly include textual works, given the publicly performed nature of the Biblical text, it clearly falls under this category; as Horsley argues,

\(^1\) Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 19.
The Bible is evidently not just about religion, but about politics and economics as well. And those politics as well as that religion may have much to do with the domination of subject peoples by various empires and the struggles of those subject peoples to adjust to or resist imperial rule.  

Finally, the last form of political discourse is a “rupture,” where a subordinate “speaks truth to power” in a moment of open, often aggressive defiance. Understandably, these moments are often immortalised and retold, becoming a part of the wider subordinate narrative against oppression. Recent examples of this might include Rosa Parks’ refusal to yield her seat to a white passenger in 1955, or the actions of the anonymous “Tank Man” in Tiananmen Square in 1989. The example of the Christian martyrs who died refusing to revoke Christ may also serve as such an example.

Horsley suggests that New Testament scholars seeking to “broaden their historical competence and balance their treatment” would be well served by working within Scott’s framework, as hidden transcripts can be found in many primary sources. He provides several helpful hints: firstly, scholars should discern the nature of the transcript recorded in the source (whether it be a public transcript, a hidden transcript of the subordinate, or a hidden transcript of the dominant). Scholars should also compare the public transcripts with the hidden transcripts in order to “discern the effects of domination on popular views and actions” and provide a basis from which to begin work.

As mentioned earlier, it is the third of Scott’s forms of discourse that best fits the Biblical text. This is what one might call the “disguised transcript,” a critique of power that hides in plain sight, disguised to seem innocuous, to teach morality, or even come out in

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93 Horsley, Hidden Transcripts and the Arts of Resistance, 13.
favour of the ruling elite. Scott notes that these often take the form of stories or apocalyptic longings—a “day of revenge and triumph, a world turned upside down using the cultural raw materials of the [oppressor’s] religion.” They include social inversions, fantasies of role reversal and of a new, hidden order taking its place. These transcripts are created in response to domination, and the strength of their words varies depending on the severity of the domination. There is an obvious tension here between how public such a disguised transcript is and how opaque its references are; too far in one direction, and the transcript loses its “hiddenness” and becomes openly seditious, too far in the other and the transcript becomes ineffective and misunderstood.

These disguised transcripts, of course, are “hidden” in that their message is often veiled (through symbolism, metaphor or sarcasm), but are often also very public acts or performances. Among the examples Scott gives are folk songs of African slaves in the South of the United States, social interactions between peasants and landowners in rural Malaysia, and, appropriately, the Filipino use of the Christian passion play in expressing rebellion or dissent. Each of these examples operates on multiple levels. On an “official” level, they appear to be innocuous, but can be interpreted by those with appropriate nous and understanding to be anti-authoritarian and subversive.

Perhaps the most compelling of these are what Scott terms “trickster stories,” stories which pit a cunning hero against a treacherous environment or powerful enemies, invariably winning through the use of guile and wit rather than through strength. The Brer Rabbit tales of African-American slaves in the United States are a prime example of this, where Brer Rabbit overcomes his antagonists Brer Fox and Brer Wolf. By casting a story using animal characters, the transcript is disguised—if asked, a slave could simply state that the story was “obviously a story about animals, a fantasy story at that, which

96 Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 168.
97 Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 27.
has nothing to do with human society.”\footnote{Scott, Domination and the Arts of Resistance, 164.} These stories could be tailored to fit different circumstances, and were also used as instructional tales that taught children the value of hiding or curbing anger in favour of guile and deception.

These stories were not unique to the cultures discussed by Scott, nor were they confined to the Biblical text; hidden and disguised transcripts abounded in the ancient world. Most have been lost in historical texts, and many of those that remain are well disguised, but some are still discernible and apparent to those who are able to decipher them. Those that survive bear a powerful witness to the depth of feeling contained within hidden transcripts, and continue to speak to oppression and domination today.

Within the Roman world, we can find similar evidence for potential hidden transcripts. For example, Plautus’ comedy \textit{Casina} openly contravenes Roman expectations of female roles.\footnote{Casina’s plot and characters will be discussed further in Chapter 5.} In a society where female compliance is expected and even commanded, Cleostrata, wife of Lysidamus, takes direct action to prevent her husband from committing adultery with a slave girl, and is ultimately successful. Such a story could easily be viewed as a disguised transcript that critiques the male patriarchal system of the Roman Empire, but can also be dismissed easily as “just a story.” Whilst we have no direct evidence that \textit{Casina} was ever intended to be read as such a transcript, we have already seen that the plays and performances of the Roman Empire were a fertile breeding ground for dissent and critique.\footnote{In Chapter Three, we discussed the power of the theatre in critiquing local politics and expressing dissent or admiration toward local politicians. For example, certain lines in plays might be directed at Senators in the audience, or soliloquys might be rewritten to reflect the politics of the day.} Given the highly subjective nature of performance, one could argue that \textit{all} plays had the potential to be interpreted as hidden transcripts in some respects. The Roman system of seating theatre-goers by class would have inadvertently helped encourage subversive behaviour by providing a hidden space for such transcripts to be developed.
Most fascinating of all is how hidden or disguised transcripts were re-used or re-interpreted in different circumstances across time to speak to different people. The story of the Exodus, for example, is a story that was recounted by African-American slaves as a disguised transcript speaking to their circumstances—when they spoke of Pharaoh, they were speaking of their slave masters.\textsuperscript{101} The stories of the Maccabean revolt continued to be told throughout the Roman occupation of Jerusalem; in fact, evidence suggests that the festival of Hanukkah, which remembers the rededication of the temple after victory against the oppression of the Seleucids, continued to be celebrated throughout this time—but retold as a hidden transcript against Rome, rather than the Seleucids.\textsuperscript{102}

It is evident that many aspects of the text of Revelation are open to this sort of analysis as there are a number of indicators as to the hidden nature of the text. John’s use of \textit{ekphrastic} language was clearly intended to help its audience picture an actualised, visual world. The presence of the souls of the martyrs under the altar (Revelation 6:9), the two witnesses (Revelation 11), and the 144,000 (Revelation 7 and 14) are all representative of the human element that participates in the drama; each of these groups suffer (or have suffered) for being followers of Christ, and the images evoked resonate with John’s earthly community and his intended audience. The throne room of God resembles the throne room of the Roman Emperor, inviting the subversive reflection that the Roman throne room was but a pale mockery of the heavenly reality.

The text also makes heavy use of metaphor, and phrases such as Revelation 3:22’s\textsuperscript{103} “whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit has to say to the churches” hint at a deeper meaning hidden within the text. The rest of the text contains instances of strongly anti-imperial imagery, and asserts an upended world where God is in control of


\textsuperscript{103} Also Revelation 2:7, 2:11, 2:17, 2:29, 3:6 and 3:13.
fate, and uses his power to bring about a renewed earth where oppression and domination have been removed. A reading of Revelation as hidden transcript is therefore a potentially fruitful interpretive strategy; all that remains is for us to engage it as such.

We must also remember the context of John’s audience—a small, widespread cult that was relatively unknown and whose membership was closely guarded. Revelation was not read or performed in the great theatres of Asia Minor, but rather in small house churches to a wide variety of people from all walks of life, many of whom were converts from Judaism—but including Greeks, Romans and many diverse and enslaved ethnic groups. For decades these had seen the Roman Iudea Capta coins depicting Jerusalem besieged and the Temple destroyed by the Romans. Some might even have seen their fellow Christians martyred for their beliefs. Revelation speaks into their context, channelling their frustration and anger at the Roman Empire, and creates a visually rich experience that helps them to understand that their suffering has a purpose—that helps bring about the imminent Kingdom of God. The text itself is clearly specified to be read within their communities of worship (the ekklisiai)—a hidden space far from the authorities’ eyes. Thus I will read Revelation with an awareness of hidden transcripts—since this awareness sharpens our appreciation of the ambiguities of performance arts, and is consistent with recent understandings of the socio-political context of the powerless in Roman Asia-Minor.

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104 The defeat of the Jews was commemorated using specially minted “IUDEA CAPTA” coins, which were spread widely across the Roman Empire. These are well attested to throughout the literature, but see for example Robert Deutsch, “Roman Coins Boast ‘Judaea Capta,’” Biblical Archaeology Review Vol. 36 No. 1 (January-February 2010): 51-53 or Ya’akov Meshorer, A Treasury of Jewish Coins: From the Persian Period to Bar Kokhba (Jerusalem: Amphora Books, 2001), 185.
4. **Let those who have ears, hear: a postcolonial approach to Revelation**

The text of Revelation is an ideal candidate for postcolonial interpretation. The imagery of the text and its language are in many places designed to obstruct, to conceal, and disguise its message—a hidden transcript subverting against the oppression of the Roman Empire.\(^{105}\) The complexity of the text lends itself to a wide variety of interpretations and ambiguity. An awareness of postcolonial theory therefore provides a hermeneutical framework within which we can evaluate the various allusions, *ekphrastic* language, and hidden transcripts found in Revelation.

Whilst it could be argued that hidden transcripts are a separate conceptual perspective to postcolonialism, the two are closely related; in fact, I would assert that hidden transcripts are a subset of postcolonial theory. If postcolonialism describes an oppressed culture's interactions with their oppressor, then hidden transcripts are the expression of the oppressed culture’s dissatisfaction with the status quo. Together, postcolonialism and an awareness of hidden transcripts provide us with the means of understanding John's message. Whilst visual exegesis and performance criticism help us to draw out key allusions in the text, postcolonialism helps us to interpret these allusions.

Stephen Moore notes the relative dearth of engagement between Revelation and postcolonial scholarship, and points out that this is not “a failing so much as... a supplementary space, not yet a crowded one.”\(^{106}\) Unfortunately, postcolonial readings of Revelation are mostly fairly recent, and have yet to gain much traction amongst scholarship of the text. Moore himself is one of the key contributors to this area, and it is

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\(^{105}\) Of course, it is folly to speak of Revelation’s “true message” in such simple terms. One of the benefits allowed by the postcolonial approach is a multiplicity of interpretations and readings, meaning that there can never be one “true message” but rather a variety of plausible readings for evaluating on other grounds.

his work I will mostly engage here. Moore identifies several others who have contributed to the field: Steven Friesen, Christopher Frilingos, Jean Kim, and Vitor Westhelle.\textsuperscript{107} Both Moore and Frilingos note that historical-critical theorists tend to intersect closely with the postcolonial field, but these same theorists generally do not interact with postcolonial theory. This is problematical, given the widespread historical-critical interpretation of Revelation as a critique of the Roman Empire, and the shortcomings of the earlier binary anti-imperial approaches.

Frilingos surveys the field briefly, concluding that his own work is not meant to engage extensively with postcolonial theory but is instead about the “pulsing rhythms of Roman culture at play in the book of Revelation.”\textsuperscript{108} Frilingos argues that Revelation should be read as an “expression of Roman culture,” rather than as a “subaltern text” or “resistance literature.”\textsuperscript{109} Although this explains his desire to set aside the methodologies of postcolonial theory, this does hamper his argument in that he does not address the various intricacies and problems that postcolonial theory demonstrates in relation to Revelation, as highlighted by Moore. In contrast, Steven Friesen’s approach is an adaptation of Edward Said’s theories, a “contrapuntal interpretation” of Revelation that views the text as resistance literature that subverts and rejects the dominant Roman culture.\textsuperscript{110} The latter better reflects the view of the majority of scholarship on the text, and more realistically understands the difficulty in subverting and challenging an all-pervasive empire.

Moore’s work, on the other hand, engages closely with the postcolonial work of Edward Said and Homi Bhabha, and postulates that John’s catachretic\textsuperscript{111} use of Roman imagery

\textsuperscript{107} Moore, “The Revelation to John,” 436.
\textsuperscript{109} Frilingos, Spectacles of Empire, 12.
\textsuperscript{110} Steven J. Friesen, Imperial Cults and the Apocalypse of John: Reading Revelation in the Ruins (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).
\textsuperscript{111} “Catachresis” is understood within postcolonial theory to be a deliberate, subversive (usually subversive or ironic) misuse of signs, words or imagery, such that words are redefined by their misuse. It
results in a conundrum: that John is “using the emperor’s tools to dismantle the emperor’s palace.” This means that the concept of empire which Revelation is purportedly opposing instead becomes an intrinsic part of the text; the ideology of empire is not broken but reinscribed on the followers of Christ. It is important to note that Moore does not deny that Revelation is a critique of empire; simply that its critique is ultimately doomed to failure. It is with this reading of Moore’s that we will now engage. As we progress, I will also be using this opportunity to demonstrate how a postcolonial reading of Revelation in dialogue with a performance mode of thought assists in providing an alternative reading of the text to Moore.

4.1 What have the Romans ever done for us? The dangers of mimicry in Revelation

A key idea implied in Scott’s theory of hidden transcripts is the idea of inversion, whereby roles are reversed, and the oppressor becomes the oppressed, and vice versa. As Scott eloquently states, the hidden transcripts express the oppressed’s longing for a “day of revenge and triumph, a world turned upside down using the cultural raw materials of the [oppressor’s] religion.” Some postcolonial readings, however, argue that this idea of inversion ultimately leads to a cycle of renewed violence. Because the idea of inversion is often founded on mimicking the violence and authority of the dominant culture, this creates a co-dependence of sorts where the subordinate culture is influenced by the dominant, ultimately recreating the dominant culture in its own image.


114 Scott, Domination and the Arts of Resistance, 6.
This is the argument put forward by Stephen Moore, who asserts a reading of the text of Revelation that utilises Bhabha’s theory of cultural hybridity to show that the text is irrevocably entwined with the very idea of empire that it opposes; that the very use of Imperial themes and motifs in Revelation ultimately creates a self-perpetuating cycle that leads to one Imperial power being replaced by another. A quick glance over the history of the Roman Empire shows that Moore’s assertion is not wrong: indeed, Moore highlights this by including in the chapter an extract from Eusebius’ *Life of Constantine* which describes the bishops feasting with the Emperor—a complete reversal of the church’s situation just a century earlier. In other words, simply by using the language and conception of empire, the interpretation of the text of Revelation may have contributed to a rebuilding of empire in the name of Christ—despite the common recent understanding that John critiqued and opposed Empire.

Moore’s argument has great merit, and indeed challenges the recently dominant preference for anti-imperial interpretations, which interpret John’s anti-imperial discourse as being a condemnation of Christian collaboration or assimilation with Rome. To discover that the call to “come out, my people” may result in nothing more than "a conception of the divine sphere as... empire writ large" is a confronting issue for those with democratic and egalitarian ideas. When paired with the historical knowledge that the Christian Roman Empire was so often just as coercive and violent as the early Roman Empire that John critiqued, Moore’s argument provides a sobering perspective on the history of interpretation of Revelation, at least, if not on the anti-imperial nature of the book itself.

115 Moore, *Empire and Apocalypse*, 97-121.
117 Moore, *Untold Tales from the Book of Revelation*, 37.
Moore’s assertion is challenging, yet deserves to be taken seriously and explored further as it raises some serious questions. Why does the text of Revelation frame its alternative view of the coming heavenly kingdom using Roman imagery? Was the legacy of empire so pervasive and all-encompassing that it formed the only framework that ancient writers knew, or did John of Patmos have a deeper reason for so writing about the coming Kingdom?

Moore writes about the tension between the strident anti-assimilationist, anti-imperial stance in Revelation and its construction of both Roman Empire and the heavenly alternative, stating that the text’s mimicry “persistently blurs the boundaries between the two empires until it becomes all but impossible to decide where one leaves off and the other begins.”\textsuperscript{118} The Divine Empire of God, he asserts, is “anything but independent from the Roman Empire; instead it is parasitic on it.”\textsuperscript{119} Further reflection on Moore’s words leads us to the inevitable comparison with a scene in the film \textit{Life of Brian} by the Monty Python troupe, and the well-known dialogue that goes with it:

“All right, but apart from the sanitation, medicine, education, wine, public order, irrigation, roads, the fresh water system and public health, what have the Romans ever done for us?”

“Brought peace?”

“Oh, peace—shut up!”\textsuperscript{120}

Whilst written and intended as jest, these words highlight a truth behind Moore’s statement—that without the influence and reach of the Roman Empire, Christianity as it

\textsuperscript{118} Moore, \textit{Empire and Apocalypse}, 119.
\textsuperscript{119} Moore, \textit{Empire and Apocalypse}, 119.
\textsuperscript{120} Monty Python, \textit{Life of Brian}, Directed by Terry Jones, Sony, 1979.
has come to exist and John’s conception of the Divine Empire may well not have survived and become a reality. For example, without the widespread communications brought by the Roman roads (chiefly to serve the Roman military), and the Pax Romana which brought a widespread “peace” of sorts, John’s apocalypse surely would not have been transmitted, copied and studied so widely by the early Christians. A postcolonial awareness of these issues takes us in awkward and ambiguous directions indeed.

4.2 The postcolonial “problem” of ambivalence

Moore’s argument is built on influential post-colonial writers like Edward Said and Homi Bhabha, with Bhabha seeming to be the more influential of the two in Moore’s writing. Bhabha writes of the ultimate desire of colonial mimicry as shaping a “reformed, recognisable Other, as a subject of difference that is almost the same, but not quite.”¹²¹ Bhabha’s conception of colonial mimicry is by definition dependent upon the coloniser or ruling power; that the colonisers are visualised as being replaced by the colonised, but with the trappings of the coloniser intact and reformed in service of the colonised. As he states, it is “a complex strategy of reform, regulation and discipline, which ‘appropriates’ the Other as it visualises power.”¹²² To Bhabha, mimicry is a process of appropriation which nevertheless remains ambivalent; it is constructed around co-dependence and so is riddled with tensions that ebb and flow as relationships between coloniser and colonised change.

Said, on the other hand, is far more assertive; at the outbreak of Culture and Imperialism he states that

¹²¹ Homi K Bhabha, The Location of Culture, (New York: Routledge Classics, 2004), 122.
¹²² Bhabha, Location of Culture, 122.
Neither imperialism nor colonialism is a simple act of accumulation and acquisition. Both are supported and perhaps even impelled by impressive ideological formations that include notions that certain territories and people require and beseech domination, as well as forms of knowledge affiliated with domination...123

To paraphrase Said, the colonisers or colonial powers are simply “advancing civilisation” by dominating those who require it; they are in effect fulfilling the mandate of a kingdom: to rule.

Given both Said and Bhabha’s understandings of imperial power as being dominant and all-encompassing, it is hardly surprising that when one utilises their framework, any conception of resistance (especially resistance literature) approaches the imperial power with a great deal of ambivalence. For how can the oppressed understand oppression without an oppressor, and how can it be articulated without using the language of the oppressor—or transmitted except by using the systems devised by the oppressor? Or, as an extension of Bhabha’s thought, what alternatives exist for the oppressed other than the dream of a reversal of roles? These intertwining dichotomies are formed by the reality of asymmetrical power and reinforced by the experience of empire or colonialism. Ultimately, the end result of such can be seen in history: that one empire is replaced with another after a period of uneasy transition, with many of the old trappings and structures intact, except, perhaps for a change in religious allegiance.

Bhabha expands upon this further when he writes of the desire for, or “fetishisation,” of colonial culture. As the dominant colonial culture is idolised and imitated, so mimicry “revalues the normative knowledges of the priority of race, writing, history... mimicry rearticulates presence in terms of its 'otherness', that which it disavows.”124 Thus, as the colonised continue to use the language and culture of the coloniser, they are drawn into

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124 Bhabha, *Location of Culture*, 127.
a cycle whereby the unique elements of their culture are replaced by a wholly alien conception—that of the colonisers. As Moore argues, there exists

a symbiotic relationship between Revelation’s apocalyptic eschatology and Roman imperial ideology, one that, for all Revelation’s ostensible antipathy toward Rome, reduces Revelation to representing the divine sphere as a kind of über-Rome or Roman Empire writ large, and as such compromises its endeavour to shatter the relentless cycle of empire once and for all.\textsuperscript{125}

This statement, if true, has significant ramifications for our understanding and interpretation of the text. It challenges the belief of many recent Biblical scholars that the book of Revelation posits a genuine alternative to the Roman Empire and its systems of domination and oppression.\textsuperscript{126} It raises the possibility of understanding the biblical text as perpetuating and authorising what Walter Wink titles the “Myth of Redemptive Violence”\textsuperscript{127}—the use of violence to establish order and to perpetuate good over evil, a strategy singularly at odds with the non-violence generally displayed throughout the rest of the New Testament. I note here that this also calls our contemporary practices into question—as participants in, and maybe critics of, the worldwide empire of capitalism, are we “just” using the language and structures of our oppressors to create our so-called alternatives, or is our use of language and structures, however well-meaning, ultimately causing a return to that which we seek to avoid?

\textsuperscript{125} Moore, Empire and Apocalypse, 123.
4.3  *Apocalypse, hidden transcripts and hegemony*

An answer to the question posed above is found in the concept of apocalyptic literature. Apocalyptic texts are hidden transcripts, speaking against the domination of imperial power, whether Seleucid, Greek, Roman, or succeeding empires. It is important to remember that these hidden transcripts remained hidden, and were often never enacted; they were, to use Scott’s terminology, a “pressure-release valve” that enabled frustrations and rage to be worked out in a way that did not endanger the subordinate community, that reassured the subordinates that justice would one day be served.

To that end, Portier-Young takes Scott’s understanding of the purposes of the transcript one step further, arguing that apocalypses as hidden transcripts speak not just to domination, but to hegemony:

What is remarkable about the apocalypses, however, is not their claim that there is an invisible, hidden world distinct from the visible world. It is their exposure of the hidden structures of false power and assertion of a more potent invisible power. It is their insistence that both of these invisible powers impact the material and visible realm in dramatic fashion.\(^{128}\)

To Portier-Young, apocalypses are nothing less than paradigm-shifting, explosive texts whose vivid imagery serves a deliberate purpose. Thus, we return to the question with perhaps a little more clarity. Why does the text of Revelation invert or mimic the Empire rather than providing a clear alternative? We know that such an approach was not uncommon for hidden transcripts (that is, a fantasy of violence and inversion regardless of actual intent), and yet so far it seems as though Moore’s argument that the text of Revelation constitutes a violent self-fulfilling prophecy remains true. However, Moore’s

\(^{128}\) Portier-Young, *Apocalypse Against Empire*, 37.
argument that the text envisions an inversion of the Roman Empire and Christianity seems far too simple, and does not portray oppressed or oppressors convincingly, instead rendering each as uncomplicated groups with a unity of thought when the historical situation was much more complex. One question has the potential to change the way we approach Moore’s point of view: what if these inversions were not intended to reverse the social structure at all?

4.4 Inversion and reversal

Erik M. Heen, in analysing the role of symbolic inversion in Paul and the Saturnalia festival by means of Scott’s theories, notes that inversion can be categorised into two main understandings according to anthropologist Victor Turner: the “status reversal,” whereby “an individual might simply exchange a traditionally held role for its opposite,” or a second sort that was “directed against the hierarchical assumptions of the dominant culture.” Heen argues that this second inversion was intended to level rather than reverse, with an end goal of producing an egalitarian society, or community, where “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” To Heen, such inversions served to illustrate the injustice of a culture to their audience, causing them to consider an alternative society where such power structures could be eliminated.

131 Heen, “The Role of Symbolic Inversion,” 130.
According to Barr, Revelation is filled with “pervasive irony” that “makes a burlesque” of the Roman imperial system, that mimics it in order to highlight its flaws. Just as theatre and drama mimic and invert reality in order to provide a critique of it, so too Revelation mimics and inverts the reality of Roman power—from the emperor down—in order demonstrate to the first century Christians that the Kingdom of God was a better alternative than the Empire of Rome. John’s audience understand that they are trapped within a system that demands their blood; John makes it clear that their suffering is not without purpose.

A fine example of such an inversion occurs in Revelation 5. As we have already discussed, the scenes of heavenly worship depicted there deliberately mimic or allude to Roman imperial court ritual. In keeping with the imperial imagery of power and strength, an elder tells the narrator that “the Lion of the tribe of Judah” is worthy to open the scroll in Rev 5:5. To this point, the inversion is a simple status reversal, in keeping with Moore’s argument about mimicry. However, when the narrator of the text looks, he does not see a lion but a slain lamb—the antithesis of a symbol of power! In this way, the inversion upends the expectation of its audience, illustrating the falseness of the Roman system of power through replacing a symbol of might with a symbol of weakness—and hailing this symbol of weakness as superior.

A similar example is found in the depiction of the Warrior on the White Horse (Revelation 19), a scene that draws inspiration from the imagery of the Roman triumph. David Thomas writes that the scene “not only looks like a Roman triumph, but acts like

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135 Greco-Romans generally viewed sheep and lambs as domesticated animals that were primarily used for food or sacrifice to the gods. See Liliane Bodson, “Attitudes towards animals in Greco-Roman antiquity,” International Journal for the Study of Animal Problems Vol. 4 No. 4 (1983): 312-320. In Jewish apocalyptic thought, lambs represent righteous resistance among the Jewish people (for example, in the Book of Enoch). Portier-Young, Apocalypse Against Empire, 380.
one, too,” and asks a similar question to that posed by Moore, “what is [John’s] justification for applying this vile imagery to Christ?” As Thomas rightfully points out, the emulation of a triumph would have been an offensive reminder to Christians and Jews of the fall of Jerusalem and the humiliation of the Jews in the subsequent triumph. Moore’s perspective would argue that the concept and method of empire was so embedded in John’s psyche that John could only express a triumphal procession in the Roman way. This is, of course, a flawed assumption in many ways, not least because it assumes blind acceptance of Roman oppression on the part of the Jewish and Christian populace. Thomas provides a succinct answer to the question:

[John] is declaring that what the emperors claimed by donning the garb of Jupiter and riding in triumphal procession was a deep spiritual reality—an entire paradigm—that did not belong to them at all. They were not the victors over evil, Christ was... John thus interprets his vision through a triumphal lens... because he wanted to reclaim what belonged to Christ and forever make clear that things were precisely the opposite of what the false gods of his age proclaimed.

One important factor in understanding a text’s interpretation would be the intended audience’s assumptions of the text. Different interpretations yield vastly different understandings, and such understandings of a text have a great influence on a community’s theology and ethics. Earlier, we discussed the idea of Revelation as apocalypse—a discourse designed to subvert empire and assert a heavenly kingdom over against earthly power structures. A brief survey on apocalyptic writings will demonstrate that there are many different types of apocalypse, and that each may vary greatly from the next according to their purpose and nature. Even texts that are

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136 David A. Thomas, *Revelation 19 in Historical and Mythological Context* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2008), 86. Of course, the battle has not yet been won—an example of dramatic irony.
generally agreed upon as being closely related or dealing with the same subject matter can present opposing viewpoints or theological slants, and of course most apocalyptic texts can be interpreted in a multiplicity of ways. Retaining this trait of apocalyptic literature, I suggest that Revelation was written with the conventions and structures of dramatic performance in mind (a “performance mode of thought”) in order to present a vision that was deliberately open to interpretation, yet still managed to communicate its transcript of resistance toward empire for those attuned to imperial oppression.

Why interpret Revelation as dramatic performance, especially in conjunction with a postcolonial framework? The answer is both immediate and obvious: dramatic performance (whether theatre, mime, opera or even a puppet show) speaks on multiple levels of meaning, often with hidden messages that only a particular subset of the audience could interpret. This stands in contrast to the approach to the text suggested by Moore, which, despite its brilliance, ends up reverting at this point to binary oppositions and inversions in a way not consistent with the rest of his postcolonial sensitivities.

Take, for example, the symbolism inherent in some contemporary films that many choose to interpret as subtle signs of a Christ figure (a fine case in point would be the Matrix films)—or, alternatively, the various claims of Satanic messages being inserted into the very same. Such a medium is ideal for conveying the hidden transcript—as Scott himself notes,

By the subtle use of codes one can insinuate into a ritual, a pattern of dress, a song, a story, meanings that are accessible to one intended audience and opaque to another audience the actors wish to exclude. Alternatively, the excluded audience may grasp the seditious message in the performance but find it difficult to react because that sedition is
clothed in terms that also can lay claim to a perfectly innocent construction.140

By reading Revelation as a hidden transcript embedded within a performance-oriented text, we understand that the text is deliberately ambiguous and open to interpretation. This allows it to be disguised, to “hide in plain sight” as a hidden transcript, and yet speak powerfully to those who understood its allusions and references. As John of Patmos continually exhorts, “those who have ears, let them hear.”141

Of course, we must also remember that the writers of the New Testament text were raised in a culture where mimicry was not only accepted, but expected and honoured. In fact, “inspired imitation is an indispensable component of [the ancient world’s] artistic aesthetic.”142 Shea writes with the assumption that mimesis was an integral part of the ancient world’s literary endeavours, with the view that this mimesis deliberately paid respect to the great works that had gone before. Shea also demonstrates that literary mimesis was not limited to “secular” writers, but can be found within the New Testament. In such a world, it is not a surprise that Revelation imitates the trappings of empire—it would be a surprise if it did not. Of course, this leads into Moore’s point that the concepts of empire are so deeply embedded within the writers’ worlds that they are inescapable.

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140 Scott, Domination and the Arts of Resistance, 158.
4.5 The power of imagination

Moore writes graphically that postcolonial readings of the Bible are centred around diametrical opposites—the “Scylla” of “wishful projection” that reads the biblical text as anti-imperial and anti-colonial, and the “Charybdis” of “excessive suspicion” that reads the text as literature that “reinscribes imperial and colonial ideologies even while appearing to resist them.”¹⁴³ His own analysis of the text of Revelation seems to identify more strongly with the perspective of “excessive suspicion.” This is highlighted when one considers that his view is heavily informed by his reading of Tat-siong Benny Liew’s *Politics of Parousia*, whereby the problem is that of colonial mimicry as “reduplication of Roman imperial ideology.”¹⁴⁴

As I have previously argued, such an understanding can be challenged when we approach the text of Revelation with an understanding of it as being an apocalyptic hidden transcript that was intended to be understood through the lens of dramatic performance. In the case of the Lion / Lamb imagery referred to earlier (Revelation 5), it is safe for us to assume that such a text, like most others in the New Testament canon, would have been read aloud to a gathered group (as Revelation 1:3 suggests). Schüssler Fiorenza reminds us that Revelation “makes quite a different impression when it is heard than when it is analysed.”¹⁴⁵ John is deliberate in using highly visual language (*ekphrasis*); when the text is read aloud, this language creates a visual scene in the audience’s mind. John’s narrator’s journey and his description of the plot are styled like a theatrical performance, and so John’s audience would have visualised a scene that was based on popular dramatic performances.

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Revelation 4 is read aloud, and the audience fill the stage with their imaginations, guided by the narration which tells them what they are seeing. They understand that the scene being painted is deliberately evocative of the Roman court; this is highly controversial, and deliberately provocative. However, this court is not that of the emperor of Rome, but of God. They hear titles and phrases ascribed to the emperor being redeployed in the service of God. Finally, they are told what they are about to see, what they have been led to expect: a Lion of the tribe of Judah, the culmination of messianic hope, the powerful king who will topple the throne of Caesar—and then are told to visualise a slaughtered lamb, the symbol of death and resurrection embodying God’s victory. This aural-visual approach renders the incongruity of Revelation 5:5-6 all the more apparent when the Lion turns out to be a Lamb, especially when the imagery provided is so fitting for a mighty lion—a symbol of imperial power for the last few centuries.

Of course, the necessity of such an approach must be questioned. Surely the aural approach or performance criticism would suffice, especially in such an instance? The advantage of reading the text with such a “performance mode of thought” is that the visual expectations that are part and parcel of the form or genre are brought to the forefront. In a dramatic work, the words spoken are expected to match up with what is seen; the heroes win, love is found, and so on. When these conventions are played with and subverted, there is a very real sense of confusion, and it is in these moments where John’s anti-imperial message is exposed most keenly. Such an approach, then, is not dependent only on the text, but on those listening to provide meaning and to expose the

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146 There are, of course, a number of other intertextual references being made, but these fall outside the scope of this work.
148 Although John’s Jewish audience may have understood this differently, they probably would also have reacted with surprise given the sudden change.
149 A brief but worthwhile discussion on the difference between seeing and hearing is found in Wes Howard-Brook, “Come Out, My People!” *God’s Call out of Empire in the Bible and Beyond* (New York: Orbis Books, 2012), 467.
hidden transcript. Interpretation is open to the listener, and like all fine works of art, each person brings their own interpretation and understanding.

This also answers Warren Carter’s criticism that John fails to “translate his verbal protest into a practical program,” and that “the rhetorical effect of this lack of an explicit and specific program is by default accommodation.” John has no need to spell out a program; his job is simply to provide a vision that grants hope and liberation, a vision that is open to be interpreted in a multiplicity of ways by those who hear and imagine his text being played out.

4.6 Final Thoughts

As we have seen, though Moore’s argument is a compelling one, there are other ways of constructing a postcolonial approach to Revelation. Moore’s understanding of Revelation and its history of interpretation reverts to binary opposition, whereas a postcolonial reading must understand the text to be ambiguous and nuanced, suggesting that Revelation does not simply invert empire. I suggest that a reading of Revelation from the perspective of performance, utilising the tools of visual exegesis and performance criticism, is one approach that can draw out the nuances and possible ambiguities of the text.

Moore writes with the benefit of hindsight, akin to a historian making a judgment on events that happened many centuries ago. Yet the text was written at a time when there

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was no possible conception of Christians ruling, let alone the entire Roman Empire converting to Christianity. As we have already discussed, Revelation was not written as a handbook on empire but rather as hidden transcript, a performance that facilitated a collective release of anger at the injustices of empire, that removed the need to lash out against oppression by instead allowing its audience a sense of justice and a hope for change. Revelation does not call Christians to violent action but rather to stay faithful; indeed, it counsels Christians to wait “just a little longer” and to join in worshipping God. At no point does Revelation call Christians to replace the emperor with God.

The book of Revelation was plagued with controversy from the outset, and its inclusion in the Christian canon was always a tenuous decision. This means that its theology and visions were not necessarily adhered to or agreed upon by all Christians, and its influence was relatively small compared to the gospels, or Paul’s letters. To ascribe to Revelation, in the first to fourth centuries, the ability to dictate a worldview that contributes to the inversion of the Roman Empire is a significant overestimation of its reach, popularity and influence by any measure.151

We should also remember that Revelation was written specifically to a particular group of people, the seven churches of Asia Minor. Whilst John’s instructions are explicit in being directed to all Christians, it is difficult to imagine that John expected his audience to stretch beyond those churches named in the letter. I have already shown, and will continue to do so, that John’s writing, his references and his allusions are all firmly grounded in the mixed cultural ground of Asia Minor—a melting pot of Greek, Roman, Jewish and other cultures. Even if we were to expand John’s audience to include all Christians at the time of his writing, the letter would still have only reached a small group of oppressed people, hardly enough to create the large-scale reversal that Moore

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describes. To suggest that John’s writings encompass an entire empire and to give him credit for the historical inversion of the fourth century is to ascribe to the text a power beyond its own imagination.

Revelation is deliberate in using “the emperor’s tools” for two simple reasons: its audience is familiar with them, and they are highly effective tools. Augustus and subsequent emperors were well aware of the power of imagery and performance, and used both of these in order to manipulate the subjects of the empire into unwitting compliance. By subverting and mimicking the imagery and language of the empire and its performances, John uses techniques with which his audience are familiar in order to push them into an unfamiliar place. He demonstrates that the emperor and his servants are not, contrary to their propaganda, all-powerful, that the empires of the world were not the ultimate controllers of destiny, but rather evil forces bent on domination and oppression. Rather than presenting his audience in Asia Minor with an unfamiliar, uncomfortable Jewish empire in the vein of other contemporaneous apocalyptic works, John chooses to present the kingdom of God as being “like” the Roman Empire in its reach to all nations (ethnē), but at the same time totally unlike it. Like Paul, John is creating an understanding for his Gentile followers, but also empowering his Jewish followers in this shared kingdom.

John’s subversion of imperial paradigms is in line with hidden transcript theory, mocking the Roman Empire to help its readers release their anger and consider alternative ways to live. Revelation was written as a hidden transcript that encouraged the oppressed Christians of John’s time. It is important to note that John does not encourage his readers to rebellion or to violent resistance, but rather calls them to witness and martyrdom. It is not the people of God who are to initiate the downfall of the evil empire, but God alone, with the faithful participation of the followers of the Lamb. By imitating empire, the kingdom of God reveals human empire to be a hollow, evil shell, nothing more than a vessel for idolatry and false worship. Had John not cast the heavenly kingdom of God in direct opposition, in places, to the earthly kingdom of evil (Rome), it would have been extremely difficult for John to demonstrate precisely
why the earthly kingdom needed to be opposed. The syncretistic practices of the Roman Empire meant that any view that did not directly contradict theirs could be incorporated, and this is precisely what John is seeking to avoid.\footnote{It must be noted that this is a common theme among New Testament writers, particularly Paul. One could argue that syncretism was the one of the greatest threats for the Gentile followers of Christ in the first century CE.} The kingdom of God and the kingdom of evil must be seen as incompatible—but neither are they constructed as direct, binary opposites, different sides of the same coin.

In constructing Revelation as an ultimately binary text, Moore sets aside the ambiguity that is a key characteristic of postcolonial interpretation, and in doing so loses sight of John’s goals in the text. Moore’s binary argument also implies an equal conflict between two powers—which is neither true for the text, which depicts a victorious God who is firmly in control of all events, nor true for the tiny minority of Christians with access to John’s work in the first century CE. As Wood argues,

To suggest that Revelation perpetuates a Christian empire in the mold of the Roman Empire under Constantine—which has no historical basis beyond Moore’s imaginative construction without evidence, despite his assertion to the contrary—imposes a self-referential agenda on the Apocalypse and disregards its message.\footnote{Wood, \textit{The Alter-Imperial Paradigm}, 41.}

John does not write to bring about the downfall of the empire, but rather to expose the spiritual reality of the Roman Empire and bring hope to his audience—a wide variety of people from differing cultures and backgrounds. The best way for him to do so is to utilise forms and language they are already familiar with, but to alter these things in order to confront his audience with this message. John shows the Roman Empire as a pale, inadequate imitation of what could be, and demonstrates that its idolatry and evil ways will soon reap their consequences. The powers and principalities employed by the Romans are shown to be ultimately subject and inferior to the one true God; the loyal
followers of Christ can have hope knowing that their suffering under empire is not in vain.

5. **Lend me your ears**

To draw together three seemingly disparate conceptual perspectives from different ways of approaching the text is not always a sensible or practical idea. As we have seen, however, each of these ideas contributes strongly towards the end goal of approaching the text as performance-inspired literature. To begin, an understanding of visual exegesis enables us to identify the various intertextual allusions in the text through John’s use of *ekphrasis*. At the same time, performance criticism and the performance mode of thought help us identify the intertextual references that allude to Roman performance, as well as drawing out the performance markers embedded within the text. Both of these approaches reveal the various visual and performative references within the text, whilst a postcolonial mindset and an awareness of hidden transcript theory sheds light on the reason for these references, and assists us in contextualising John’s message to his audience.

This hybrid approach allows us to come to the text with an open mind, acknowledging from the outset that the performative nature of the text means that it is open to a variety of different interpretations from different people. It requires a range of cross-disciplinary skills, but that is no different to many of the newer, more contemporary methods being developed in the academic world. At the same time, this approach is also quite exclusive given its narrow focus, selected texts in Revelation, which permits us to suggest a plausible range of interpretations for the text. The next chapter will begin the process of engaging the theory with the text, and will demonstrate that there are some obvious advantages of approaching the text using this method.
Chapter 5

“I was in the Spirit”: bringing together Revelation and Roman performance

This chapter will undertake a reading of the Book of Revelation that engages the text with the various types of Greco-Roman performance art explored in chapter 3, as well as the conceptual perspectives discussed in the previous chapter. Specifically, we will be exploring the intertextual references within the text that are exposed by both reading the text from a “performance mode of thought”¹ and an awareness of John’s use of ekphrastic language. Here, the various allusions and references to Greco-Roman performance art and culture will be explored, with the intention of exploring the text from a perspective that understands (or at any rate is broadly aware of) the culture of Roman performance. Finally, a postcolonial perspective will be applied in order to discern the meaning and purpose of these allusions and references.

Here, it is worth pausing to remember Brian Incigneri’s brief excursus on the construct of the “original reader” in both narrative and literary criticism. Incigneri reminds us that many of the original readers of the Biblical text were quite aware of the allusions being made within the text—as well as being aware of contextual information that we as twenty-first century readers are not privy to.² Although intended to be applicable to the Gospels and Epistles, this remark also applies to the text of Revelation, especially given the strong Greco-Roman links found in Revelation. In fact, it is highly possible that there are numerous references within the text that a contemporary reader will not understand, whose greater significance could only be discerned by an original reader. Reading Revelation from the perspective of performance will help with the task of

untangling some of these references, in an attempt to add to our understanding of the text.

In order to keep this manageable, the text has been broken down into several component parts. I have simply gone to some of the most obvious examples of Greco-Roman intertextuality within Revelation, and begun to draw out the allusions made by John. It must be noted that there has been no attempt to provide any sort of structural breakdown of the entire book, nor will there be any sort of attempt to do so in this thesis. It is useful to keep in mind Bandy’s argument that “those looking for a single overarching structuring principle (i.e., a series of sevens) stumble over odd passages in the text that simply cannot fit neatly into that pattern no matter how one enumerates the visions”3 as we explore—in other words, Revelation does not easily lend itself to any one structuring principle, nor is this the place for us to explore that.

It is also important that we bear in mind the assertions of scholars who suggest the theatre at Ephesus as a potential staging ground for the drama of Revelation.4 Whilst it seems extraordinarily unlikely that Revelation was ever intended to be performed in a theatre, the links between the Ephesian theatre and the text are abundant: John directs the first of the letters to the churches to Ephesus, home to the Great Theatre which some scholars suggest held seven thuromata (or staging windows), after speaking of seven golden lampstands. He follows this with a series of significant events subdivided by seven objects—seven seals, trumpets, and bowls—each being held by an angel, arguably intended to be visualised as standing above in the “heavens” of the thuromata as a means of marking the progression of the story.

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The theatre itself is well attested to as being one of the key meeting points in Ephesus. In my previous chapter, I demonstrated that the theatres of each city were places of great cultural, political and religious significance, and the Ephesian theatre was no different. Christian commentators will of course be familiar with the riot of the Ephesian silversmiths recorded in Acts, who gathered a crowd into the theatre and chanted for two hours in protest against Paul’s evangelism efforts. The theatre also appears in the writings of Philostratus, who records the actions of Apollonius when a plague strikes the city—he leads the population to the theatre, where the problem is solved through the stoning of the demon that caused the disease, and the statue of the averting god (the apotropais) is set up over where the demon is killed. Both texts demonstrate the theatre’s continuing importance to the city, and with its imposing position on the side of the hill overlooking the city, it is hard not to imagine some link in John’s mind.

Given the strong link between Ephesus and Revelation, one cannot help but notice (as we will see in this chapter) that John has created strong allusions to dramatic forms and structures in his writing. In doing so, writers like Blevins and Mills and Watson argue that John may be setting a scene in his audience’s mind, encouraging them to picture the events of Revelation being played out in the Great Theatre—at least, to some extent. When understood from this point of view, John’s repetition of the number seven from the outset of the text, alongside his deliberate mention of Ephesus, may both function as a means to psychologically prime his audience; to mentally set the scene in the Great Theatre in Ephesus.

Even if this Ephesian link were to be removed, we see that archaeological excavations have so far discovered that six out of the seven cities written to in Revelation 2 and 3 contained theatres—only Thyatira seems not to have a theatre, or rather no theatre has

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6 The text is unclear as to the nature of the demon—it initially appears as an “old mendicant,” then shows “eyes full of fire,” and finally is revealed to be a “Molossian dog... in size the equal of the largest lion.”
7 Philostratus, The Life of Apollonius of Tyana, 4.10.
been discovered yet. Indeed, several of the cities addressed in Revelation with the title of “metropolis” (Ephesus, Pergamum, Smyrna, Sardis and Laodicea) all had “theatres of enormous size.” Given the depth of visual-exegetical evidence for a performance-based reading of Revelation that we have already discussed, and the corresponding archaeological evidence for Roman performance in the cities Revelation is addressed to, it seems certain that John was writing to an audience that was highly familiar with the visual stylings of the various performance arts of the Roman Empire, and strongly alluded to these arts in his writing. These allusions remain for us, the contemporary readers, to discover and to interpret—a process that we will now embark upon.

1. **Characters and themes**

Most important to a “performance mode of thought” approach to Revelation is the question of narrative—understanding and identifying the various aspects of the theatrical narrative that can be found in the text. As mentioned in earlier chapters, one of the great strengths of a narrative approach to a text like Revelation is the preservation of the text as a unified, coherent whole. This approach also helps the text to be understood using the conventions of narrative—that is, employing devices such as characters, setting, and climax in order to enhance the plot. A number of writers have

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9 Frank Sear, *Roman Theatres: An Architectural Study* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 325-328. Sear lists archaeological excavations of amphitheatres and theatres in Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea. Of these six cities, it is known that five possessed theatres around the time of John’s writing of Revelation (with Pergamum’s theatre being undated as yet).

10 The prized title of “metropolis” was awarded by the emperor to a particular city. See Gregory Stevenson, *Power and Place: Temple and Identity in the Book of Revelation* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2001), 94-96.


12 And, as we have mentioned, not just the “formal” arts of theatre, but also street performances, *ludi*, executions, assemblies, religious rituals, and so on.
sought to interpret Revelation from a narrative perspective,\textsuperscript{13} and their findings are very useful in identifying various elements of the text as narrative constructs.

1.1 \textit{Narrator}\textsuperscript{14}

John, the author of Revelation, remains a relatively undefined figure throughout the reading of the text. Although he is part of the performance, his identity remains secretive and unexplored, and we know little more about him than what he chooses to reveal.\textsuperscript{15} As we will later discuss, John’s narrative voice is utilised in the manner of the Greco-Roman practice of a narrator opening a theatrical performance in order to introduce the events of the play to the audience.

A preliminary question that needs to be discussed is, of course, “which John?” Alan Culpepper summarises the four arguments surrounding John's identity as follows: the apostle John wrote the Gospel and Revelation, the apostle wrote the Gospel but not Revelation, the apostle wrote Revelation but not the Gospel, or neither Gospel nor Revelation was written by the apostle.\textsuperscript{16} He concludes, as do many others, that there are three (or four) distinct Johns: the Evangelist, the Seer, the Elder, and the Beloved Disciple, and that the writings attributed to John all stem from “a school of early Christian writers who had access to the same traditions and who provided guidance for


\textsuperscript{14} There are a number of other literary devices that could be explored, such as plot, setting, climax, narrative structure, symbolism, and so on—they have been left out due to space constraints.

\textsuperscript{15} This may not have been the case for John’s original audience, who may have known him well. This familiarity would have strengthened his argument among them, lending credence to his vision.

a loosely related group of churches within the same general geographic area.”

Revelation is written by just one of these “Johns,” who seems to be part of a prophetic movement or guild of sorts.

Revelation’s John claims to write from the island of Patmos, and many interpret his words to mean that he has been exiled or banished for preaching the Gospel. However, Boxall notes that the construction of this sentence is ambiguous in Greek, and can be interpreted to mean that John: “goes to Patmos in order to preach,” “voluntarily retreats to Patmos as part of his activity,” “goes to Patmos to receive prophetic inspiration,” “was prompted by God’s word to go to Patmos,” “went to Patmos as a result of studying God’s word,” or perhaps “chose Patmos in an act of voluntary flight or self-imposed exile.” This provides such a wide variety of possible interpretations as to be impossible to interpret decisively.

These interpretations are of great assistance, for each of these possible interpretations hold meaning for different members of each congregation, again allowing them to identify with John. Whether preaching, seeking God, in exile, prompted by God, or studying God’s word, these activities all would have, and continue to, resonate with Christians as part of a devotional life. Patmos itself is relatively unimportant—it functions a “wilderness” of sorts, a figurative place in the distance where prophetic activity occurs. For most of John’s audience, Patmos is a distant land with few distinguishing features, a perfect place for visions and dreams. For contemporary

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19 This is a traditional view, but one largely accepted by scholarship; see for example Adela Yarbro Collins, who notes that this was a credible and likely punishment at the time. Adela Yarbro Collins, “Patmos” in Paul J. Achtemeier (ed.), *Harper’s Bible Dictionary* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), 755.
readers, to go to Patmos through John’s eyes is to enter a new landscape, a “thin place” where God-encounters and dreams might occur. To listen and hear John’s Apocalypse is to step into the unknown, to open oneself up to the experience of another. John’s ambiguity in declaring his own identity is deliberate, and allows his audience to step into his place and identify with him in experiencing the “unveiling” that must occur.

As Revelation is narrated, it is through John’s eyes that the audience see, and so for him to be relatively unknown creates a blank slate (the “everyman character”\(^{21}\)) that can be easily filled by the audience. This lack of further self-identification is a deliberate move on the author’s part—not because of his unique standing within the text as both narrator and character,\(^{22}\) but because of his positioning as faithful human witness, the person whom his audience will most identify with. John’s character represents his audience, and he even acts much as they would (for example, on two separate occasions, he attempts to worship an angel, and is rebuked). His claim to suffering due to his faith creates a resonance with those hearing the text, and his identification as a seemingly common person allows the audience to further identify themselves in his place. John “brings [the audience] to the stage, and involves them in what is going on, in order to elicit a response…”\(^{23}\)

That is one of the reasons why this thesis has chosen not to delve into John’s identity—John himself does not see it as vitally important for those who are experiencing the Apocalypse. By only providing vague statements as to his identity and his reasons for being in Patmos, John empowers his audience to fill in the gaps with their own ideas, thereby helping them to empathise with his character and therefore opening their minds to his experience. John’s sufferings and exile are important in that they help

\(^{21}\) In the world of literature and drama, the “everyman character” is defined as a common human being, with whom an audience is able to identify with. This “everyman” allows the audience to be hypothetically placed within extreme situations, and is the character through whom the action is understood or interpreted.

\(^{22}\) Desrosiers, An Introduction to Revelation, 13.

\(^{23}\) Smalley, Thunder and Love, 105.
establish his authority and credibility, but as we will see later, he stands in the place of his audience, going so far as to attempt to worship an angelic being. Ultimately, it is through John’s eyes and ears that we experience the Apocalypse, and the less we know of John, the easier for us to paint ourselves into the picture.

1.2 Protagonist

Newton argues that “clearly the Lamb is the central protagonist of Revelation,” and there is very little that suggests otherwise. It must be noted, however, that the appearance of the Lamb changes throughout the text; although the Christ is predominantly presented as the slain Lamb, he is also shown as “One Like a Son of Man” (Revelation 1:13, 14:14), a “male child” (Revelation 12:5) and “the Word of God” (Revelation 19:13). Perhaps, then, a better way to describe the protagonist would be simply as “Jesus Christ”—as the text itself suggests with the phrase Ἀποκάλυψις Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ. This phrase’s meaning is ambiguous—it is either a revelation given by Jesus Christ, or a revelation about Jesus Christ. Either way, it is clear that Jesus Christ is the protagonist, and holds the key to the message of the text. The action in the story “derives from the will and action of the Lamb,” and the focus of the entire plot is the incarnation, death and victory of the Lamb through the inauguration of the kingdom of God.

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25 Desrosiers, An Introduction to Revelation, 11.
1.3 Antagonist

Whilst it seems obvious that Revelation has a clearly defined antagonist of some sort, the identity of this antagonist is much less obvious. There are a number of candidates that stand out from the text: the Dragon of Revelation 12 (who is later identified as Satan in Revelation 12:9 and Revelation 20), the Sea-Beast of Revelation 13 and 16, the Land-Beast of Revelation 13 or the Whore of Babylon of Revelation 17. Each of these can be classified as antagonists: they are actively opposed to the work of the protagonist within the narrative. An initial glance seems to point to the Sea-Beast as being the major antagonist: it has a throne and is "allowed" authority and violence against the followers of God.

This view, however, is not exclusive; a closer examination of the Dragon, Sea-Beast and Land-Beast demonstrates that all three are inextricably linked, and are similar in many ways. The Dragon and Sea-Beast are similar (though not identical) in physical appearance.28 As well, it is the Dragon who bestows power and authority upon the Sea-Beast, and it is the Dragon who is worshipped, making it the central figure in Revelation 13.29 A helpful, if anachronistically problematic conclusion is that all three are intended to be viewed as a false trinity;30 yet, to do so still does not yield a viable, single antagonist.31

This leads on to a simple question: is there a need to identify a single antagonist? When we take a step back from close analysis to view Revelation as a whole, it becomes

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apparent that the text is not speaking against any antagonist in particular, but rather targets the twin ideas of empire and evil as expressed through the metaphors of Whore, Dragon and Beast. This is an idea that will be explored in further chapters; suffice to say now that Revelation targets not an individual but rather an idea, the evils of human empire. Although it is tempting to ascribe this evil to the Dragon (or Satan), it is apparent in Rev 13 that empire (as represented through the two Beasts) is given authority by, and works in tandem with, evil as represented by the Dragon.

1.4 Themes

The themes of Revelation are not unique to the text, but are reflected in its contemporaries—in the case of this thesis, identified as dramatic pieces by Greco-Roman authors that were performed or circulated during the late first century CE. For example, the works of Seneca, written between the reign of the emperors Augustus and Nero, deal with similar issues:

... the determinism of history; the genealogy and competitive cyclicity of evil... the failure of reason; civilisation as moral contradiction; man as appetite, as beast, as existential victim; power, impotence, delusion, self-deception... the freedom, desirability, and value-paradox of death; man, god, nature, guilt, unmerited suffering; the certainty of human pain, the terror of experienced evil; the inexorable, paradoxical, amoral—even morally perverse—order of things; the possibility of human redemption... 32

As these are arguably inescapable themes of human existence, it is hardly surprising that they are found in the literature, and dealt with by the New Testament. Where Revelation differs is in its outlook of hope; unlike the Senecan literature, it is not mired in Stoic philosophical acceptance but looks to God to resolve the issues at hand.

2. Revelation 1-3: Opening the Show (The Son of Man and the Seven Churches)

Although it may seem foolhardy to classify all three first chapters of Revelation as an “introduction,” such an approach is well in line with the conventions of first century Roman drama. For example, in Plautus’ works, each play opens with a narrator addressing the audience and explaining the play’s setting.33 Whilst John does not overtly refer to any dramatic works or plays, as we shall see, he does reference and make use of their conventions from the beginning of his text. By doing this, John subtly begins the process of intertextuality;34 his audience understands the conventions of drama are being used, and so approach the text with similar expectations.

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33 For example, see the plays *Rudens* or *Casina* by Plautus, as seen in Plautus, *Rudens – Curculio – Casina*, translated by C. Stace, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

2.1 The Narrated Opening

Presenting the narrator of Revelation as the narrator of a play helps the audience mentally to create the setting, in this case the theatre. It becomes clear that this is John’s intent when the text moves beyond salutations and begins describing a scene—in this case, the narrator’s own setting of Patmos, and the first character that he encounters. However, from the outset of Revelation, it is clear that John intends his work to be understood as performance.

Revelation 1:1-3 opens with a “descriptive title”35 and a “beatitude”36 that both function to “provide divine authority for the book.”37 In essence, these opening sentences provide a background to the story, naming the author and welcoming the audience to the reading of the work; “Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of the prophecy, and blessed are those who hear and who keep what is written in it; for the time is near.”38 Plautus’ *Casina* (and indeed most examples of Roman plays) begin in much the same way, with the narrator first welcoming the audience, “I bid you, most worthy Spectators, welcome; who most highly esteem the Goddess Faith, and Faith esteems you.”39 Especially notable here is the benediction upon those who are present. Although their contexts are different—Plautus’ plays would most likely have been performed at religious festivals, whereas Revelation would obviously have been limited to churches—the connotations of this benediction are the same, blessing the attendant audience. This indicates John’s familiarity with theatrical conventions, and perhaps reflects deliberate mimicry of these conventions.

37 Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 22.
38 Revelation 1:3.
The similarities between the two are striking, although it is worth noting that the language in Revelation indicates that John clearly expects the book to be heard rather than spectated.\textsuperscript{40} Another similarity lies in the two works’ explanation of their origins; both name their author and demonstrate the lineage of the story—

\begin{verbatim}
Nos postquam populi rumore intelleximus
Studiose expetere uos Plautinas fabulas…
Comoediai nomen dare uobis uolo.
Clerumenoe uocatur haec comoedia
Graece, latine Sortientes. Deiphilus
Hanc graece scripsit, postid rursum denuo
Latine Plautus cum latranti nomine.
\end{verbatim}

We, since we have heard the report in public, that you ardently wish for the Plays of Plautus, have brought forward this ancient Comedy of his… I wish to mention to you the name of the Play. Clerumenæ this Comedy is called in Greek; in Latin, Sortientes. Diphilus wrote it in Greek, and after that, over again, Plautus with the barking name in Latin afresh.\textsuperscript{41}

Compare \textit{Casina} to Revelation:

The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place; he made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, who testified to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw.\textsuperscript{42}

\textsuperscript{40}Whilst this may seem an issue (especially with regards to the visual nature of theatre), the practice of \textit{recitatio} (the dramatic reading of plays never intended to be performed) was already widespread around the time of Revelation—see Chapter 3 for a further explanation of the practice.


\textsuperscript{42}Revelation 1:1-2.
It is clear that the opening lines of Revelation bear more than passing similarities to the opening lines of *Casina*, a Greek play adapted by Plautus to become a quintessential Roman comedy.⁴³ Although Plautus wrote his plays around the turn of the 2nd century BCE, evidence suggests that they continued to be performed in front of Roman audiences up into the Augustan era and beyond.⁴⁴ This sort of prologue, or introduction, seems to have been part of a standard form within Roman New Comedy, and similar examples can be found in the writings of other authors such as Terence.⁴⁵ Given the widespread popularity of comedic theatre, it is not unreasonable to assume that the members of the Roman Empire would have been familiar with the form. Roman comedies would have been performed outside Rome in various parts of the Empire, and many people, including those in Asia Minor and beyond, would have been familiar with them.⁴⁶

For John to begin his work in a manner reminiscent of Plautus demonstrates at the very least a shared heritage or understanding; John’s Revelation and Plautus’ *Casina* are seen to share a similar structure, and it seems that John may be borrowing from Greek comedic conventions. Here, we see an example of intertexture—John uses the structure of Greco-Roman plays alongside Hebrew prophetic forms to shape his plot. This allows the audience to shape their understanding and perceptions accordingly; the rules and conventions that apply to other genres are absent, a certain suspension of disbelief must occur, and, in the case of an ancient audience used to the methods of Roman performance, a certain number of references to daily life, political or otherwise, is expected. It is telling that John’s “theatrical” introduction comes before his epistolary introduction—if the order were reversed, it would be clear that Revelation was

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⁴⁵ See, for example, George F. Franko, “Terence and the Traditions of Roman New Comedy” in *A Companion to Terence*, eds. Antony Augoustakis and Ariana Traill (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 35-38. Each of Terence’s plays contains a prologue which outlines the background of the plot of the play, a practice that began with Greek comedies and tragedies.
⁴⁶ Bhabha’s understanding of colonial mimicry is helpful here; one of the ways for the Roman Empire to export (and therefore inscribe) its culture would be through the medium of performance; specifically theatrical performances of Roman plays.
intended as a letter. Instead, the epistolary format of Revelation serves as a plot-setting device.

This is confirmed by the next move in both texts: setting the scene and introducing a character. In *Casina*, right after describing the lineage of the story, the narrator turns to the stage, points to it, and begins setting the scene, “An old married man is living here; he has a son; he, with his father, is dwelling in this house.”\(^{47}\) The narrator then describes the various circumstances that have led to the events of the play: a foundling was taken in, and has now reached an age where she is “attractive to men.” Both father and son desire her, and are putting in place schemes to claim her for their own. Amidst this, the mother has become involved, and actively joins her son to scheme against her husband (the father).

Similarly, in Revelation, John describes his own circumstances and settings (in the Spirit, on the island of Patmos) and his hearing of a mysterious voice, commanding him to write to his audience. He then turns to see “seven golden lampstands, and in the midst of the lampstands... one like the Son of Man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash across his chest.”\(^{48}\) Revelation’s introduction, however, is much longer than *Casina’s*, in that the letters to the seven churches (chapters 2 and 3) all contribute to setting the scene. The play begins properly at Revelation 4; Revelation 1-3 is the prologue which explains the events of Revelation 4-22.

In Revelation 1, John, in line with Roman dramatic convention, sets the scene for the performance with a narrator describing the scene to the audience; earlier, we discussed Revelation 1’s similarities with *Casina*. For contrast, an example from Seneca’s version of *Oedipus* follows below:

\(^{47}\) Plautus, *Casina*, 35-38.
\(^{48}\) Revelation 1:12-13.
An oracle once came to Laïus, king of Thebes, that he should perish by his own son's hands. When, therefore, a son was born to him, he gave the infant to his chief shepherd to expose on Mount Cithaeron. But the tender-hearted rustic gave the babe instead to a wandering herdsman of Polybus, the king of Corinth.

Years later a reputed son of Polybus, Oedipus by name, fearing an oracle which doomed him to slay his father and wed his mother, fled from Corinth, that so he might escape this dreadful fate. As he fared northward he met and slew an old man who imperiously disputed the narrow way with him. Upon arriving at the Theban land he read the riddle of the Sphinx, and so destroyed that monster which Juno had sent to harass the land which she hated; and for this service Oedipus was made the husband of Jocasta, the widowed queen of Laïus (recently slain, so said report, by a band of robbers, on the high road), and set upon the vacant throne.

Now other years have passed, and sons and daughters have been born to the royal pair. But now a dreadful pestilence afflicts the State. Oedipus has sent Creon to consult the oracle, to learn the cause and seek the means of deliverance from the scourge. And while he waits his messenger's return the murky dawn still finds him grieving for his kingdom's wretched plight.49

In contrast, here are John's words in Revelation 1:9-20:

I, John, your brother who share with you in Jesus the persecution and the kingdom and the patient endurance, was on the island called Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus, I was in

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the spirit on the Lord’s day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet saying, “Write in a book what you see and send it to the seven churches, to Ephesus, to Smyrna, to Pergamum, to Thyatira, to Sardis, to Philadelphia, and to Laodicea.”

Then I turned to see whose voice it was that spoke to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, and in the midst of the lampstands I saw one like the Son of Man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash across his chest. His head and his hair were white as white wool, white as snow; his eyes were like a flame of fire, his feet were like burnished bronze, refined as in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of many waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, and from his mouth came a sharp, two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining with full force.

When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. But he placed his right hand on me, saying, “Do not be afraid; I am the first and the last, and the living one. I was dead, and see, I am alive forever and ever; and I have the keys of Death and of Hades. Now write what you have seen, what is, and what is to take place after this. As for the mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand, and the seven golden lampstands: the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.

Whilst the words of Seneca’s narrator cannot be directly matched to those of John in Revelation 1:9-20, there is no denying the formal similarities between them, especially when approached with a performance mode of thought. Both are soliloquys that have been carefully designed to precede the story about to be told, revealing important contextual details so the audience is prepared for what is to come. Both are solo orations, ensuring that those speaking have the full attention of their audience. And both were surely accompanied by hand gestures and body movements to help the narrator fully articulate their speech whilst capturing the imagination of the audience. This would have helped the narrator (in Revelation’s case, the orator or reader) to set the scene and to provide some background context to the drama that was about to follow.
This is not merely a “beginning” in the literal sense of the word, but ushers in the entirety of the text. It was not unusual for Plautus or Seneca to use a narrator to open a play; it seems that “the ancient theatre relied heavily on the visual effect of the first speaker on entry, and still more on the very words of the text, to announce its beginning.”\(^50\) The opening lines of a play, however, are not merely there to grab an audience’s attention, but also have “a literary life which can take written form and fly through time and space”\(^51\) which firmly grounds its audience in its desired context. John makes use of the same conventions in writing Revelation, and the influence of Greco-Roman drama on the opening scene of Revelation is particularly apparent through its narration.

2.2 The Exposition of the Story

At this point, the form of ancient drama leads us to exposition; the delivery of information vital to the plot. This information is often held exclusively by the narrator and the audience, and deliberately withheld from the characters within the play. Alison Sharrock demonstrates that over-exposition, or the sharing of “spare” information, is a deliberate plot device that is designed to “trap us further in the play, to give us a sense of something bigger than we know about, something more,”\(^52\) and I suggest this is the same with Revelation’s exposition, the letters to the seven churches.

John’s addressing of Revelation to seven churches in seven distinct cities is a question that needs exploring. What do each of these cities have in common? Scholarship

\(^{50}\) Alison Sharrock, *Reading Roman Comedy: Poetics and Playfulness in Plautus and Terence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 23.

\(^{51}\) Sharrock, *Reading Roman Comedy*, 22.

\(^{52}\) Sharrock, *Reading Roman Comedy*, 36.
remains divided as to why these seven churches in particular were addressed by John, yet a consensus remains that the number of churches is as significant as their location. Often, scholars make note of the significance of the number seven, representing variously either “completeness” and the entire church at large, or the “divine origin and authority of the message of John.”

Whilst these discussions have great value in themselves, many commentators fail to make note of the significance of Asia Minor as the seeming crossroads between East and West, the melting pot of Greco-Roman culture. Here, under the influence of the Johannine school, Christianity was enthusiastically embraced by (mostly Gentile) locals, and so it is to these churches that the letters are addressed. Some argue that “the seven churches were already recognised as a group,” indicating their acceptance as major centres of early Christianity in Asia Minor. Geographically, it seems that these cities were best positioned to reach other, surrounding cities, making them focal points through which news of the newly formed church could be most efficiently distributed. It is also a possibility, albeit an unlikely one, that John chose seven churches in order to allude to the seven *thuromata* of the theatre of Ephesus.

It is also important not to ignore the cultural factors at play in the seven cities. Ephesus contains the Great Theatre, which potentially was envisioned as the stage for Revelation—this may be why Ephesus is the first city mentioned. As we have already discussed, theatres have been excavated in six of the seven cities, a helpful step in consolidating the interpretation (or at least framing) of Revelation from a dramatic perspective. As well, archaeological evidence shows temples dedicated to the imperial

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53 Aune, Revelation 1-5, 29.
56 Sear, Roman Theatres.
cult in Pergamum, Ephesus, Smyrna, Sardis and Laodicea. These were the cultural centres of Rome amidst the other cities and towns of Asia Minor, and as such it was to them that John addressed his apocalypse of subverted empire, warning them to repent.

Here in John’s introduction, we see an instance of the hybridity in the text, as John uses the conventions of both epistle and drama to set the background for his work. John’s use of the epistolary formula as modified by Paul and his own alterations to the formula are well documented, but it is of vital importance to remember the Roman convention of reading documents aloud rather than assuming they were read in silence. John makes use of the epistolary format as bookends on either end of the text (in Revelation 1:4-8, 2-3, and 22:8-21) in order to direct his words at his intended audience in Asia Minor; other than this, he has no further need for the format and so abandons its use.

One of the more important, but seldom discussed issues, is the question of the seven letters’ epistolary format in the context of the ancient world. As we have already demonstrated, letters and proclamations were read aloud; either by trained slaves in the case of a letter, or by heralds (praecones) in the case of royal decrees. These would be considered public performances in and of themselves, another subtle intertextual reference by John. There was an expectation that the public reader / narrator would stand in for the writer of the letter, and Revelation’s audience are placed in a tricky position where they identify with John as the subject of the play experiencing directions from Jesus, but also as congregation members of the church being addressed. The letters therefore function to directly address John’s audience, but also a plot device that they would have been familiar with.

57 Wes Howard-Brook and Anthony Gwyther, *Unveiling Empire: Reading Revelation Then and Now* (New York: Orbis Books, 1999), 103.
Another helpful perspective is John L. White’s study of ancient Greek letters, as White examines a number of types of ancient Greek letters, classifying them according to their purpose. A reading of Revelation 2-3 suggests that the text’s closest affinity lies with what White terms “royal correspondence,” which were generally letters sent by a king or on behalf of a king to city-states. Such letters were “based on city decree[s],” and also had a particular form of its own.

This type of letter consists of one long sentence or statement in two parts. An extensive statement, formed by a series of small parallel clauses, sets out the circumstances which occasion the king’s decision. This long statement climaxes in the king’s decision.

The letters in Revelation bear sufficient resemblance to this form of epistolary format that a comparison yields fairly positive results, especially when compared to existing royal letters. For example, the letter to the church in Smyrna (Rev 2:8-11) can be divided up and then compared to a letter from Ptolemy II.

Revelation 2:8-11:

Opening Clause

And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: These are the words of the first and the last, who was dead and came to life:

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62 This is agreed on by deSilva, who argues that Revelation can be compared to “Persian royal diplomatic letters and edicts and later edicts issued by Roman magistrates and emperors.” David A. deSilva, Seeing Things John’s Way: The Rhetoric of the Book of Revelation (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 178.
I know your affliction and your poverty, even though you are rich. I know the slander on the part of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.

Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Beware, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison so that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have affliction. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.

Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches. Whoever conquers will not be harmed by the second death.

Ptolemy II to Miletus (262/1 BCE)

Opening

King Ptolemy to the council and the people in Miletus, greeting.

Body (circumstances)

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I have in former times shown all zeal in behalf of your city both through a gift of land and through care in all other matters as was proper because I saw that our father was kindly disposed toward the city and was the author of many benefits for you and had relieved you of harsh and oppressive taxes and tolls which certain of the kings had imposed.

Body (decision)

Now also, as you guard steadfastly your city and our friendship and alliance... we knowing these things praise you highly and shall try to requite your people through benefactions, and we summon you for the future to maintain the same policy of friendship toward us so that in view of your faithfulness we may exercise even more our care for the city.

Closing

We have ordered Hegestratus to address you at greater length on these subjects and to give you our greeting. Farewell.

There are obvious parallels between the two, and there are also some differences. Revelation’s letter is more direct and forceful, and much shorter in both introducing the issue and stating its command. This is largely to do with the example chosen—the Greek text was written several centuries before the text of Revelation, and to a city-state, necessitating more diplomatic language. These differences are less apparent in a letter from Domitian to a procurator—the Roman letter is, comparatively speaking, short, sharp and to the point.
Domitian to Claudius Athenodorus⁶⁴

Opening

From the orders of the Emperor Domitian Caesar Augustus, son of Augustus. To the procurator Claudius Athenodorus:

Body (circumstance)

Among the select matters demanding great pains I am aware that the attention of my divine father Vespasian Caesar was directed to the cities’ privileges, intent upon which he commanded that the provincial territories be oppressed by neither [forced] rentals of beasts of burden nor importunate demands for lodgings. Nevertheless, wittingly or not modification has taken place and that has not been enforced...

Body (decision)

Therefore I order you also to see to it that no one requisition a beast of burden unless he has a permit from me; for it is most unjust that the influence or rank of any persons should occasion requisitions which no one but me is permitted to authorise. Let nothing, then, occur which will annul my order and thwart my purpose most useful to the cities...

Closing

[the rest of the text is lost.]

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The text of Revelation is much closer to this example. The letters serve as exposition, and explain the circumstances of the churches that have necessitated the drama of the rest of the text; their form imitating royal letters lends them authority and weight, carrying God’s authority as instructions to those in the communities addressed. Revelation’s mimicry of the royal letter format serves a second purpose: to set up the opening scene of the drama, the throne room of God. Although no available Greco-Roman drama features a royal letter, five of Plautus’ comedies (Trinummus, Bacchides, Persa, Curculio, and Pseudolus) feature epistles as a key plot element,\textsuperscript{65} meaning that such a connection between epistle and drama was not unknown to the ancient world. Royal letters were clearly the provenance of kings, being dictated and ordered by royalty, and so the audience is primed to see a king before the throne room is revealed. Revelation’s mimicry of a standard Imperial format is, of course, deliberate, and seeks to assert that God is the highest authority before he is introduced as king.\textsuperscript{66}

\subsection{John the Narrator / Slave}

As we have previously discussed, John himself is a participant in the drama, and yet little is known about him; he appears “as a stand-in for the reader, not as an omniscient author fully in control of what is happening.”\textsuperscript{67} This allows the reader (or in our case, spectator or hearer) to place themselves in the midst of the drama, providing a first-person viewpoint into the action. John is presented as a “literary character telling a

\textsuperscript{65} Emilia A. Barbiero, “Reading Between the Lines: Letters in Plautus” (PhD Dissertation, University of Toronto, 2014). Barbiero demonstrates that these epistles (and the process involved in writing them) act as a plot device, driving the story forward.

\textsuperscript{66} See also David E. Aune, who argues that “Christ is the true king in contrast to the Roman emperor who is both a clone and tool of Satan.” David E. Aune, “The Form and Function of the Proclamations to the Seven Churches (Revelation 2-3),” New Testament Studies Vol. 36 No. 2 (1990): 204.

\textsuperscript{67} J. Ramsey Michaels, Revelation (Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 16-17. It is telling that Michaels, who interprets the genre of Revelation as a “prophetic letter of testimony,” nevertheless falls back to literary and dramatic terms to describe the experience of the text.
story over which he himself has only limited control,“68 and it is his perspective that informs the audience; John, as Michaels puts it, functions as “our surrogate.”69 John is a tabula rasa, the everyman character that the audience can relate to, and his relative anonymity is a deliberate device that allows the audience to project themselves onto his character and step into his journey. John is us, and we are him, as we step into the text and experience it from his perspective; what happens to John happens to his audience as he narrates it firsthand.

Intriguingly, John identifies himself as a “slave” carrying a message to “show [God’s] slaves what must soon take place.”70 Here lies another possible intertextual reference by John, in this case to Plautus. In Plautus’ comedies, the “tricky slave” was a common stock character who is ultimately the protagonist of the story.71 Much has been written about the reasons behind Plautus’ depiction of slaves; Caputi, for example, argues that Plautus’ comedies were deliberate in inverting social norms to “make life tolerable” for its audience,72 acting as the “pressure release valve” to allow slaves a fantasy respite from everyday realities.

Gruber, using Turner’s methodology, argues that Plautine comedy is “seen as a kind of ritualised ‘status reversal’ with powerful stabilising or compensatory effects on its audience.”73 He asserts that Plautus deliberately used slaves in order to represent a total inversion of society, which “manifest[s] a magical discrepancy which Aristotelian concepts of mimesis cannot fully express.”74 Because slaves existed outside the social structures of Roman society, by making slaves his protagonists, Plautus forced Roman audiences into a liminal space that was neither reality nor an inversion of society, an

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68 Michaels, Revelation, 18.
69 Michaels, Revelation, 18.
70 Revelation 1:1.
73 Gruber, Comic Theaters, 43.
74 Gruber, Comic Theaters, 46.
uncomfortable space where anything could happen. Here, we could argue that the socio-cultural texture of Plautus’ work is intended to engage with the ideological spheres of his audience, exposing that uncomfortable space and making Plautus’ message all the more powerful.

On the other hand, Kathy McCarthy engages with both Plautus’ plays and Scott’s ideas on public transcripts to demonstrate that the notion of the “tricky slave” in Plautus’ works is a construct designed to reinforce the social structure of slavery in the Roman world. She argues that the act of slavery created a tension for Roman slave-owners (given its innate cruelty) and that this was alleviated and addressed through the transcript of Plautus’ plays, which created a fictive world where slaves were playful and carefree. This performed two functions: it maintained the illusion that slavery was neither cruel nor evil, but rather provided slaves with a fulfilling life, and curiously, it provided a fantasy of rebellion for masters who felt bound to the public transcript by their status in society.

Both readings are of great help when it comes to reading Plautus; they help express the hidden depths and social context of the plays, exposing the hidden transcripts that function within the liminal space of the plays. These readings reflect the postcolonial perspective of multiple possible interpretations for texts (a text that seems innocent to one could be interpreted as anti-authoritarian by another); they remind us that the Biblical text is similarly open to multiple valid interpretations, which are seen where the text and its messages conflict with the experience of everyday life.

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76 McCarthy, Authority in Plautine Comedy, 213.
77 McCarthy, Authority in Plautine Comedy, 211. The example of George Orwell shooting an elephant has already been discussed, but has relevance here.
John confronts this reality head-on when he introduces Revelation, calling it a revelation given to “show his slaves what must soon take place” (Revelation 1:1) and identifying himself as a “slave” (Revelation 1:1). This has three effects: firstly, by naming its audience, it forces them into the liminal space outside the structures of society—a space where the impossible is possible, and hidden transcripts are common. Then, the text identifies itself as a hidden transcript—for slaves, by a slave—and therefore functions as an exposed transcript, giving the audience a sense of being privy to privileged (and highly volatile) material, reinforcing the audience’s perceptions of being in a liminal space. Finally, it reverses the expectations of Plautine performance—rather than having a clever or tricky slave carry the day over against dim-witted masters, this is the master’s edict of victory, which is celebrated by his slaves.

This functions, from a postcolonial perspective, to expose the flaws of earthly empire. Plautus’ works have the slave characters succeed against foolish, bumbling masters; Plautus’ audience members identify with both types of characters and do not have “any simple and enduring investment in either the maintenance or subversion of hegemonic claims.” As slaves, Revelation’s audience are spectators without agency and can only identify with marginal characters such as the martyrs or the witnesses; the question of hegemony is removed from their control and placed entirely in the hands of God, whose empire subverts the Roman empire just as the tricky slave subverts the Roman social order.

By referring to himself and the audience as “slaves,” John is alluding to the victorious protagonists of Plautine comedy, implying a victorious ending, but in doing so also casts the text in the realm of hidden transcript. At its conclusion, the text presents God’s victory, which takes place without human agency, and therefore sits in a liminal third space between acceptance of empire and rejection of empire. God’s empire is “same but

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78 McCarthy, Authority in Plautine Comedy, x.
different,” and both mimics and critiques earthly empire in order to provide context for its audience.

3. **Thunderbolts and lightning: Staging the Performance**

One of the most impressive features of Roman drama was the technology that it could harness in order to create a spectacle. There are numerous accounts of various structures and devices that allowed performers to fly, or helped scenes to rapidly change. In examining them, it becomes evident that John of Patmos’ visions may well have been informed by his experiences at theatres in and around Asia Minor. A quote from Seneca the younger illustrates the possibilities inherent in the theatre:

> The arts of amusement are those which aim to please the eye and the ear. To this class you may assign the stage-machinists, who invent scaffolding that goes aloft of its own accord, or floors that rise silently into the air, and many other surprising devices, as when objects that fit together then fall apart, or objects which are separate then join together automatically, or objects which stand erect then gradually collapse.79

Beacham argues that the soaring structure was a type of scaffolding called a *pegma*, that could exhibit “performers as well as scenic displays which may have divided laterally,

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and certainly could be borne aloft.”

Beacham also goes through the various devices attested to by Pollux’s writings, and I have listed his findings below:

- The *ekkuklema*: a “platform which could be wheeled out from within the building for the discovery of actions,” which seems to have functioned as a plot device,
- The *mechane*: a type of crane used in Greek and Roman theatre to make actors fly,
- A device for emulating the sound of thunder, “made of stones rolled into copper pots,”
- The *geranos*, a “contrivance let down from above for raising up a body,”
- The *aorai*, “ropes hung down to raise up heroes and gods into the air,”
- Trapdoors in the stage floor for “the rising of a river or some similar manifestation,”
- The *hemikuklion*, a “semicircle” located near the orchestra, which would “show some part of the city far off or people swimming in the sea,” and
- The *stropheion*, a scenic tableau which revealed “heroes translated to divinity or those who have died at sea or in battle.”

Almost all of these devices bear significance with regards to Revelation: the *mechane* or *aorai* could have inspired the flight of the seven angels, and the passage of the narrator (from heaven to earth and vice versa). Similarly, John could have been drawing inspiration from the *stropheion* in his portrayal the souls of the martyrs located under the altar in Revelation 6, and the *hemikuklion* in writing about the fall of Babylon in

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81 The following adapted from Beacham, *The Roman Theatre*, 180-182.
Revelation 18. Nor is it difficult to envision a city descending from the heavens when similar events occurred during shows and triumphs with the help of the *pegma*.\(^{82}\)

4. The Throne Room

Revelation 4 concludes the introductory phase of the text, and metaphorically marks the beginning of the performance that John is creating. The audience follows the narrator in their journey up to heaven, and are immediately confronted with a great throne room that could be recreated in the *proskenion* (stage) of the Roman theatre. Here, there are multiple references to the performance arts of Rome—specifically the Roman theatre—which form the central core of Revelation. A detailed examination of the various references follows. It is worth remembering the existing scholarship that compares and contrasts the throne room scenes to that of the Roman Emperor’s court\(^{83}\)—arguably, John is alluding to both Imperial court and performance art. This demonstrates the richness of the text, and its ability to be read on multiple levels.

Of course, before we attempt to find exact archaeological details that definitively anchor the text to any physical structure, we must allow ourselves to be reminded that “John was not, it appears, unduly constrained by reality” and therefore “the heavenly world... is an ideal world in which perfect correspondence to earthly realities can neither be expected nor desired.”\(^{84}\) This means that we must remove our expectations of one-to-one matches when exegeting John’s text, and remember that the text is drawing on a

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\(^{82}\) Beacham cites both Josephus and Pliny the Elder in describing the potential lavishness of the *pegmata*, which could be “three or four storeys high” and “gilded with gold or silver,” fittingly enough for the New Jerusalem.


\(^{84}\) Aune, “The Influence of Roman Imperial Court,” 6.
number of varying influences (and its interpretation is largely created from the reader’s knowledge).

4.1 The Great Theatre and the Great Throne Room

Blevins’ study “The Genre of Revelation” provides a comprehensive look at the details of the Great Theatre of Ephesus, noting especially the seven *thuromata* and the affinity of Revelation to being staged in the theatre. The theatre itself was located at the centre of the city, next to the *agora* and baths, and directly visible from the harbour, and was one of the most visible buildings of the city. A closer look at the details of both the theatre at Ephesus and the Great Throne Room of Revelation reveals a close resemblance between the two, and is one of the best pieces of evidence for a setting of Revelation within the theatre.

The theatre at Ephesus, like many Roman theatres, was comprised of two distinct levels: the ground level, the orchestra, was a semi-circular area which backed onto the main building (the *skene*), out of which jutted a stage (the *proskenion*). Behind the stage, and continuing to be a part of the *skene*, were the *thuromata*—windows for displaying scenery. Given this thesis’s argument that Revelation was never intended to be staged, there is no pressing need to match the levels of the theatre with the text of Revelation. What is important, however, is that Roman theatre was not a strictly one-level affair. As seen in the discussion on Roman machines above, actors could be made to fly, people

could be seen in the distance and people could be raised up and down various levels. This sense of multiple levels of staging corresponds well to Revelation's constant vertical movement.

Also important are the *thuromata*, the seven windows depicting scenes. What better visual imagery than for an angel bearing a trumpet or bowl to appear in one of these *thuromata*, then for a scene to be enacted in the level below\(^{87}\)—or for the scenery in the *thuromata* to change to reflect what was being narrated?\(^{88}\) Again, whilst I am not arguing for a direct correlation between the Ephesian theatre and Revelation, it is helpful to know that Revelation's movements and scene changes were all well within the boundaries of reality, and indeed were commonplace enough to have been witnessed by all who dwelled in Ephesus.

The text of Revelation 4 brings the audience right into the throne room of God, where twenty-four thrones encircle a single great throne. This, Brewer believes, is a deliberate move by John to evoke the Great Theatre of Ephesus by mimicking its floor plan:

> Around the perimeter of the orchestra, usually in the front row of auditorium seats, was a semicircular row of carved stone seats, or "thrones," reserved for priests or high dignitaries in attendance upon the dramatic performance.\(^{89}\)

The question of just how many seats existed will be examined in detail a little later, but for now it is sufficient for us to note the similarities of the Great Theatre at Ephesus to

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\(^{87}\) Revelation 8:7 is a good example of this—the first angel blows their trumpet, and "hail and fire mixed with blood" fall to earth, causing a third of the earth and vegetation to be burned up.

\(^{88}\) For example, Revelation 6:12-14 depict a transformation of the earth after an earthquake, and the heavens receding "like a scroll rolled up." It is entirely possible that John is providing stage directions of sorts—or at least guiding his audience's imaginations. The sun turning black, moon turning red, and stars falling to earth are all visually possible according to the conventions of the Roman theatre.

Revelation’s throne room—a deliberate allusion by John to set the scene in the largest city of Asia Minor.

4.2  Making sacrifices: the altar of the theatre

Revelation 6:9 marks the first mention of an “altar” in the throne room, one that hitherto has not been mentioned in the text—including John’s description of the throne room in Revelation 4. The altar’s sudden appearance in the text implies that its presence is taken for granted, that it is a detail not worth mentioning. Why would this be the case? The answer lies in the architecture of the Roman theatres— theatres often “had one or more altars in the orchestra,”90 and these altars were regularly referred to in plays.91 These altars were utilised as part of Roman ludi, and Hanson argues that sacrifices were made before the commencement of games and plays, implying a strong link between the theatre and Roman worship.92

In the case of Revelation, John is subverting the paradigm of sacrifice, implying that the blood around the altar represents the blood of various Christian martyrs (perhaps shed in amphitheatres as per some of the early martyrdom accounts) crying out for vengeance. In so doing, John exposes the falseness of the sacrifices offered to the Roman gods, and critiques both the idea of sacrifice and the death of Christians at Roman hands. By placing the altar in the Throne Room of God, John demonstrates God’s dominance over all other forms of worship, and indicates that God’s power extends into the sacred spaces of the Romans.

90 Sear, Roman Theatres, 7.
91 References are made to altars in comedies of both Plautus and Terence.
The evidence suggesting a close bond between theatre and religion stretches further than the mere presence of an altar, however—many theatres also possessed a small temple located on a portico behind the stage building. Hanson notes that in many theatres across the Empire, these temples were dedicated to Augustus and members of the Imperial family, indicating a direct link between theatre and the various Imperial ruler cults.\textsuperscript{93} Theatres were also frequently adjoined to temples, acting as a visual reminder of the religious origins of theatre. For John to co-opt the theatre but redescribe it as God’s throne room was for him to make a definitive statement about the power of God over all forms of Roman religion and ritual, and in so doing declare the falseness of Roman religion.

4.3 \textit{Twenty four: thrones, elders, lictors, chorus}

With his description of God’s throne room, John is creating a subversive paradigm: in the vision of Revelation 4, the dignitaries and priests, the high-ranking officials who are the guests of honour at the performance and therefore seated around the orchestra, are bowing down to the throne in the centre of the stage. Some argue that the imagery presented is clearly that of a royal scene, with the elders as the emperor’s advisors arrayed around him,\textsuperscript{94} and yet the imagery of the elders is multivalent; they are not presented as one or the other but as a montage of different roles. It is well attested that senators and other dignitaries had the right to sit in the front row of the theatre (the right of \textit{prohedria}), and in some cases they sat in thrones (\textit{bisellia}) that were twice the

\textsuperscript{93} Hanson, \textit{Roman Theatre-Temples}, 96.
size of normal seats, and considered to be within the orchestra itself rather than part of the regular seating.\textsuperscript{95}

The thrones bear their own significance in Greco-Roman understanding. Laszlo Gallusz demonstrates that there were a variety of meanings behind the throne motif in Greco-Roman writings: the throne as an emblem of divine power, the throne as proof of dignity, and the throne as a “place of revelation, petitions, worship and commissioning.”\textsuperscript{96} Gallusz also mentions that one of the “most influential representation[s] of the enthroned deity” in the Greek world was the “relief of the east pediment of the Parthenon.”\textsuperscript{97} There, we see a scene that mirrors Revelation 5:

The central figure of the scene is Zeus, who is pictured as sitting enthroned in a group of twelve deities. The gods are identified primarily by their grouping. The authority of Zeus is emphasized by the fact that he is the only one sitting on a θρόνος, while the other gods occupy only their κλισμοί.\textsuperscript{98}

There are differences—Revelation has twenty-four rather than twelve surrounding the throne, and both God and the twenty-four elders seated on θρόνοι rather than distinguishing between types of throne—but the parallels are nevertheless obvious. The scene in Revelation recalls a scene of Greek divinity, and demonstrates the added authority of God.

Of course, there is a problem with the statement above: it was generally understood that the number of significance was twelve, not twenty-four. A possible solution to this lies in David Aune’s detailed and thorough commentary. Amidst surveying the possible

\textsuperscript{95} Sear, \textit{Roman Theatres}, 6.
\textsuperscript{96} Gallusz, \textit{The Throne Motif in the Book of Revelation}, 83.
\textsuperscript{97} Gallusz, \textit{The Throne Motif}, 92.
\textsuperscript{98} Gallusz, \textit{The Throne Motif}, 92.
identities of the twenty-four, Aune notes that the emperor Domitian had increased the maximum number of lictors accompanying the emperor from twelve to twenty-four, and it seems likely that John was making a reference to Domitian’s action by subverting the audience’s expectations (by showing twenty-four instead of twelve).

Aune also comments that Domitian would “preside at games flanked by various priests wearing gold crowns.” It seems that John could be deliberately evoking and subsequently combining the imagery of priesthood and lictorship under Domitian’s reign, presenting them as dignitaries who nevertheless are lower in rank compared to God (rather than to the Roman Emperor). This is a particularly subversive act, as it indicates that both the gods of the Roman Empire and the authority of Domitian as Roman Emperor are all subservient to God. In the ancient world, divinity and authority were closely linked, and it is no great surprise that John chooses to demonstrate God’s authority over both.

Another theatrical explanation for the twenty-four elders is the role of the chorus in Greek and Roman theatre. In Greco-Roman theatre, the chorus served the role of commentator and occasional participant, utilising song in order to enhance the proceedings—or as Hill puts it, to “draw out whatever mood or argument is especially relevant at particular moments in the drama.” Hill argues that the Roman chorus was intended to function in a background rather than foreground role, much like background music to contemporary films—thus being able to pre-empt or reflect the occurrences of the drama. At the same time, the chorus was considered a character in the work, and was often integral to the story. The chorus was a complex role, one that

99 Aune, Revelation 1-5, 292. Lictors were bodyguards who accompanied Roman officials, carrying fasces which represented the authority of the official in question.
100 Aune, Revelation 1-5, 292-293.
was capable of both omniscience and utter bewilderment from one scene to the next, but was concerned with two key things: exposition of the plot, and liturgical expression that fit the scene.\textsuperscript{103}

At this point, it is worth making a brief excursus to remind ourselves that Roman and Greek forms of theatre were often quite different.\textsuperscript{104} Although Roman and Greek dramatic forms do not differ greatly at first glance, it is nevertheless an anachronistic mistake to substitute the Greek form for the Roman given both the cultural and temporal differences between the two—one need only look at the value placed on the theatre by the respective cultures to realise the difference. More specifically, Roman theatre was far more risqué and relied much less on the chorus (often substituting this with a narrator), and of course had the advantage of several centuries of technological development, as we have already discussed.

Given the dearth of reliable historical evidence, it is difficult to say which were performed in Asia Minor. The most likely answer is that both styles were performed across a period of several hundred years, gradually evolving from the Greek form to the Roman. This is likely given the history of Asia Minor, especially the degree of Hellenisation of Asia Minor and the adaptation of ancient Greek plays for Roman audiences,\textsuperscript{105} then the process of Romanisation of Asia Minor—which, of course, was not a uniform process but happened gradually and at different rates in different areas. Cities throughout Asia Minor often possessed at least one theatre, and sometimes

\textsuperscript{104} This was discussed extensively in Chapter 3.
\textsuperscript{105} Matthew Leigh, \textit{Comedy and the Rise of Rome} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 4-5.
multiple theatres. These could take either the Greek or Roman form, and sometimes a Greek theatre might be modified and altered to fit Roman requirements.

Revelation seems to have a stronger familiarity with the Roman form of theatre than the Greek—John gives prime position to the narrator as the main character of the story, and the chorus serve largely to help transition between scenes. The degree to which Roman choruses (as opposed to Greek choruses) sang and danced is debated—many argue that the Roman choruses were given vastly reduced roles due to the lack of space in early Roman theatres; however, it is evident that they were still an important part of proceedings. In Revelation, the elders take the role of the chorus as they help transition between, and commentate on, the various scenes depicted by John.

David Aune points out that the elders’ outfits have a cultic significance—that their white garments and golden crowns are a direct allusion to Roman priestly attire. He contends that “wreaths and white garments were appropriate cultic attire for praying, sacrificing, and marching in religious processions” and that “priests of the imperial cult in Asia Minor customarily wore gold crowns displaying busts of the emperor.” Conceptually, this means that when we view Revelation as a drama, the chorus is composed of priests modelled after Roman priests, but focused on worshiping God rather than the emperor or Roman deities.

G.K. Beale makes an interesting observation that the clothing of the elders is “a development into the ideas of the previous chapters concerning the saints’ crowns,

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106 Sear, Roman Theatres, 110.
107 For example, the theatre at Ephesus was “enlarged and extended throughout the first three centuries of the Empire.” Sear, Roman Theatres, 113.
108 J.C.B. Lowe, “Plautus’ Choruses,” Rheinisches Museum für Philologie Vol. 3 (1990): 297. Lowe’s argument that the songs of the Roman choruses were “drastically curtailed” is a helpful one, in that Revelation’s chorus hymns are generally quite short.
109 Aune, Revelation 1-5, 293.
110 Aune, Revelation 1-5, 293.
white clothing, and dominion, which will be granted to them if they persevere”—in other words, Revelation promises its audience that they, too, will be elevated to the role of the elders if they persevere in their faithfulness. This is a particularly subversive idea given the social structures of the Roman Empire—the thought that every believer could become a priest (or advisor of God, or adjutant) defies and challenges the Romans’ wealth-based caste system. It presents believers with a vision of both political and religious acceptance and power, a hidden transcript that empowers them; their hope is not found in earthly processes, but in a future reward of heavenly influence.

4.4 The songs of the theatre and the hymns for God

John’s vision of political subversion continues throughout the hymns that he places in the chorus’ mouths. Although Beale argues that the hymns of Revelation are well connected to various Jewish writings and traditions and therefore some editorial work has taken place; that is, the hymns are composed with purpose and with a clear goal. Although some have suggested that the hymns are a reflection of early Christian liturgy, Aune

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112 Although Grabiner identifies the importance of the elders in relation to what he calls the “hymnic pericopes,” he does not recognize them as a chorus but rather as part of the divine court. See Steven Grabiner, Revelation’s Hymns: Commentary on the Cosmic Conflict (Sydney: Bloomsbury Press, 2015), 73.
113 Beale, The Book of Revelation, 368.
argues that the level of integration of the hymns to the text of Revelation suggests that such a connection is misguided and needs to be rethought or abandoned.\footnote{Aune, “Imperial Court Ceremonial,” 23. In short, Aune argues that the style and theme of Revelation’s hymns indicates that they are clearly written for Revelation, rather than being existing forms altered to suit the text.}

A stronger connection can be made between the hymns in Revelation and the acclamations (\textit{acclamatio}) shouted to the emperors of Rome. Seal notes that acclamations were generally rhythmic, easily-learned phrases that lent themselves well to being chanted by groups of people,\footnote{Seal, “Shouting in the Apocalypse,” 342-343.} and were used for a variety of purposes: to demonstrate public opinion, to reaffirm an emperor’s rule, or to spread propaganda about that emperor.\footnote{Seal, “Shouting into the Apocalypse,” 343-344.} It was also a useful tool for social control—to allow the populace to shout acclamations to the emperor gave them a false sense of power, and those who wished to shout otherwise would be influenced in the opposite direction.

It is difficult to pinpoint with any certainty just who performed these acclamations; Nero and Augustus are reported to have paid singers to sing acclamations,\footnote{Grabiner, \textit{Revelation’s Hymns}, 8.} but there are also recorded instances of spontaneous acclamation (for example, the acclamation of Augustus as \textit{imperator} by his troops on the battlefield).\footnote{Brian Campbell, \textit{War and Society in Imperial Rome: 31BC-AD284} (London: Routledge Press, 2002), 145.} It seems, then, that the practice of \textit{acclamatio} was one that would have been familiar to the wider population of the Roman Empire given its relatively widespread use, and that most would be familiar with its ritual and imperial connotations.\footnote{Aune, “Imperial Court Ceremonial,” 6.} John’s \textit{ekphrastic} language here engages both visual and oral practice; for him to utilise this imagery is to subvert not just the oral practices of the royal court, but also of the population in greeting the emperor.
To narrow the function of the twenty-four elders to simply being a group of acclamators, however, would be to do them an injustice. Their role is a multivalent one, and they function much more like the chorus in Greco-Roman drama. Like a chorus, they function to help the audience navigate and understand the events that are unfolding. They are an integral part of the text, and their interactions are important in helping shape the plot. Their contributions serve to highlight the action of the drama; as we shall see, their hymns form a vital part of the overall picture painted by John.

Hymns are sung at various points throughout the text of Revelation; the text provides its own instruction as to which characters are singing. The twenty-four elders are noted specifically as singing at several points in the narrative: Revelation 4:8, 5:9-10, 5:12, 7:12, 11:17-18, and 19:4. With the exception of Revelation 11:17-18, the elders’ songs are short, and serve to emphasise the authority and power of God—much like the acclamations of the Roman Empire. Throughout these examples, John employs *ekphrastic* language that reminds his audience of Greco-Roman worship, and subverts it to point toward God. Hymns were sung as part of Roman ritual worship and at major festivals; they were considered part of the experience of worship for those who were part of the Empire. For John’s audience to hear and see hymns re-employed in service of Christianity and sung by white-robed elders would have been quite confronting.

Revelation, then, presents its readers with a choice: they can choose to persevere with Christ, and ultimately fill the position of elder, singing acclamations to God, or they can choose to be subservient to the emperor. By following Christ’s commands in Revelation 2-3, they allow themselves to be transformed into the chorus of elders, whose understood purpose is to form part of God’s heavenly council, and to shout acclamations to him. The disempowered, persecuted Christians are given a voice in God’s heavenly throne room. This is in line with Revelation’s ideas around power and victory—that ultimately, all power rests with God, and nobody, not the earthly powers nor God’s own subjects, have authority or power over his decisions or will.
5. **Good Lord! Roman ritual and naming**

Revelation utilises a number of titles for God, many of which will be familiar to those familiar with Roman Imperial titles. This mimicry is endemic in the text of Revelation, and is assumed to be deliberate, as part of John’s continual use of intertexture throughout the text. Although this is no different to the Gospels or other parts of the New Testament, it is worth briefly revisiting a few of these titles and understanding their place in Roman society.

First, and perhaps best documented, is the title of “the Son of God” or υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ in Revelation 2:18. Robert Mowery notes the use of the term θεοῦ υἱὸς (Son of God) by a number of Roman emperors (Augustus, Tiberius, Nero, Titus, and Domitian), and argues that the use of the same term in the Gospel of Matthew is a deliberate evocation of the Roman imperial title. Mowery does also note that the Gospel of Mark uses the phrase υἱὸς θεοῦ instead, and asserts that Matthew’s phrase is identical to the Roman title whereas Mark’s is not. Mowery’s own work, however, seems to indicate that any formulation of “Son of God” (whether it be θεοῦ υἱὸς or υἱὸς θεοῦ) is reserved for the emperor and the imperial family—and, given John’s predilection for mimicking Roman terms, it is safe to assume that the formulations of υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ found in Revelation are similarly alluding to the imperial family.

As we have already discussed, Revelation goes to great lengths subversively to mimic Roman imperial settings, terminology and conventions with the intention of asserting

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121 Mowery notes that the term θεοῦ υἱὸς is, despite assertions to the contrary, not one that is unique to Augustus, but rather is applied to various emperors across both Julio-Claudian and Flavian dynasties. Robert L. Mowery, “Son of God in Roman Imperial Titles and Matthew,” *Biblica* Vol. 83 No. 1 (2002): 104.

122 Mowery, “Son of God in Roman Imperial Titles and Matthew,” 110.
God's power over them, and the titles of the Roman emperor are no different. It is important to remember the proliferation of the various Roman imperial cults throughout the Empire, especially Asia Minor; such terms were routinely used on a daily basis to refer not just to the emperor, but to those worshipped by the cults.123 This means that Revelation targets not just the figure of the emperor, but the entire imperial apparatus—however, as figurehead and ruler, the person of the emperor is naturally subjected to the most scrutiny and mimicry.

This is evident in Revelation's use of titles such as “Lord and God” (κύριος καὶ ὁ θεός),124 “Sovereign Lord” (δεσπότης),125 “Lord God the Almighty” (κύριος θεός ὁ παντοκράτωρ),126 “King of the Nations” (βασιλεύς τῶν αἰώνων)127 and “King of kings and Lord of lords” (Βασιλεύς βασιλέων καὶ κύριος κυρίων).128 David Aune demonstrates that many of these titles were used in reference to the Roman emperors, specifically Domitian: dominus et deus (Lord and God), dominus / princeps et deus (translated δεσπότης καὶ θεός, or “master and god,” corresponding with Revelation 6:10), and imperator (commander, translated to βασιλεύς (king) by some ancient writers).129 More recent scholarship has questioned official usage of these terms in reference to Domitian, arguing instead that these titles were used by those seeking to flatter the emperor or later impositions rather than in widespread use by official mandate.130

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123 Friesen, *Imperial Cults*, 75-76.
124 Revelation 4:11.
125 Revelation 6:10.
127 Revelation 15:3.
129 Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 310-312, 875.
Helpfully, Dominik also nuances our understanding of the imperial titles ascribed to emperors by noting that poets and writers would often conform to the emperors’ wishes “not only in order to continue receiving material aid but also to avoid personal danger.” Dominik points out that “compliance did not necessarily imply belief” in the emperor’s divinity, a fact made abundantly clear by Martial’s renouncement of his former claims following Domitian’s death. This is especially helpful when reading Revelation—if the imperial titles are disbelieved or at least not adhered to, then Revelation’s mimicry of them reflects the irony of their everyday usage. That is to say, Revelation turns these titles, sarcastically used when referring to the emperor, into genuine worship by referring them to God.

Along these lines, Dyer has recently argued that scholars’ understanding of the term βασιλεία as a direct equivalence to Rome’s “empire” is anachronistic and an overstatement, born from a desire to demonstrate Revelation’s opposition to empire. He points out that βασιλεία is never used of the Roman Empire before the second century CE, and that John “never uses an explicit reference to Rome or to Roman rule or power.” This is deliberate given Revelation’s status as a hidden transcript; were John to openly use Kaisar / Caesar, or any other imperial form of address, it would have been immediately apparent to Roman authorities that John was taking aim at the Roman Emperor. This does not diminish the point that John is making; rather, it obscures it behind a layer of disguises, much like an actor donning a mask. Revelation’s titles are still a mimicry of Roman imperial titles, but look different enough that they are not easily recognised except by those who have “ears to hear.”

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Of note is the phrase “Lord God the Almighty” (κύριε ὁ θεός ὁ παντοκράτωρ), specifically the word παντοκράτωρ. Aune provides an excellent look at the Jewish origins of the phrase, but misses the connection to the Roman imperial title of αὐτοκράτωρ. The word αὐτοκράτωρ is variously used to translate the Roman terms dictator¹³⁵ and imperator, and can be translated into English as “one who rules by himself.”¹³⁶ The term Revelation uses, however, is παντοκράτωρ, “Almighty, All-Powerful, Omnipotent.”¹³⁷ This serves as a direct challenge to the authority of the Roman emperor by asserting that God’s authority is an order of magnitude greater—rather than ruling as αὐτοκράτωρ, God rules over everything (πᾶν), giving him authority over the emperor. It is hardly surprising that this is one of the titles for God most frequently utilised by John.¹³⁸

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Revelation</th>
<th>Roman Empire</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>δεσπότης (Sovereign Lord)</td>
<td>δεσπότης καὶ θεός (Lord and God / dominus et deus)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>θεός (God)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

¹³⁵ Polybius, Histories, 3.86.7.
¹³⁷ Danker, Greek-English Lexicon, 754.
¹³⁸ The term appears nine different times in the text: Revelation 1:8, 4:8, 11:17, 15:3, 16:7, 16:14, 19:6, 19:15, and 21:22.
Table 1. The names of God and the titles of the Emperor in Revelation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of God, Emperor</th>
<th>Title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>βασιλεὺς βασιλέων (King of kings)</td>
<td>No direct equivalent (<em>Kaiser</em> is perhaps the closest equivalent)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>παντοκράτωρ (Almighty One)</td>
<td>αὐτοκράτωρ (Ruler / dictator)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Overall, we see that John is deliberate in phrasing his titles for God in Revelation so as to call to mind the different aspects of the Roman emperors’ titles. Indeed, John here does not merely subvert the standard titles used for the emperors, but goes one step further by giving God greater glory, honour and power than the emperor. John’s subtle use of *ekphrasis* evokes the titles of the emperor, commonly seen engraved on coins and temples, and in doing so challenges the emperor’s claims to divinity and worship, asserting that God alone is worthy above the emperor.

6. I heard, then I saw: visual and auditory disconnects

One of the most jarring moments in any reading of the book of Revelation is when the character of the Lamb is first introduced in Revelation 5:5-6. The audience is told to
expect a conqueror, the "Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David" (Revelation 5:5)—but are subsequently shown a "Lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered, having seven horns and seven eyes" (Revelation 5:6). Many scholars have already commented on the use of juxtaposition and contrast in order to deliver a theological point; we should not, however, ignore the very real sense of surprise that is keenly felt by the audience when their expectations are upended.

I have already mentioned how the scenes of heavenly worship depicted are acknowledged to be a mimicry of Roman imperial court ritual. The inversion of Lion and Lamb upends the expectation of John's audience, illustrating the falseness of the Roman system of power through replacing a symbol of might with a symbol of weakness—and hailing this symbol of weakness as superior. This illustrates well the advantages of a “performance mode of thought” approach to Revelation. Performances are expected to conform to the conventions of their genres—for example, the heroes or “good guys” are supposed to overcome the odds and triumph, old men are wise and provide valuable insights to the main characters, and so on. When these conventions are played with and subverted, there is a very real sense of confusion, and it is in these moments of liminality where John's message is most keenly visible. Such an approach relies on the listener to create meaning, and every interpretation created as a result is a unique one. Interpretation is open to the listener, and like all fine works of art, it is the individual's context, background and culture that informs interpretation.


140 John Christopher Thomas, for example, argues that the “juxtaposition of images makes clear to John and his hearers that their own ‘faithful witness’ and ‘overcoming’ is intimately connected to the sacrificial death of Jesus, and may even necessitate their own death.” He also argues that the Lamb and the Lion are to be understood as one and the same, that “He does not stop being the Lion owing to the appearance of Lamb imagery.” John Christopher Thomas, *The Apocalypse: A Literary and Theological Commentary* (Tennessee: CPT Press, 2012), 224-7.

141 See, for example, Aune, "The Influence of Roman Imperial Court Ceremonial," 5-26.

142 A brief but helpful discussion on the difference between seeing and hearing is found in Wes Howard-Brook, “Come Out, My People!” *God's Call out of Empire in the Bible and Beyond* (New York: Orbis Books, 2012), 467.
Similar juxtapositions occur elsewhere in Revelation, most notably in Revelation 7:4-9 where John hears “the number of those who were sealed, 144,000” from the twelve tribes of Israel then sees “a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages.” In this case, the juxtaposition is more clearly intended to demonstrate the shift from a Jewish-dominated, Israel-focused perspective to a more universal and inclusive perspective. The *ekphrasis* helps to create a sense of tension between what is initially visualised by John’s audience and what is actually revealed by the text.

In the liminal space between hearing and seeing, the 144,000 chosen from Israel’s tribes are transformed into a great multitude from all tribes and peoples and languages, showing the inclusivity of God’s throne room in Heaven. To Jews or Jewish Christians, this would be reminiscent of YHWH’s promises to Abraham: the “promise of innumerable descendants and the promise that Abraham would be the father of many nations.”

To Gentile Christians, however, this would signify acceptance and acknowledgment of their salvation—and, as Thomas points out, is indicative of their justification and righteousness before God in that they are “in very close proximity” to God and the Lamb, and share fellowship with them. In either case, it is clear that those of the multitude are greatly honoured in their acceptance into the throne room of God.

This demonstrates the importance of the narrative approach, the visual-exegetical understanding and the performance mode of thought. All highlight the shared experience of the audience hearing the text—not only is it evident that the audience is expected to have prior contextual knowledge of some sort, but also that they are being led on a journey by the narrator, and that they are expected to see and hear as John does. John goes to great lengths to describe his visions, and does so expecting that his

143 Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 466-7.
audience will understand the allusions he is making. He makes reference to things that he knows his audience will understand, but does so in a way that alters them in order to make a point.

As we can see, John makes great use of ekphrasis in order to move his audience's expectations. He also uses this language to help expand his audience's point of view. Following his description of the Throne Room in Revelation 4 (containing the Throne, the Four Beasts, the Seven Torches and the Twenty-Four Elders), he suddenly and dramatically expands the scope of the heavenly realm in Revelation 5:11 to include “many angels surrounding the throne and the living creatures and the elders; they numbered myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands…” This is then expanded in Revelation 5:13 to “every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them…” John progressively unfolds a larger picture as the story plays out, and this is repeated in his cycles of seven—each number is accompanied by an expansion in vision and effect until all of creation is encompassed. From a performance mode of thought, John expands the scope of the drama from being performed on the stage, outwards to incorporate the entire structure of the theatre, and to include his audience as part of the drama.

7. **Hark the herald angels: praecones, angels and priests**

Revelation 8 introduces one of the best-known and most striking visual images in apocalyptic literature: the seven angels blowing their trumpets, each signifying the start of a new eschatological event. As discussed in the previous chapter, the image of a trumpet-bearing herald or messenger is one that is common in Jewish and Greco-Roman worldviews. In the Hebrew Bible, the sound of the trumpet serves as warning for a variety of things:
[Trumpets] sounded the call to festive assembly and battle, announced warning and victory, were instrumental in the holy war in which God along gave the victory, were sounded on New Year’s Day and the accession of a king, and were an element in the sound and fury of the theophany.\textsuperscript{145}

Within the apocalyptic literature of the Jewish world, the trumpet is generally taken to signify judgment,\textsuperscript{146} and most commentators have interpreted the angels of Revelation in the same way—certainly a valid interpretation. What is sometimes missing, however, is a Greco-Roman perspective on the trumpeters.

It is clear that the trumpet is strongly associated with military imagery in Greco-Roman culture. As in much of the literature relating to trumpets in the Hebrew Scriptures, many of the texts surrounding trumpets and trumpeters in the Greco-Roman context are focused on their use in and association with warfare and combat. Of course, this is not the only use for trumpets—they are recorded as being used widely outside a combat situation. The Roman legions used the trumpets to convey orders to their troops, both in battle and whilst travelling.\textsuperscript{147}

As I argued in the previous chapter, however, it seems that one of the more significant areas where trumpets were encountered in the Roman world was in the position of praeco. The praecones played an important role in a variety of spheres of life: as auctioneers, as announcers in religious ceremonies, theatres and circus games, and

\textsuperscript{145} Boring, \textit{Revelation}, 134. Another important story is the battle for Jericho in Joshua 6; there, after walking around the city seven times, the trumpets are blown in accordance with YHWH’s commands, and Jericho’s walls collapse.


\textsuperscript{147} As attested to by ancient sources: see Aristides Quintilianus, \textit{Peri musikes}, 2.6.62.18 in Matthiesen, \textit{Apollo’s Lyre}, 230, and Josephus, \textit{The Jewish War}, 3.5.3-4.
most importantly, as heralds representing the Empire (*praecones publici*) who announced official news and verdicts—those who narrated the script of the Roman Empire. There is no question that the position of *praeco* was one of great social significance within the Roman world.

Returning to the question of *ekphrasis* in Revelation, what images would a Greco-Roman audience (the *ekklesiai* of Revelation) have seen in hearing John's reference to angels/messengers bearing trumpets? Aside from the connotations of warfare and destruction that seem to be universal across both Jewish and Greco-Roman culture, it seems that these messengers could have been understood as emulating the *praecones* of the Roman Empire—that is, acting as the heralds announcing great events to come, and also as messengers of the emperor, spreading the news of the empire far and wide, and calling for the surrender of his enemies.

If we take Rauh's word for it, the *praecones* (or at least the *praecones publici*, which seem to be what the text calls to mind amongst its Asian audience) also represented a class of public servants that enforced the culture, rules and ceremonies of the Roman Empire.⁴⁴⁸ Purcell takes this a step further, arguing that the role of *praecones publici* represented a gateway toward social mobility, an entry point into the Roman social and political hierarchy.⁴⁴⁹ This was rare in the highly regimented society of Rome, and these *praecones* (classed as *apparitores*) would have been seen as social climbers—arguably, those in a liminal space between rich and poor.

In the Greek world, Griffith argues, heralds were essential in the creation of truth—in Greek life, public demonstration and approval were so important that “until a thing has

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been made public, it has never happened at all.” In the case of Revelation, of course, these heralds serve God, and their purpose is essentially identical—to proclaim the judgment and coming Kingdom of God, to call God’s enemies to repentance and surrender. In Revelation, the *praecones* have been transformed—from representing Empire and creating truth in the name of the Empire, to representing God and proclaiming an alternative truth and judgment.

When viewed in line with their historical counterparts, it becomes evident that the angels represent the Kingdom of God breaking in to all spheres of life, and demonstrate the dominion of God over against the Roman Empire by calling forth God’s cosmic power. Bond’s analysis of the *praecones* helps us to clarify their spheres of influence to three facets of everyday life in the ancient world: the religious, heraldic and imperial—all of which were strongly connected to the emperor and imperial rule. One could argue that the *praecones* might have represented all three in Revelation, and therefore that their presence in service of God symbolises yet another subversion on John’s part.

In each of these three areas, the *praecones* blew their trumpets to draw attention and call for silence before an activity.

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151 It must be noted that these three categories are a twenty-first century imposition, designed solely to help us to understand the text better. The ancient world made no distinction between these categories, and indeed they would have been considered inseparable by the ancients.

152 The worship of the emperor through imperial cults is an area in Biblical scholarship that continues to grow, and has powerfully demonstrated that emperor worship was widespread and accepted (albeit in varying forms, and to different degrees) throughout Asia Minor. See for example Friesen, *Imperial Cults*, 56-122 or Howard-Brook and Gwyther, *Unveiling Empire*, 103.

153 Revelation 8:1 shows an interesting inversion, where the silence occurs before the trumpets are blown—normally one would expect the trumpets to be blown, calling for silence, then the seals on the scrolls to be broken and the message within proclaimed.
From the perspective of Roman religion, the *praecones* announced the openings of religious ceremonies, ushering in a period of sacrifice and religious fervour that was usually presided over by the Roman emperor or the chief high priests.\(^{154}\) This is also the case in Revelation, where the sounding of the seven trumpets causes the Temple of God to be opened and great cosmic events to occur, presided over by the Lamb.\(^{155}\)

From a heraldic perspective, the *praecones* announce the sequence of events in the *ludi* of the empire, and their trumpet call marks the beginning of the next event in the *ludi*. The *ludi* were one of the defining features of the Roman Empire, and were the main system of entertainment for all those who were part of the Empire.\(^{156}\) In Revelation, each trumpet call is seen to mark the beginning of the next great “terror,” acting as a narrative device to keep the plot moving forward. Much like the *ludi* were religious festivals with a sequence of events honouring the Greco-Roman deities, Revelation is a performance with a sequence of events showing that true worship should be directed at God alone.

Finally, from an imperial perspective, the *praecones* act as the mouthpiece of the Roman emperor, representing his dominion and authority and making proclamations on his behalf. To a subjugated or besieged populace, they represented the voice of their oppressor calling them to conform and surrender; to others, they represented the voice of their god-king, informing them of his will. These connotations are slightly different in Revelation, as the seven angels with trumpets do not speak, but other angels are seen to fulfil the role of spokesperson for God.

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\(^{154}\) The presence of the emperor would, of course, have been limited to Rome—yet is still significant. As *pontifex maximus*, the emperor was understood to be the chief high priest of all religion, and therefore any local chief priests were representatives of the emperor in that regard.

\(^{155}\) Revelation 11:19.

\(^{156}\) Lewis and Meyer write that “the emperors provided these amusements with lavish hand, as a means of keeping the populace amused and out of mischief: under the Empire circus games were held at Rome on fifty days of the year.” They also note the revival of the Greek games, the spread of Roman spectacles and the restoration of old festivals across the Empire. Naphtali Lewis and Meyer Reinhold (eds.), *Roman Civilization, Vol II: The Empire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 142.
In short, the angels replicate the actions of the *praecones* of the Roman Empire, but are shown to be serving God rather than the Roman Emperor. Such a subversive mimicry is perfectly in line with the intentions and theology of Revelation, which is argued to be “a call to have faith in God rather than empire.”\(^{157}\) John’s use of *ekphrasis* in calling to mind the practices of the Roman Empire is very deliberate, and it functions to impart to John’s audiences a sense—an interpretation—of the “true” nature of the realities they encounter each day, doing so in a way that immediately exposes the distance between the understanding of those realities as communicated within the public discourse of Asia Minor and the understanding imparted from within the Jewish and Christian tradition (as interpreted by John).\(^{158}\)

To that end, the herald angels of Revelation can be seen as deliberate evocations of the heralds of the empire, transformed in the service of God and proclaiming the coming Kingdom and imminent victory of God over the Roman Empire. They (and their trumpets) represent not just the coming judgment, but the total subversion and redefining (*catachresis*) of the Roman Empire and its power in submission to God—the apocalyptic hope of a new *basileia* with God as king.

### 8. Women on stage: the female performers of Revelation

Revelation’s performers are not uniformly male—in fact, a substantial portion of Revelation’s narrative is performed by two different women, the Mother of Revelation 12 and the Whore of Babylon in Revelation 17. Each of these women is the central figure

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\(^{157}\) Howard-Brook and Gwyther, *Unveiling Empire*, xxiii.

in the scenes they appear in, an unusual move in the New Testament’s general treatment of women, but not so in Roman performance where female characters (almost always portrayed by men) were the norm. Huber points out that the two female characters of Revelation are both “structurally prominent” and “rhetorically prominent”, and therefore stand out as being important figures in John’s text. There is much that can be said about these two characters; here, we will merely focus on the performative aspects of their depiction, and mostly on the Mother—the Whore will be covered in a subsequent chapter.

The previous chapter explained that women were not allowed to act or perform in any mainstream Roman entertainment with the exception of mime. Mime was seen as scandalous and low-brow, and often featured lewd acts and female nudity. In light of such a context, it is not inconceivable that the Whore of Babylon is meant to be viewed as a mime actress; however, there are other explanations that better fit the character. Roman drama (comedy, tragedy and mime) featured female characters, whose presence, though understated, drove the plot.

One example of this is Plautus’ comedy Casina. Casina features three main characters: Casina herself, who is rarely viewed and often a peripheral character, a man, Lysidamus, who lusts after Casina, and Lysidamus’s wife, Cleostrata. Cleostrata and Casina are the central characters of the plot; Cleostrata, unusually for a Roman wife, decides to “seize control of the plot and become for the remainder of the play the poeta in charge of the action.” Casina, on the other hand, is initially viewed as an “object of desire,” and yet “remains the locus of power in the comedy.” These two female characters, like the

160 For a complete examination of the two female characters, see Huber, Women in Revelation.
women in Revelation, are responsible for the actions of others; and yet like the women in Revelation, behave in very different ways.

A quick summary of the plot of *Casina* is as follows: Casina, a slave, was abandoned at the door of Lysidamus and Cleostrata. Lysidamus’ son Euthynicus wants to marry Casina, but Lysidamus himself lusts after Casina. Lysidamus therefore schemes to remove Euthynicus from the country, and for his own servant Olympio to marry Casina instead, allowing him conjugal rights over Casina. Cleostrata, however, discovers Lysidamus’ plan and devises a series of schemes to prevent him from succeeding, culminating in a public humiliation for both Lysidamus and Olympio. Ultimately successful, Cleostrata allows Lysidamus to return to her, and Euthynicus marries Casina, discovering that she was a free-born Athenian all along.

Revelation 12 features the character of the “Mother” (Revelation 12:1), who gives birth to a male child “who will rule all the nations with an iron sceptre” (Revelation 12:5) and is “snatched up to God and to his throne” (Revelation 12:5) before he can be devoured by the Mother’s nemesis, the Red Dragon (Revelation 12:4-5). The Mother, seemingly about to be devoured by the Dragon, does not passively accept her fate, but flees into the wilderness (Revelation 12:6). She is given the “two wings of a great eagle” to escape into the wilderness, and is aided by the earth, which opens its mouth to swallow the river that the Dragon expels (Revelation 12:14-16). Her escape enrages the Dragon, and sets off a chain of events whereby the Dragon wages war upon the loyal believers by summoning the Sea-Beast and the Land-Beast (Revelation 12-13).

The Mother of Revelation and Cleostrata are both maternal figures who upend expectations and societal norms in order to thwart their nemeses and drive the plot forward. Florence helpfully notes that the “creative departure from [the] audience’s expectations demands an understanding of female subordination but then transgresses
the model in a new and particularly original way.” Florence’s understanding is very important—although these female characters could be seen as stereotypes, it is their actions that drive the plot and create movement. Otherwise, the Mother is a perfect representation of the Roman matronly ideal: a child-bearing woman of high rank and great faithfulness, who lives in harmony with nature. True to the subversive nature of John’s ekphrasis, this matronly ideal is turned on its head, and we are later shown that the Mother’s children are not the citizens of the Empire, but rather those who oppose it and are martyred by it.

Revelation 17, on the other hand, depicts the Whore of Babylon. Like Casina, the Whore of Babylon is the “locus of power,” but is also a character around whom various actions take place. The Whore of Babylon is quite clearly intended to be viewed as a prostitute, albeit one of high class, and can be read from both Judeo-Christian and Roman perspectives on sexuality. John follows Roman convention whereby “bad women are almost always sexualised”; Roman women were expected to contain their sexuality, and a common trope in Roman performance is that of the abhorrent older woman who attempts to impose her sexual will. It is hardly surprising that prostitutes were considered infamia in Roman thought.

Roman prostitutes were legislated to wear a Roman male’s toga, which marked their status in the public eye as “others” who were outside the bounds of respectable society. This is supported by evidence that suggests that adulteresses were similarly required to wear the toga as a mark of their transgressions. Their togas, however,

164 Florence, “Sexuality in Greek and Roman Comedy and Mime,” 376.
168 Dixon, Reading Roman Women, 38.
were distinguished from those of men through colour, and were a dark colour rather than white.\textsuperscript{171} The depiction of the Whore of Babylon takes this a step further, dressing her in “purple and scarlet,” colours reserved for those of Senatorial rank. The seeming high rank of the Whore is confirmed through her jewellery and clientele: she is adorned with “gold, precious stones and pearls” with a “golden cup in her hand,” and is frequented by the “kings of the earth.” Huber equates this imagery with Juvenal’s depiction of Messalina, wife of Claudius, and argues that John uses the image of the woman as a metaphor to describe the excesses and moral condition of the Roman Empire.\textsuperscript{172} Here, the result of John’s \textit{ekphrasis} is not glorification of God, but a direct assault on the Roman wealthy and elite—by subverting their ideals and imagery, John mocks them and equates them to prostitutes.

In either case, it is clear that John is employing and subverting tropes that were familiar to his audience, as playwrights are wont to do. As with much of Revelation, it is within the liminal spaces of upended expectation where John’s sentiment is to be found—the Mother does not allow herself to be taken, but actively works against the Dragon, and her children are not good Roman citizens, but are martyrs in the service of God. The Whore is not a common prostitute, but operates with the authority and sanction of the kings of the earth, and drinks the blood of the martyrs. Like the playwrights of the Roman Empire, John subverts and plays with expectations and ideas of stereotypes and stock characters. John uses these reversals and inversions to upend his audience’s expectations, and in doing so exposes the true nature of both the Roman Empire and God’s coming kingdom. We will further discuss John’s use of female stereotypes in the next chapter.

\textsuperscript{171} McGinn, “Prostitution: Controversies and New Approaches” in \textit{A Companion to Greek and Roman Sexualities}, 96.

\textsuperscript{172} Huber, \textit{Women in Revelation}, 68.
9. The Sea-Beast and the naval prowess of Rome

Revelation 13 introduces the character of the “Sea-Beast,” the beast summoned from the sea by the Dragon. The Sea-Beast and its presentation have strong connections to Rome and its martial imagery. Israelite tradition makes it clear that the sea is a place to be treated with caution. Revelation 21:1 notes that with the passing of the first earth and heaven, “the sea is no more,” indicating an ambivalence toward the sea. Aune demonstrates the “ancient Israelite tradition of the opposition of YHWH and the sea,” arguing that the sea is a “negative symbol for chaos and even for the abyss” in Israelite thought.173

In contrast to Israelite belief, the Romans were not afraid of the sea—rather, they strove to assert their dominance over the world through their power at naval warfare, as epitomised by Octavian’s victory at sea over Mark Antony and Cleopatra in the Battle of Actium, seen as the event which consolidated Octavian’s rule over Rome and secured his position as Roman emperor—the founding myth, as it were, of Octavian’s (Caesar Augustus) prowess. The poet Virgil, writing during Augustus’ reign, immortalised the Battle of Actium in verse, describing it as forming the centrepiece of the shield created for Aeneas by Vulcan.174

Augustus clearly recognised the importance of dominance over the sea; in his Res Gestae, “the sea” is mentioned on five separate occasions, and often in conjunction with “the earth”. A brief look at Augustus’ words reveals that the sea was not seen merely as a geographical feature, but as part of Rome’s sovereign territory much like the earth, and could be defended and claimed just like land:

173 Aune, Revelation 6-16, 1119.
174 Virgil, Aeneid, 8.671-713.
“I often waged war, civil and foreign, on the earth and sea, in the whole wide world...”\textsuperscript{175}

“... throughout the all the rule of the Roman people, by land and sea, peace had been secured through victory...”\textsuperscript{176}

“I restored peace to the sea from pirates.”\textsuperscript{177}

“I sailed my ships... to where no Roman had gone before that time by land or sea...”\textsuperscript{178}

This expression of power was not just limited to Rome itself, but extended to all parts of its empire. Close to Jerusalem, Rome’s naval power and dominance was expressed in the construction of Caesarea Maritima by Herod the Great; at the centre of this new city, designed to be a link between the Mediterranean and the wider Empire, stood a temple dedicated to Roma and Augustus, a clear symbol of Rome’s power.\textsuperscript{179} McCane notes that the temple was situated atop a 13-metre high podium, and oriented toward the harbour rather than with the rest of the city, causing it to stand out when approaching the city from all directions.\textsuperscript{180}

Roman ingenuity allowed even the theatres and amphitheatres to become visible reminders of its naval power. Some of the theatres and amphitheatres were designed to be sealed and flooded with water, allowing re-enactments of naval battles (\textit{naumachiae})

\textsuperscript{175} Augustus, \textit{Res Gestae}, 3.
\textsuperscript{176} Augustus, \textit{Res Gestae}, 13.
\textsuperscript{177} Augustus, \textit{Res Gestae}, 25.
\textsuperscript{180} McCane, “Simply Irresistible,” 733-734.
to take place.\textsuperscript{181} Cassius Dio recounts that the inauguration of Titus was celebrated in part by naval displays in the Flavian Amphitheatre, claiming that four thousand men fought in one such battle.\textsuperscript{182} This was not the first time that such a battle had been staged in an amphitheatre—both Cassius Dio\textsuperscript{183} and Suetonius\textsuperscript{184} attest to Nero’s staging of at least one “naval battle in salt water with sea monsters swimming in it.”\textsuperscript{185}

Of special note, of course, is the mention of “sea monsters” in both Dio and Suetonius’ accounts of the naumachiae—it seems very likely that Revelation’s Sea-Beast is a reference to one of these games, which would have been widely publicised around the empire. Whilst we do not have details of the appearance of these monsters, they are the most likely connection between Roman performance and Revelation. Quite aside from the literal presence of sea monsters, however, the naumachia held great significance in that it demonstrated the power of the emperor to perform the miraculous (an adynaton, according to Coleman)—to stage a naval battle on the sea, and in one instance to stage a land battle in the ocean.\textsuperscript{186} Whilst John may be visually referencing the literal sea monsters, his ekphrasis is intended to work on a deeper level, representing the empire and its naumachiae (and therefore the emperors, who seem to have held exclusive rights to arranging for naumachiae).

This helps us greatly in our understanding of Revelation 13. Approaching the text with a performance mode of thought, we see that aquatic displays were not unknown in Rome; in fact, they were rare and imbued with great significance. Because of this, stories about the naumachiae were widespread, especially at key convergence points of Roman trade

\textsuperscript{181} Naval battles were not the only displays held in flooded theatres; see Anne Berlan-Bajard, \textit{Les Spectacles Aquatiques Romains} (Collection de l'École française de Rome 360, 2006).

\textsuperscript{182} Cassius Dio, \textit{Roman Histories}, 66.25.2.

\textsuperscript{183} Cassius Dio, \textit{Roman Histories}, 61.9.5.

\textsuperscript{184} Suetonius, \textit{Nero}, 12.1.

\textsuperscript{185} Suetonius, \textit{Nero}, 12.1. Cassius Dio records very similar observations – specifically, “salt water”, “naval battle” and “sea monsters” are all held in common between the two narratives.

routes (such as Ephesus), and so John’s audience would have been familiar with the allusions he was making. John is very deliberate in his depiction of both a Sea-Beast and a Land-Beast as enemies of God—he represents both Roman thought and Roman domination of sea and land as being opposed to God’s natural order, and shows that the emperors’ power over both is unnatural and therefore gives rise to the “Beast” of oppression. John makes it abundantly clear that he is depicting the Roman Empire—the Sea-Beast has ten crowned horns atop seven heads, representing the ten emperors of Rome atop the seven hills of Rome. The Sea-Beast is Rome’s overarching power, made manifest into a form that demonstrates its dominance.

10. “Thus much I have to say”

This chapter has begun the process of using both a performance mode of thought and an examination of ekphrasis in drawing out the various allusions that John makes to different performance types that were known throughout the Roman Empire, specifically in Asia Minor. In this chapter alone, we have seen that this approach has the potential to be a very productive one, not only in identifying allusions but also in explaining many of them. The next chapter goes on to apply this process more methodically in the form of an exegetical exploration of the text, focusing on chapters 19 and 20 of Revelation. These chapters are among the most visually striking in Revelation, but can also be among the most controversial for some contemporary readers. To be able to apply this approach to two whole chapters rather than to selected examples is a much fairer test; ideally, it will go a long way towards demonstrating the approach’s suitability in helping contemporary readers understand Revelation in new ways.
Chapter 6

“Those who have eyes”: an exploration of Revelation 19-20

Revelation 19-20 contain some of the most vivid imagery in the book of Revelation. These chapters are a mixture of liturgy and strongly voiced imagery, and form one of the key points of the narrative of the text. The following chapter will be an exegetical exploration of the two chapters, utilising the conceptual perspectives outlined in Chapter 4. To recap briefly, the three perspectives / lenses are:

- **Visual exegesis**: specifically the use of *ekphrasis*—both “vivid language that enlivens the imagination,”¹ and also a structure of communication—“a context of communication through statements or signs that conjure visual images in the mind which, in turn, evoke ‘familiar’ contexts that provide meaning for the reader or hearer.”²

- **Performance criticism**: specifically, the *performance mode of thought*, a perspective that approaches the text with a view to understanding and extracting the embedded performance markers and “compositional characteristics which still reside embedded in the written literature.”³ This perspective understands the text as being written with a view to performance—whether physical or oral—and as such containing these characteristics.

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• Postcolonial studies: specifically, the understanding of a *hidden transcript*, which argues that certain texts were composed as “hidden” works that encouraged resistance to empire, authority and dominion by the underprivileged and oppressed. James C. Scott describes them as “works composed by those under oppression as a response to domination and hegemony, which use codes and symbols to convey an anti-authoritarian message.” Mimicry and inversion are important characteristics of the hidden transcript, and both are employed extensively throughout Revelation as John subverts the imagery of empire (including performance) in order to demonstrate the spiritual reality of God’s kingdom.

It is important to remember that the postcolonial approach is not intended to be utilised in the same way as the other two, but rather helps inform the context of John’s audience, and so forms a framework for understanding. In other words, we should remember John’s audience’s ambivalence (and possible anger) towards structures of oppression and empire, and understand that this is the purpose of Revelation—to address these feelings.

By utilising these three perspectives alongside a variety of well-established exegetical methods, this chapter aims to draw out the performance aspects of the text and also to explore possible motivations for them.

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5 Revelation is defined as a “hidden” transcript given its position—as a controversial, relatively uncommon text that was available only to members of an illegal underground cult (Christianity) that spread throughout the Roman Empire.
1. Narrative context: fallen, fallen is Babylon!

Revelation 19 and 20 can be structured in many ways, each with its own benefits and disadvantages, but here I have chosen to divide the text into two main sections: Revelation 19:1-10, the “Hallelujah chorus in heaven” and Revelation 19:11-20:15, the “Last battle and judgment.” These two chapters were chosen as examples of how a performative approach to Revelation can draw out new insights from the text; the three conceptual perspectives above are aids in discovering these insights.

The two chapters are preceded by a two-chapter sequence, Revelation 17 and 18, in which John depicts Babylon as a “Great Whore,” the root of evil and the cause of oppression and suffering for the Christians. This is highly problematic imagery—Blount, for example, calls it a “misogynistic fault line capable of devouring the self-image of any woman thrown up against it.” Yet to be affected strongly by the portrayal of women in Revelation when attempting an exegesis of the text is somewhat anachronistic thinking; it is important to remember Revelation’s wider background context (specifically, Jewish / Greco-Roman views and imagery). To do so does not excuse the language of the text, but it firmly grounds the text in its own reality—and reminds the contemporary reader that this reality is one that is, at times, very different from their own!

Lynn Huber offers a rational and thorough exploration of the ancient world’s views on women, noting that in a Roman worldview, “the female body... [is] a logical choice for

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7 See, for example, Steve Friesen’s response to Tina Pippin, which explores the symbolism of the text and concludes that there are some significant issues with feminist arguments against Revelation. Friesen, Imperial Cults and Revelation, 185-187.
8 There are a number of scholarly reactions to John’s portrayal of Babylon as a lewd prostitute—among them scholars who denounce John’s writing as misogynistic and harmful towards women (such as Blount, Pippin, Moore), scholars who explain John’s choice of words using a contextual interpretation (Friesen, Huber, Schüssler Fiorenza), and scholars who see no issue at all (a vast majority of the predominantly male scholarship). Whilst I acknowledge and recognize that John’s words may be unhelpful, as I argue further, they are bound and informed by their context—which we must take time to understand before offering further critique.
representing Rome’s subjects,”9 but also notes the variety of imagery in Roman thought depicting women (as conquered prisoners representing people groups, as idealised characters representing Roman virtues, as the goddess Roma representing the city). To that end, as Davina Lopez points out, the depiction of the Great Whore could be a reference to both the goddess Roma and the “gendered symbols of defeat”10 shown in the *Sebasteion* (such as bared breasts and unkempt hair).11

Huber also compares both Schüssler Fiorenza and Pippin’s contrasting arguments regarding the Whore of Babylon—Schüssler Fiorenza arguing that the gendered language and imagery is often not about gender but about socio-political critique,12 and Pippin conversely arguing that the imagery is a misogynist fantasy that empowers violence against women.13 To bridge the two views, Huber offers a third path—that the image of Babylon “cannot be reduced to either domain” and that “John employs the concept WOMAN precisely because of the gender assumptions inherent in the domain. And yet, as a metaphor, the image of Babylon as Whore is not intended to communicate anything about women *per se.*”14

Quite aside from the suggestions offered by various commentators as to the imagery that lies behind the Whore of Babylon (Juvenal’s depiction of Messalina, Roma, Artemis, the Old Testament imagery), or the perceived or imagined allusions to Jewish scripture,15 it is important to remember that prostitution was a daily reality in the

10 Huber, *Thinking with Women in Revelation*, 45.
14 Huber, *Seeing with Women in Revelation*, 60.
15 For example, commentators are quick to link the figure of the Whore with Jezebel of 1 Kings, who instituted worship of Baal and Asherah and ordered the destruction of the prophets of YHWH. Jezebel is of course the title that John gives to a false prophet in Thyatira in Revelation 2:20.
Roman Empire, and that many would have been familiar with prostitutes.Prostitutes were well represented in popular culture, and so approaching the text from a “performance mode of thought” offers another solution, a solution that is grounded in an awareness of the everyday lives of people reading the text.

Much like Greek comedies, Roman comedies drew on a group of stock characters, each of which came with its own characteristics and personality, like the “tricky slave” discussed in Chapter 5. One such character is the prostitute or *meretrix*, heavily utilised by Plautus in his writing. Those working as prostitutes were generally understood to be required by a decree from Augustus to wear a toga to distinguish them from *matrons*, as discussed in the previous chapter. Raia identifies three distinct types of *meretrix* depicted in Plautus’ writing: the inexperienced prostitute with just one lover, the jaded madam who advises younger prostitutes (mostly on the importance of money over love), and the women of luxury who spend their time “bathing, perfuming, and ornamenting themselves with the clothing and jewelry that their lovers shower upon them.”

The Great Whore of Babylon is reminiscent of the *meretrix* character that many would have been familiar with. Here, the *ekphrasis* employed by John in Revelation 17:4-5 is

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16 Stephen Moore and Jennifer Glancy argue that many scholarly interpretations of the text are derived from “elite Greek or Latin literary texts or from Jewish Scripture,” and therefore have no basis in reality for the original audience of the text. Their contribution—an understanding of the realities of prostitution in the Roman Empire—is enlightening and very helpful (and arguably vital) for all who approach the text. Stephen D. Moore and Jennifer A. Glancy, “The Empress and the Brothel Slave” in *Untold Tales from the Book of Revelation: Sex and Gender, Empire and Ecology*, ed. Stephen D. Moore (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2014), 105.


21 This is not unique to theatrical literature; Aune notes, for example, that “courtesans were used, particularly by moralist writers, as personifications of the vices.” See Aune, *Revelation 17-22*, 935.
The woman was clothed in **purple and scarlet**, and adorned with **gold and jewels and pearls**, holding in her hand a **golden cup** full of abominations and the impurities of her fornication; and on her forehead was written a name, a mystery: “Babylon the great, **mother of whores** and of earth’s abominations.”  

For those approaching the text from the perspective of performance (utilising a “performance mode of thought”), the clothing and language used to describe the woman can be conflated with a description of a theatrical character. By equating the Great Whore of Babylon with the **meretrix** of Greco-Roman comedy, the role of the Whore becomes that of a stock stereotype with which John’s audience in Asia Minor would identify. The character is to be understood as a caricature, a straw man, and rather than intentionally speaking with specific gendered language, John is employing a trope that many would have been familiar with in order to drive home the anti-imperial message in his text. Where Roman propaganda would depict Roma as an elegant goddess, a **matron** embodying Roman virtues, John reveals her to be an old, self-interested prostitute; she is adorned with stolen goods and is the opposite of a paragon of virtue.

At the same time, to reduce any female character to a mere caricature surely compounds the insult to women. Here, it is helpful to return to our brief discussion of the female characters in Chapter 5. There, it was shown that the roles played by both the Mother in Revelation 12 and the Whore in Revelation 17 represented a creative anomaly, a deviation from the standard expectations of female characters within Greco-

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22 Revelation 17:4-5.
23 John’s audience would also have been familiar with the depiction of defeated nations as women, especially in Roman coinage and statuary.
Roman comedy. As Florence argues, the “creative departure from [the] audience’s expectations demands an understanding of female subordination but then transgresses the model in a new and particularly original way.”

John plays to female stereotypes in line with the culture he is writing to—but at the same time, both of these characters cross boundaries and expectations, causing the audience to reconsider these cultural norms. They are pivotal, monumental characters whose actions drive the plot of the drama. Whilst women are not the centre of Revelation, they are certainly essential to it.

John’s intention does not seem to be the denigration of women, but rather the subversion of his audience’s expectations of women in order to expose the evils of empire. Although John’s text does treat women differently, it does so within the context of the societal norms of its audience, and does so in order to construct a critique. Revelation is a product of its context, and any criticisms of the text’s treatment of women should be aimed at the culture of the first century CE.

Following on from this, a declaration is made in Revelation 18 that Babylon has “fallen,” and that the kings, merchants and other traders are weeping over her demise. Of note is the list of items traded with the great city—luxury items meant for the rich and wealthy, indicating that those who suffer as a result of Babylon’s fall are those in power. Revelation 17-18 therefore form a clearly self-contained unit within the text which describes the “judgment of God upon the great harlot, Rome.” This is followed by a musical interlude of sorts in Revelation 19, then yet another dramatic passage in Revelation 19-20. We will now explore Revelation 19 and 20 using our three conceptual perspectives.

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2. Revelation 19:1-10: Worship in the Throne Room

2.1 The Heavenly Host (19:1-7)

Revelation 19:1-10 is a transitional text that bridges the fall of Babylon in Revelation 18 with the subsequent last battle of Revelation 19:11-21. It is clearly a worship scene, and a continuation of the command in Revelation 18:20 to “rejoice.” The text’s description of the fall of Babylon makes it clear that the city’s destruction is a judgmental action by God, and the rejoicing in heaven comes about due to this action, as Revelation 19:2 points out. The assembled multitude in heaven, as well as the twenty-four elders and the four beasts, proclaim Ἅλληλουϊά (hallelujah), a Greek transliteration of the Hebrew phrase הַלְּלוּיָ, meaning “praise YHWH.” Later, a presumably different multitude (notable in that they are not referred to as being in heaven) similarly sing praises to God.

The “multitude” (ὄχλος πολύς) occurs just once outside of Revelation 19—the phrase appears in Revelation 7:9, after John hears of the 144,000 but sees a great multitude assembled. Aune argues that both occurrences in Revelation 19 are probably references to the heavenly beings (angels, elders, and living creatures) seen surrounding the throne in Revelation 5:11, and notes that the multitude in heaven of Revelation 19:1 and the multitude “like the sound of many waters and mighty thunderpeals” in Revelation 19:6 seem to be intended as different entities. There is a clear distinction between the two; one possible explanation is that this distinction is similar to that found between Revelation 5:11 (“the voice of many angels surrounding the throne and the living creatures and the elders; they numbered myriads of myriads and thousands of

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A simpler explanation for both differences, one informed by a performance mode of thought, is that John is simply providing the equivalent of stage directions in his text. For example, Revelation 5:9 shows the 24 elders, the core chorus, singing a “new song” of praise, then Revelation 5:11 demonstrates an extended chorus consisting of every performer on the “stage” of the Throne Room, and finally Revelation 5:13 shows the entire cast and assembly singing. This, of course, is also a visual enlarging of the scale of the drama, and one that would have been very effective. Revelation 19, on the other hand, works slightly differently. In the first instance (Revelation 19:1) John hears the “great sound” of a “great multitude in heaven,” whereas the second time round he hears the “sound” of a “great multitude” augmented by thunder and water. In a previous chapter, we have already discussed the mechanical and technical innovations of the theatre, and it was no great difficulty for Greek or Roman theatres to produce such noises. This, then, is John augmenting and expanding his script to add further drama to the events occurring; as the performance reaches a climax, it seems as though even the elements join in the worship of God!31

There are obvious, strong parallels between Revelation 5 and 19, and this suggests that this is a deliberate storytelling device that helps the audience to understand the significance of the events happening. In this instance, John utilises a chiastic structure in the vein of classical ring theory, and repeats motifs and recreates scenes as a tool for marking significance. They are summarised below:

A  Revelation 5:11-12 The heavenly host sing  
B  Revelation 5:13 The whole earth sings

31 Of course, Revelation 19:6-7 refers to a sound “like” waters and thunderpeals—which, as discussed in earlier chapters, was possible to enact through the many devices employed in the theater.
Although these are not direct parallels in that some verses have been omitted, this is characteristic of ring-style storytelling; two arcs within the wider narrative are parallel events, forming two half-rings within the wider ring of the entire text. Whilst these events do differ, they are painted with the same broad brushstrokes, and are recognisably similar as particular motifs are repeated. In both cases, we see that the upscaling of the choral singers leads to a climactic event; in the case of Revelation 19, heaven is opened and the Rider on the White Horse appears. In this, we see another example of John’s playing with his medium using *ekphrasis*; much like in Revelation 5 where the audience expect to see a Lion and instead are presented with a Lamb, in Revelation 19:7-9 the audience is told to expect a Lamb, and are presented with a warrior in Revelation 19:11.

Both scenes are also reminiscent of the Roman worship that might have taken place as part of the *ludi*. As we saw in the previous chapters, the twenty-four elders resemble the chorus, but also resemble Roman priests singing hymns during the *ludi*. Gladys Martin demonstrates that Roman hymns were composed of three parts: the invocation of a deity, the praise of the deity, and a petition to the deity. The hymns in Revelation 19 make no request of God; they simply consist of praise, indicating the fulfilment of God’s promises and the coming consummation of the Kingdom of Heaven.

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2.2 White Linen, Bright and Pure (19:8)

The great multitude sing in Revelation 19:7-8 that the Bride of the Lamb has been “granted to be clothed with fine linen, bright and pure,” and that “fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints.” Clothing is clearly very important to John, and from a performance mode of thought, the costuming of the various characters in any performance plays a large part in characterising and defining who they are. John is careful to make mention of clothing throughout his narrative, and the contrasts are stark. The characters aligned with God are almost always dressed in white, or at least have some semblance of radiance about them:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Character</th>
<th>Location in Rev.</th>
<th>Dress</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Son of Man</td>
<td>1:13</td>
<td>Long robe and golden sash</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twenty four elders</td>
<td>4:4</td>
<td>White robes with golden crowns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Martyrs</td>
<td>6:11</td>
<td>White robe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>144,000</td>
<td>7:9</td>
<td>White robes with palm branches</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angel with scroll</td>
<td>10:1</td>
<td>Wrapped in cloud; rainbow over head</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two witnesses</td>
<td>11:3</td>
<td>Sackcloth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>12:1</td>
<td>Clothed with the sun; crown of twelve stars; moon under feet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One like the Son</td>
<td>14:14</td>
<td>Golden crown; sharp sickle</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
On the other hand, we see a much greater variety of clothing amongst the other characters, many of whom are enemies of God:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Character</th>
<th>Location in Rev.</th>
<th>Dress</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Locusts</td>
<td>9:7</td>
<td>Like gold crowns, iron breastplates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cavalry</td>
<td>9:17</td>
<td>Breastplates (fire, sulphur, sapphire)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sea-beast</td>
<td>13:1</td>
<td>Diadems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All humans remaining</td>
<td>13:16</td>
<td>Mark on forehead and right hand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whore of Babylon</td>
<td>17:4</td>
<td>Purple and scarlet, gold, jewels, pearls</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Great City</td>
<td>19:16</td>
<td>Fine linen, purple and scarlet, jewels and pearls</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 2. Characters aligned with God and their costumes*

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34 It is notable that these angels are the only group of seven angels whose clothing is described.
Table 3. Other characters in Revelation and their costumes

It is immediately evident that God’s enemies are richly dressed; the Sea-Beast, the Whore of Babylon and the Great City are all bedecked with jewellery, and the Whore and the City are dressed very similarly. God’s allies, on the other hand, are quite plainly dressed, and there seems to be a uniformity of sorts in that their clothing is generally either white or “bright.” There is an obvious contrast between the Mother (who is clothed with the sun, wears a crown of twelve stars, and has the moon under her feet) and the Whore (who is clothed in purple and scarlet, wearing gold, jewels and pearls).

The symbolism here is quite clear—the allies of God are dressed humbly, like priests, whereas God’s enemies are richly dressed, flaunting the excesses of their ill-gotten wealth. To an audience who might have been suffering under the evils of empire, who had witnessed the fall of Jerusalem and heard about the triumph held by Titus in celebration, a single look at the clothes worn by each character makes it clear whose side they are on. Those who fight alongside God dress simply and humbly, with colours reminiscent of priesthood and religion, whereas those against God dress in the colours of earthly kings. Here lies yet another answer to Moore’s critique of Revelation; if Revelation were truly a simple, binary inversion of empire, as he asserts, surely God’s allies (or at least the Son of Man or God himself) would be dressed in mimicry of the Roman emperor. John does not seek to replace an earthly king, but rather casts a critique at earthly kingship, reminding his audience that they are ruled by a heavenly king.

Amidst all this, we also see mentions of disrobing and nakedness; Revelation 16:15 says “Blessed is the one who stays awake and is clothed, not going about naked and exposed to shame,” and John is told in Revelation 17:16 that the whore will be made “desolate and naked.” Without seeking to set aside the valid questions raised by feminism of the
treatment of women in John’s text, \textsuperscript{35} it is worth remembering both Rossing and Hood’s conclusions that John is creating a dichotomy for his ancient readers, forcing them to choose between one or the other. \textsuperscript{36} John does not set out to denigrate the feminine any more than he chooses to denigrate or elevate the masculine; he simply uses terminology and imagery that are highly contextual to his audience.

Returning to Revelation 19:8, we see that the Bride has made herself ready, and yet the notion of the Bride is, in Aune’s words, “mentioned enigmatically but not further defined or described.” \textsuperscript{37} It is important to note that although the bride is mentioned, she is never seen! Aune also notes that “the metaphor of Christ as the bridegroom and the people of God as the bride was widespread in early Christianity,” \textsuperscript{38} but goes on to argue alongside Revelation that the new Jerusalem is also the bride, \textsuperscript{39} following John’s lead in mixing metaphors. \textsuperscript{40} The Bride is only finally seen at the culmination of events, in Revelation 21.

It seems plain that the Bride is both metaphorical woman and physical city in the same way that John envisages Babylon. Engaging with this idea from a performance mode of thought, it seems that John might be engaging in the deliberate anthropomorphization common to cities in the ancient world in Revelation 19, \textsuperscript{41} pre-empting and leading into a scene (more correctly, backdrop) change in Revelation 21. In Revelation 21, John sees


\textsuperscript{37} Aune, *Revelation 17-22*, 1029.

\textsuperscript{38} Aune, *Revelation 17-22*, 1029.

\textsuperscript{39} See Revelation 21:2; Aune, *Revelation 17-22*, 1030.

\textsuperscript{40} There are, of course, Biblical references to both city and church as being bride—Song of Solomon 6 explicitly compares the bride to Jerusalem, and Ephesians 5 likens the church to being married to Christ.

\textsuperscript{41} Aune links the Whore of Babylon to the *Dea Roma* cult which worshipped the anthropomorphisation of the city of Rome, the goddess Roma, and notes that this was common to cities around the eastern Mediterranean. See Aune, *Revelation 17-22*, 922-923.
the holy city “coming down out of heaven from God.” As before with Revelation 19:6, the technology of the theatres meant that this was not an impossible feat to imagine. John’s audience might have imagined a change in backdrop, or a crane lowering a large model of a city—or even the idol of the city goddess.42

The mention of fine linen is also significant to the point John is trying to make. Those characters aligned with God who are similarly dressed in “fine linen” are all clearly heavenly beings (the angels with the bowls, the Bride of the Lamb, and the armies of heaven), and therefore the Bride is not a human creation. At the same time, her counterpart, the City of Babylon, is also clothed in fine linen, but her liner is not “bright and pure” but rather “purple and scarlet,” the colors of human royalty. John deliberately creates a contrast in the two characters’ costumes in order to highlight their differences; though they are similar in being anthropomorphized cities, they are different in that one is a human creation which consumes precious cargo and kills the witnesses of God, whereas the other is a heavenly creation which is built of precious stones and gives life to all people.

As a hidden transcript, John’s anthropomorphisation of the evil city,43 presumably the city of Rome, as most interpreters would assert and Revelation itself suggests, allows him to use cultural conventions to force a choice on his audience. On the one hand, we see a woman dressed like royalty, who is both named and acts like a prostitute, and who enacts violence. John has clearly described a twisted version of the goddess Roma, personification of the city of Rome, and the actions against her and the language used to describe these actions reflect the anger of his audience against the ruling authorities. Roma (or Babylon) is thrown down, and her rich and powerful consorts can no longer

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42 A possible link may be found in Acts 19:35, which indicates the belief that the statue of Artemis had come down from heaven: “…the city of the Ephesians is the temple keeper of the great Artemis and of the statue that fell from heaven.”
43 Of course, it is questionable as to whether this is John's anthropomorphisation or a natural assumption for an ancient worldview - see, for example, Huber’s arguments regarding the ancient world’s conception of cities as women in Lynn R. Huber, Like A Bride Adorned: Reading Metaphor in John’s Apocalypse (London: T&T Clark, 2007), 89-112.
gain advantages from her. These actions also reflect the actions experienced by the oppressed and marginalised that John is writing to; this creates complex moral questions.

As Bhabha and Moore argue, the problem with inverted fantasy texts is that they are irrevocably entwined and reliant upon the cultural status quo; thus violence is constantly in danger of being replaced with violence, dictatorship with dictatorship. In their eyes, the dominant culture is replicated even as it is railed against, and so violence and evil traditions continue to be unwittingly propagated.44 We have already discussed these arguments at length, so we shall not revisit them again here save to reiterate the argument that the boundaries of hidden transcripts are made especially clear through the medium of performance—they are entirely fictional, and acknowledged to be pure escapist fantasy, creating a space where frustrations can be safely vented. It must also be pointed out that all of the violence and retribution carried out on behalf of God in Revelation is solely enacted by heavenly or evil powers, not human will.45 This does not absolve John or indeed any writer of the questions raised by their treatment of women, but goes a long way toward explaining and understanding it.46

Not all of John’s text is negative towards women, however, as we see a heavenly alternative being alluded to in Revelation 19—Roma as she should have been to the Romans, or, to the Christians and Jews, the perfect city of Zion or Jerusalem. Clothed in the same way as the angels or the heavenly host, this new city is perhaps the epitome of hope as expressed through either hidden transcript or apocalyptic literature. It is not surprising that John only hints at the Bride in Revelation 19 before finally revealing “her” in Revelation 21—he creates an atmosphere of suspense, and shows his audience

44 Moore, Empire and Apocalypse.
45 Lupieri points out that “it is not the Lamb who destroys the prostitute but rather the Satanic forces...” see Edmondo F. Lupieri, A Commentary on the Apocalypse of John (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2006), 278-280 and 299.
46 It is also worth remembering that Revelation has inspired men and women both throughout the centuries despite of, or perhaps because of, its imagery. See Judith Kovacs and Christopher Rowland, Revelation (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 188-189.
that the holy dream of the heavenly city cannot be realised until the events of the Apocalypse are at an end.

2.3  John’s Curious Mistake (19:9-10)

The announcement of the yet-to-arrive city and the wedding feast is of such magnificent import that John falls at the angel’s feet to worship it, and is rebuked for doing so. Here, John as narrator engages in a blatantly incorrect act of worship; the rebuke serves to remind John’s audience that neither the angels, nor John himself, nor the readers or performers of the text, are worthy of devotion, but are all simply messengers in service of God. Most intriguingly, John later attempts to worship the angel again in Revelation 22:8, and is once again rebuked for doing so.

We have already discussed at length the religious and spiritual implications of the theatre in both the Greek and Roman worlds. Worship was a common feature, and Revelation is itself full of liturgy. Why, then, does John only attempt to worship the angel now? David Aune points out that “mistaking a human being for a deity appearing in human form is a motif found frequently in Greek and Hellenistic literature,” and it seems likely that this is an allusion to such literature. Stuckenbruck points out that this event has its parallels in apocalyptic writings contemporary to Revelation; in some of these writings, worship is offered to an angelic being by a prophet or visionary, but is rejected by said being. As we shall see, John’s worship of the angel is an important anchor point in the text that helps his audience to remember key motifs that occur throughout his narrative.

47 Aune, Revelation 17-22, 1035.
48 See Loren T. Stuckenbruck, Angel Veneration and Christology: A Study in Early Judaism and in the Christology of the Apocalypse of John (Tübingen: WUNT, 1995).
John only falls (πίπτω) three times in Revelation. The first time occurs when he encounters the One Like a Son of Man in Revelation 1; John writes that he “fell at his feet as though dead.” Next is Revelation 19:10, where he “fell at his feet to worship him,” and finally in Revelation 22:8, where he “fell down to worship at the feet of the angel.” Each of these occurrences follow a similar pattern and form a recurring motif that speaks to the ring cycle of the text; John sees something significant, worships or attempts to worship, and is given an instruction. As such, these events form bookends or markers of significance within the text, indicating that the events following (in the case of Revelation 1:17-19 and Revelation 19:10) and preceding (in the case of Revelation 22:8-10) form a unit of sorts. This is best explained below:

Revelation 1:17-19

A Revelation of One Like a Son of Man  
B John falls to worship  
C “Do not be afraid”  
D Write to the seven cities

Here, we see the beginnings of the cycles of seven with 'write to the seven cities'.

Revelation 19:10

A’ Revelation of John’s Vision (the Cycles of Seven)  
B’ John falls to worship  
C’ “Do not do it”  
D’ The testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy (worship God)

Here, we see the final narrative arc, the ‘testimony of Jesus’.

49 Revelation 1:17
Revelation 22:8-10

A” Revelation of the Holy City (the Testimony of Jesus)
   B” John falls to worship
   C” “Do not do it”
   D” Do not seal up the words of the prophecy (worship God)

Finally, we see the conclusion of the narrative, and a command for the prophecy not to be sealed, but presumably to be distributed to the seven churches, creating a cycle that returns the narrative to Revelation 1. John’s falling to worship is also a visual cue for his audience, using _ekphrastic_ language (in this case, the image of the narrator falling down in worship) to remind them of the key motifs and to mark key points in the narrative.⁵⁰

To recap, Revelation 1:17-19 indicates a beginning of sorts to the narrative; Revelation 22:8-10 indicates an end, and Revelation 19:10 marks both the conclusion of the cycles of seven and the final narrative arc of God’s redemption. Revelation 22:10’s command for John not to “seal up the prophecy” is designed to bring the audience back to where the narrative began, with the command to “write to the churches.” Each time, John (and therefore John’s audience) is also reminded to “worship God.” These three instances are important anchor points in the narrative, and serve as both bookends and reminders for worship. Of course, implicit in this pericope is a warning against incorrect worship or idolatry; to view it as simply a warning, however, does not do justice to the breadth and ambition of John’s work.

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⁵⁰In so doing, John also takes his audience back to the last time they saw John “fall.” This acts as both visual cue and as storytelling device (a la ring theory). A contemporary example occurs in _Star Wars Episode IV: A New Hope_, where Luke is twice blinded when wearing a helmet. The first time this happens, whilst training with Obi-Wan to become a Jedi, Luke gradually learns to “use the Force.” The second time, he is prompted by Obi-Wan at a crucial moment to blind himself, and again to “use the Force,” leading to a successful shot that takes down the Empire’s superweapon. In employing this visual cue, Lucas fulfills the chiasm, but also creates a visual callback that helps the audience remember past events in the narrative. This also creates (possibly unconscious) expectations on the audience’s behalf—expectations that Lucas fulfills (Luke is successful), but John subverts (John is told not to worship).
3. **The last battle: Revelation 19:11-21**

3.1 *King of Kings and Lord of Lords: The Word of God (19:11-16)*

Revelation 19:11-16 introduces another image of the Son of Man, this time presented as a warrior mounted upon a white horse (the “Word of God”). This passage is generally read as “a description of the return or Parousia of Jesus Christ,” but is problematic because “the pericope contains no features clearly derived from traditional early Christian conceptions of the Parousia of Jesus.”\(^{51}\) Of course, the imagery presented is still replete with Jewish and Christian symbolism; however, in this instance, it is clear that it is necessary to take cues from Greco-Roman theatrical sources in order to present a fuller understanding of John’s allusions.

The warrior we see in Revelation 19 is remarkably similar at first glance to the Rider on the White Horse of Revelation 6: both are astride a white horse, both wear crowns (the Rider in Revelation 6 wears one, whereas the rider in Revelation 19 wears many), both ride out to conquer, and both are portrayed as victors of sorts. Approaching the text from a literary and structural perspective, it is evident that John is creating a recurring motif, or at least deliberately paralleling his imagery. From the perspective of the audience, we might expect another series of seven events, given John’s tendency toward cycles, but we have also just seen (in Revelation 19:10) a conclusion to the cycles of seven. Whilst the themes are repeated, it soon becomes clear that this warrior is not the original Rider on the White Horse.

\(^{51}\) Aune, *Revelation 17-22*, 1046.
The text names the warrior as both “Faithful and True,” and as “Word of God,” and depicts the armies of heaven as following behind him dressed in “fine linen, white and clean” and riding white horses. In a previous chapter, I noted that scholars tend to equate this scene with that of the Roman triumph, and therefore the Word of God with the figure of the victorious general (often the Roman Emperor). There is also a suggestion that the cargo lists of Revelation 18 bear similarities to the spoils of battle carried as part of a triumphal procession—a suggestion that has great merit to it, given that the lists include items of great rarity and value, and also include horses, chariots and slaves. The ekphrastic language here would surely evoke the military setting of the Roman armies—the language of horses, swords, and armies in particular.

The Roman triumph was an event heavy with religious and mythical significance. As a celebration of the victorious Roman army, it allowed the Romans to display both their prowess in battle and their devotion to Jupiter; it was as much a spiritual celebration as a physical one. There was an order to the triumph: the spoils of battle and captives first, then the victorious general and his captains, and finally the soldiers. In the same way, Revelation 18 lists the goods of Babylon, and then in Revelation 19 the Rider is described, followed by the heavenly army. Knowledge of the triumph was not just limited to Rome—the imagery of triumphs were inscribed on coins and temples across the Empire as part of imperial propaganda.

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53 J. Nelson Kraybill provides an analysis of the value of the items, and notes that “John recognizes that Rome’s appetite for this array of exotic goods goes beyond ordinary use,” calling it a “warped spiritual obsession.” Whilst his language is bombastic, he correctly identifies that all export roads led to Rome, and that wealthy Romans were great consumers of the exotic. J. Nelson Kraybill, *Imperial Cults and Commerce in John’s Apocalypse* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 102-110.
54 An excellent dissection of the history of the triumph and its significance can be found in David A. Thomas’ study of Revelation 19. See Thomas, *Revelation 19*.
The triumph was not just seen as a military parade celebrating the victories of the conquering general; in fact, the event was seen fundamentally as a transformative event (a “construction of worldviews”) where Rome was introduced to the foreign nature of the outside world. In Allan Georgia’s words, “the Roman triumph was able to revel in its expansive global dominance while at the same time helping to naturalize otherwise unfamiliar people and cultures.” Of course, Georgia reminds us, the triumph was nevertheless a firm reminder of Rome’s dominance, and invariably ended in the dedication of enemy kings and soldiers to Jupiter.

This is seen vividly in Josephus’ account of the triumph in Rome that followed the destruction of Jerusalem. Following a period of civil war, the populace of Rome were united in a triumph that celebrated their victory over the Jews—who were a worthy enough enemy, having defeated the Romans in battle several times during the war. This was, of course, a highly significant event for the Jews and Christians as well, and many argue that Revelation both directly and indirectly alludes to the fall of Jerusalem. Indeed, the following extracts from Josephus’ account of the triumph show a great degree of similarity to John’s list of trade goods lamented by the merchants in Revelation:

... for there was here to be seen a mighty quantity of silver and gold and ivory, contrived into all sorts of things... there were also precious stones that were transparent, some set in crowns of gold... the images of the gods were also carried, being as well wonderful for their largeness... the men also who brought every one of these shows were great multitudes, and adorned with purple garments, all over interwoven with gold...

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56 For example, on the Arch of Trajan, or the “temple of the Sebastoi” in Ephesus—see Steven J. Friesen, Twice Neokoros: Ephesus, Asia, and the Cult of the Flavian Imperial Family (Leiden: Brill, 1993), 29-49.
besides these, one might see that even the great number of the captives was not unadorned...\(^{59}\)

For comparison, here follows the first half of John’s list in Revelation 18:12:

... cargoes of gold, silver, precious stones and pearls; fine linen, purple, silk and scarlet cloth; every sort of citron wood, and articles of every kind made of ivory, costly wood, bronze, iron and marble...\(^{60}\)

There are undeniable similarities between John’s list and Josephus’ account of the spoils paraded in the triumph. Of course, John is not necessarily quoting Josephus, or vice versa, but it seems possible that John is drawing on the best-known imagery of the triumphs to paint his own picture. After this, and a series of other processions, Josephus sketches out the triumphal entry of the emperor, the climax of the triumph.\(^{61}\) It is also worth noting the clothing of the emperor, seen before the details of the triumphal procession.

... while they were themselves without their arms, and only in their silken garments, and crowned with laurel: then Vespasian accepted of these shouts of theirs; but while they were still disposed to go on in such acclamations, he gave them a signal of silence...\(^{62}\)

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\(^{60}\) Revelation 18:12.

\(^{61}\) Shane Wood notes the disparity between the Roman emperor, mounted on a *quadriga* (four-horsed chariot), and Jesus, who is mounted on a single white horse, and convincingly contends that John is using the imagery of the Flavian Triumph to depict Jesus as "Son of God," given Domitian’s position in the triumph on a white horse alongside the *quadriga* bearing his victorious father, Vespasian, and brother, Titus. See Shane J. Wood, *The Alter-Imperial Paradigm: Empire Studies and the Book of Revelation* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 211.

... after which Vespasian marched in the first place, and Titus followed him; Domitian also rode along with them, and made a glorious appearance, and rode on a horse that was worthy of admiration.63

Following their entry, the emperor and his consorts would offer sacrifices to the gods, in most cases killing the enemy general and leaders.64 This was seen as a sacrifice, and drew the people of Rome together in defiance of this strange enemy whom they had defeated. There can be no doubt that triumph was a significant event, and Versnel colourfully argues that it was perhaps the most significant event in the religious life of Rome:

In no other Roman ceremony do god and man approach each other as closely as they do in the triumph... the triumphator himself has a status which appears to raise him to the rank of the gods... it seems as if Jupiter himself, incarnated in the triumphator, makes his solemn entry into Rome.65

Versnel’s suggestion, rooted in a deep understanding of Roman spirituality and mentality, further illuminates our understanding of the person of the Rider. If the triumph represents the apotheosis or perhaps incarnation of the triumphator, then John’s depiction of the Word of God as a warrior to match the Roman Emperor is a deliberate appropriation and inversion of Roman imperial imagery. The ivory sceptre of the triumphator is replaced with the iron sceptre of the King of Kings, and the laurel branch is replaced by a sword—however, this sword emerges from the mouth of the Rider on the White Horse, indicating the power of the Word and a denial of the violence of Rome. This is further reinforced by the name written on the robe and thigh of the warrior, “King of Kings and Lord of Lords” (Βασιλεὺς βασιλέων καὶ κύριος κυρίων). As

discussed in the previous chapter, Revelation’s use of these titles is both ironic and transformative, and turns imperial cult worship towards God.

Shane Wood further argues that Revelation 19’s depiction of the triumph is not the final picture, but rather the opening procession that leads to a further climax with the revealing of “the one on the throne” in Revelation 20:11-21:4.66 The enemy in this case is not Rome, but rather is Satan, who is first bound and imprisoned, then released to “reenact in a dramatic fashion the moment of his defeat.”67 John’s audience are like the citizens of Rome, gathered together to bear witness to the victorious entry of the Word of God. Wood’s suggestion is another helpful perspective on the text, albeit one that does not take into account the chiasm created between Satan’s first (Revelation 20:1-3) and second bindings (Revelation 20:7-10).

Intriguingly, it seems that the procession (in Revelation 18) is not aimed at naturalising viewers to the foreign, but rather to highlight the differences between Babylon and the coming city of God. As D.A. Thomas puts it,

[John] is declaring that what the emperors claimed by donning the garb of Jupiter and riding in triumphal procession was a deep spiritual reality—an entire paradigm—that did not belong to them at all. They were not the victors over evil, Christ was... John thus interprets his vision through a triumphal lens... because he wanted to reclaim what belonged to Christ and forever make clear that things were precisely the opposite of what the false gods of his age proclaimed.68

Although a heavenly army follows the Rider, they are not armed, and do not enact violence, but rather act as witnesses to the fall of God’s enemies. They are dressed like

68 Thomas, Revelation 19, 87.
priests in both Greco-Roman and Jewish traditions,\textsuperscript{69} which represents their character, and are not dressed in scarlet, purple, or any form of armour, unlike the Roman armies who follow their emperor.

Of course, the \textit{ekphrastic} language used by John does not have to refer to just the triumph. John certainly writes in a way that evokes that imagery, but it is not the only reference being made in his depiction of the Rider. \textit{Ekphrasis} is not limited to evoking just one particular image, nor one context, and it is impossible for us to know what John’s true intentions might have been. For example, according to Suetonius, Caligula once rode his horse across a temporary floating bridge in order to defy a soothsayer’s prediction.\textsuperscript{70} This is just one other instance of what John may be alluding to with his \textit{ekphrasis}, and there are numerous possibilities. However, given John’s consistent focus on creating a hidden transcript that speaks against the Roman Empire, it seems likely that the triumph imagery is the best fit, and that John is speaking about the triumph of Christ over the Roman Empire. The mimicry of the triumph is in line with Scott’s hidden transcript theory, and John’s inversions are both deliberate and carefully thought out in order to portray the Roman Empire as both inferior and unequal to God’s Heavenly Kingdom.

Ultimately, what John demonstrates is a spiritual reality that is opposed to that of the Roman Empire: where the Romans have a king of claimed divine status whose will is enacted through edicts but also through military might and violence, God’s kingdom is ruled by the indisputable Son of God, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, who has his servants (the angels), but who ultimately goes into battle on behalf of his people. He is dressed and enters the fray triumphantly, as one who has already won, metaphorically re-enacting the triumph that signalled the defeat and humiliation of the Jewish people.

\textsuperscript{69} Beale, \textit{Revelation}, 961.

In doing so, he inverts and reclaims the victory for himself, and brings hope that justice will come to his people.

3.2 The Angel calling (19:17-18)

After seeing the Rider and the multitude, John sees an “angel standing in the sun,” calling to the birds of the air. Although this seems like a simple transitional sentence, this reflects the multi-level approach to Revelation that is clear to those interpreting the text from a performance mode of thought. The Greco-Roman theatres throughout the Empire were large, with multiple levels of staging. Revelation shows a lot of movement between each level, and we see that each level represents a different location. Most theatres, as we have discussed, would have consisted of a ground-level orchestra, a raised stage called the proskenion, above which were stage windows called thuromata.

To assign specific locations to each level of staging is a futile and pointless task, given that John does not seem to adhere to these levels tightly—not only are there more than three levels shown, the stage props he describes could not fit into all three. It is far more likely that John is hoping to draw his audience into envisioning his levels, as the drama is read out loud. What is important is the idea of vertical movement and levels; the earth is below the heavens, the sun and moon and stars above, and so on, creating a mental map of everyone’s place, and reinforcing the idea that John’s text is set within the confines of a theatre, or at least envisioned within a space similar to one. By writing in this way, John utilises his audience’s imagination to the fullest, transforming a simple one- or two-dimensional presentation into a three-dimensional one. He also is able to place God above all created beings, reinforcing his perceived natural order to things and placing the kings and emperors of the earth beneath God.
For example, Revelation 19 clearly shows us three different levels (technically four) upon which the drama of the text is staged. From top to bottom, we see “the sun” in Revelation 19:17, corresponding with the *thuromata*, then “heaven” in most of the chapter (Revelation 19:4-5 and Revelation 19:11-16 as key examples) corresponding with the *proskenion*, and finally “earth” and the “lake of fire” in Revelation 19:17-21, corresponding with the *orchestra*. There is also an “in-between” level, the “mid-heavens” (μεσουρανημα) where the birds fly, in this case presumably at a lower point than the sun in the *thuromata* (given that the *thuromata* and *proskenion* meet, there is no real in-between).

It is also important to remember that these things were all possible with the technology of the time, as we have explored in previous chapters. Cranes, lifts, trapdoors—these were all familiar to playwrights and writers of the first century CE, and they were widely employed to add drama to the works being performed. They were not limited to the stages of the theatres, either; the executions of prisoners in arenas (or orchestras, in theatres) also utilised the latest in performance technology in order to create a sense of spectacle for the audience.

This sense of vertical movement gives Revelation a much larger sense of scale, and helps to reinforce the idea of multiple levels. Later, we see Jerusalem descending from heaven into earth; previously, we have seen John brought up into heaven. The text that John is writing is no small-scale work, but a truly epic saga that tells of the complete victory of God over empire and all the things of earth. It is set not just in Asia Minor or in the Roman Empire, but in the whole world, and cataclysmic events of great proportion occur, indicating that this is a truly significant vision for all people. In enlarging the scale of the events and incorporating it visually into the text, John helps his audience to realise just how important this vision is, and this underscores the urgency of his message.
As Frilingos reminds us, however, the job of the audience was not to enact, but merely to witness: “For all of its martial imagery, the new heavens and new earth that Revelation finally envisions is not an empire of warriors but one of viewers.” To use Frilingos’ terminology, John’s audience understand that they are seeing a parody of Roman spectacle, albeit one that has very different motivations, reasons and outcomes. Like Roman spectacle, the audience are not active participants in the drama, but cannot help but be transformed by what they see as they are invited to engage with the drama’s outcomes. It is this difference that separates Revelation from empire, but also brings the two inextricably together. By mimicking the spectacles of theatre, John continues to remind his audience of the pervasive influence of Rome. This serves to further his critique of empire, subverting one of its most powerful cultural and political tools in service of God.

3.3 The Battle is joined (or is it?) (19:19-21)

From Revelation 19:19-21, we are told of a great battle that occurs between the Rider on the White Horse and his army, and his enemies, the beast and the kings of the earth (and their armies). However, we do not see a battle, only the aftermath—Revelation 19:20 tells us that “the beast was captured, and with it the false prophet” and that the two of them are thrown into the lake of fire. The rest of the enemies, the kings of the earth and their armies, are simply “killed by the sword of the rider on the horse, the sword that came from his mouth.” Aune points out that none of the battles in

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72 With the possible exception of Revelation 2-3, where they are named as John sets the scene.
Revelation are described in any detail, only the subsequent capture and / or decimation of the defeated enemies.74 Here, it is again worth pointing out that the violence (or implied violence) in Revelation is only ever enacted by God, and never by human agency.

John does not wish to show his audience a battle, but is content with showing them the outcome of the battle. This is perhaps due to the fact that the outcome of the battle was never in doubt—given the asymmetry of the match. The spectators are also important: the heavenly court and God were watching, and the Rider and a heavenly host were fighting. This indicates that the battle itself is not the focus, nor is it the most significant event, but rather the subsequent actions are what matters: God’s triumph, the punishment of the beast and the false prophet, and the death of the enemy kings.

From a performance mode of thought, it does seem puzzling that there is not a greater emphasis on the battle, as this would be a highly visual climax to the performance. Nowhere in the text does it say, however, that the battle does not occur—it is simply not described. It is not inconceivable that John is simply leaving it to the individual’s imagination.75 As well, by not describing the violence, John is countering the gory human spectacles of the Roman Empire which were rife with death, instead demonstrating the necessity of God’s justice in bringing about peace and order to the new kingdom of God. John’s original audience may have seen their share of violence in the fall of Jerusalem (certainly they would have seen violence aplenty in the entertainment around the cities), and therefore John is sparing them a gory re-enactment. Given that the earlier pages of Revelation are filled with violence, there seems to be no further need as the battle has been won.

74 Aune, Revelation 17-22, 1065.
75 Susan Hylen points out that violence is nevertheless implied and therefore read into the text, raising some important questions for those who choose to read the text metaphorically. She goes on to argue, in a similar vein to this thesis, that understanding Revelation as metaphor (specifically multiple metaphors) acknowledges the violence in Revelation as important (and limited), but also enables it to speak ethically into a variety of contexts. See Susan Hylen, “Metaphor Matters: Violence and Ethics in Revelation,” Catholic Biblical Quarterly Vol. 73 No. 4 (Oct 2011): 777-796.
Astute readers will have noticed that there are considerable logistical difficulties with the battle, given that the armies of heaven are in heaven (the level of the proskenion) and the armies of the beast are on earth (a level below, in the orchestra). These are not insurmountable difficulties by any means; Beacham writes about three distinct devices of the theatre that could have been used to solve this issue, the mechane, the geranos, and the aoral. All three were devices used to transport actors between levels, and seem to be fairly common in theatres during the time of the Empire. This means that John’s audience was familiar with actors flying and being transported; in this case, it seems like they might have imagined the Word of God and his army being transported down to earth (the orchestra) to do battle.

At this point, it is worth mentioning two other important devices: the hemikuklion and the stropheion. The first was a “semicircle” located near the orchestra, which would “show some part of the city far off or people swimming in the sea”; the second was a scenic tableau which revealed “heroes translated to divinity or those who have died at sea or in battle.” Both of these demonstrate the distinct possibility of enacting Revelation 19:20-21—the hemikuklion would have been a distinct method of showing the lake of fire, and the stropheion would have shown the deaths of the enemies of God, pierced by the sword coming from the Rider’s mouth.

Of course, we have no indicator that John ever intended this work to be performed; in fact, we have explored the idea that Revelation was written to be read aloud in the style of a recitatio. Why then is it important for us to show that many of John’s “stage directions” were physically possible? There are two reasons, both closely linked: to understand better the extent of the imagination of John’s audience, and to avoid anachronistic interpretations. By understanding what existed within the realms of

76 Adapted from Richard J. Beacham, The Roman Theatre and its Audience (Massachusetts: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 180-182. For a complete list (and a further explanation of each) see Chapter 3.
77 Beacham, The Roman Theatre, 180-182.
78 The is also a possibility that stropheion could also have been used to show the image of the martyrs under the altar.
possibility in the theatres and arenas during John’s time, we are able to comprehend the possible scope of the audience’s imagination. Had flying machines or cranes not been available at the time, to talk about flying from a theatrical perspective or a performance mode of thought would most likely be anachronistic and therefore incorrect, or at least an overstretch of the imagination. The visual nature of Revelation is limited only by its audience’s imagination, but their imagination is (and was) limited by the things commonly seen and available in their context.

4. The thousand years: Revelation 20:1-6

4.1 The binding of Satan (20:1-3)

Revelation 20:1-3 depicts an angel “coming down out of heaven” in order to bind Satan for a thousand years, referencing the vertical stage movement discussed earlier. The angel carries both a key and a chain, and is quite clearly a jailer of some sort. The performative aspects of this text are very clear—Satan is “seized” then “bound” and “thrown” into the Abyss. Verbs like these introduce action into the scene, and may be alluding to stage directions.

Aune makes mention of the multiple myths linked to a “binding” and imprisonment—for example, the Greek pantheon’s defeat of the Titans and their subsequent imprisonment under the earth,\textsuperscript{79} the chaining of the Hekatonchaires, or Ouranos’s children being bound and cast into Tartarus.\textsuperscript{80} Another familiar tale is that of Prometheus, who stole fire from the gods, being chained to a rock, doomed to have his

\textsuperscript{79} Aune, \textit{Revelation 17-22}, 1078.
\textsuperscript{80} Aune, \textit{Revelation 17-22}, 1082.
liver devoured by an eagle. Due to Prometheus’s immortality, he cannot die (his liver regenerates) and so he relives the same fate day after day until rescued by Heracles.

Martial in his *De Spectaculis* records that the punishment of Prometheus was one of many used to execute prisoners in the inaugural games held by the emperor Titus to christen the Flavian amphitheatre, later known as the Colosseum. Such horrific punishments served several purposes: punishment of criminals, entertainment of the masses, but also education regarding the myths of Greco-Roman religion. Ironically, it seems that many of these myths took on a cruel twist in order to punish criminals with death. In a previous chapter, for example, we discussed the re-enactments of myths like Pasiphae and the bull, or Laureolus and Prometheus, or even Daedalus and Icarus.

It is possible that Revelation, or at least some of it, makes reference to the Flavian games and indeed to the reign of Titus himself. The Flavian games and the text of Revelation are both places where myth is played with and subverted in order for justice to prevail. The Flavian games came after a series of disasters during Titus’ first year as emperor—the eruption of Mount Vesuvius and the subsequent destruction of Pompeii, a fire destroying parts of Rome, and an outbreak of plague in the city. John’s depiction of disasters befalling the earth may be a reference to these events. The Flavian amphitheatre is argued to have been intended as a monument commemorating the triumph of Roman troops in the Jewish war—in which both Vespasian and Titus took part as conquerors, and, as we have already argued, is mimicked in Revelation. Finally, the reign of Titus saw the rise of a man named Terentius Maximus, “the False Nero,” in

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82 Shane Wood argues that Revelation was written in the later part of Domitian’s reign, and in doing so argues for a strong Flavian influence on Revelation—for example, his argument that Revelation 19 and 20 are meant to parallel the Flavian triumph. Wood, *The Alter-Imperial Paradigm*, 131, 132-188.
83 Martial records that stories such as that of Orpheus and Prometheus were subverted in order for the criminals playing these characters to die gruesome deaths. See Martial, *De Spectaculis*, 9.7, 10.8 and 24.21.
Asia Minor. John’s use of “666” and the “Nero redivivus” myth may be a reference to this man and the apocalyptic thoughts surrounding his rise.

Of course, it is not the intention of this work to argue conclusively for any specific dating of the text, although the evidence for a later dating is perhaps the most convincing, especially when Wood’s argument for a Domitian-era writing is taken into account. From a performance mode of thought, however, it is helpful to be aware of these events; as has been discussed, writers and performers were prone to altering dialogue or actions in performances to reflect current events. John may similarly be referring to current events in Revelation. Returning to the original argument, it is clear that a “binding” is an action that would have been seen in Roman theatres and amphitheatres in the execution of criminals, and so to “bind” Satan is to treat him as a criminal.

This, of course, calls to mind a familiar scene for many Christians: the martyrdom of various Christian witnesses, whether through crucifixion or through ludi like those described earlier. Although the true extent of the persecution of Christians remains contested,87 primary source evidence suggests that the Christians were accused of starting the Great Fire of Rome by Nero (as a scapegoat) and subsequently “punished”88 with “the most exquisite tortures.”89 Tacitus elaborates further, stating that

Mockery of every sort was added to their deaths. Covered with the skins of beasts, they were torn by dogs and perished, or were nailed to

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86 Cassius Dio, Roman Histories, 66.19.
88 Suetonius, Nero, 16.
89 Tacitus, Annals, 15.44.
crosses, or were doomed to the flames and burnt, to serve as a nightly illumination, when daylight had expired.\textsuperscript{90}

Tacitus’ account is reminiscent of the \textit{ludi}, and correlates well with other accounts of executions of criminals. Here, we see the Roman sense of irony displayed in their deaths: crucified like Christ, or burned just as Rome itself had been burned. Christians died in arenas, amphitheatres and theatres, and it is very possible that John is alluding to these deaths, utilising this Roman sense of irony, in his depiction of the binding of Satan. It is not beyond the realms of possibility that one punishment may have involved binding wrongdoers and throwing them into bodies of water, or forcing them to fight in nautical games. Cassius Dio records one such naval battle sponsored by Domitian, the so-called next “great persecutor” of Christians, and it could be this naval battle that John is alluding to.\textsuperscript{91} This same punishment, wrought upon Satan, would be an ironic reversal in line with hidden transcript theory.

Little physical evidence exists to confirm a systematic persecution of Christians by Domitian, but Domitian himself would have cut a strong, oppositional figure: an emperor strongly in favour of censorship, deifying his family members, strongly authoritarian and, some argue, rejuvenating the cult of emperor worship.\textsuperscript{92} He was also characterised by his enemies as being cruel and enjoying the suffering of others, particularly in his management of \textit{ludi}, as noted below by Cassius Dio:

\begin{quote}
In the Circus, for example, he exhibited battles of infantry against infantry and again battles between cavalry, and in a new place he produced a naval battle. At this last event practically all the combatants and many of the spectators as well perished... Often he
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{90}Tacitus, \textit{Annals}, 15.44
\textsuperscript{91}Cassius Dio, \textit{Roman History}, 67.8.2-4.
would conduct the games also at night, and sometimes he would pit dwarfs and women against each other.\textsuperscript{93}

It is important to remember that neither contemporary history nor the contemporary view of Domitian are of primary importance in interpreting Revelation from the perspective of its original audience; what matters for such a reading of Revelation is John and his audience’s view of Domitian. Arguably, the Christian view of both Nero and Domitian as being two of the earliest persecutors\textsuperscript{94} is one that exists for a reason—and presumably that reason is the Christians’ own understanding that they were being persecuted, and treated as criminals, sentenced to die. As an aside, it is also interesting to note that the Great Theatre at Ephesus bore an inscription that “stated that the related ornamentation were dedicated to the Ephesian Artemis and the emperor Domitian,”\textsuperscript{95} a helpful link between Domitian and the theatre that many in John’s audience would have been aware of.

Returning to the text, it is clear that Satan is seen and treated as a criminal to be punished, just as the Christians might have been treated by Nero or Domitian. Once again, when we read the text from a postcolonial perspective, we see a reversal of roles, in this case one that would have been very real and present to John’s audience: their enemy being bound and tortured in the arena just they might have seen their fellow Christians bound and tortured. Just as the emperor and the ruling class might have presided over the death of the martyrs, the reversal sees the faithful dead reigning alongside Christ, presiding over the binding of Satan (and by implication, God’s enemies). By depicting Satan as the one being bound, and not the emperor, John


\textsuperscript{94} For example, \textit{Foxe’s Book of Martyrs} categorically argues that the first two true persecutions against Christians were initiated by Nero and Domitian respectively.

reminds his audience that their struggle is not ultimately against human authorities but rather against evil and its representation.

4.2 The Faithful Witnesses (20:4-6)

Following the binding of Satan, Revelation returns its audience to a scene of victory—a mysterious group of people sitting on thrones, having been given authority to judge. This pericope forms the centre of a chiasm, with the appearance of Satan on either side (Revelation 20:1-3 and Revelation 20:7-10). The text implies that these are martyrs, faithful witnesses who had been killed by the Roman Empire because of their faith. Aune explores the use of the word “beheading” (πεπελεκισμένων) by John, and argues for a connection between axes used for beheading (πέλεκες) and fasces (the bundles of rods and an axe carried by lictors). In previous chapters, we have explored a prior connection in Revelation 4: between the number twenty-four, lictors, and the Roman emperor Domitian, noting Aune’s suggestion that John’s depiction of twenty-four elders is meant to mimic Domitian’s increase of the official lictors from twelve to twenty-four. For John to again allude to fasces towards the end of Revelation suggests that neither is an accident, that John is aware of the powerful symbolism of the fasces and is seeking to actively address it.

Aune also notes that the same word (πέλεκες) is used by Josephus to describe executions that were carried out by Romans in Palestine. Although beheadings were just one of a variety of ways Christian martyrs were killed during the first century, the symbolism and wordplay of the axe and fasces speak well to the performative nature of

96 Aune, Revelation 17-22, 1087.
97 Aune, Revelation 1-5, 292.
98 Aune, Revelation 17-22, 1087.
Revelation. This is especially significant because of the fasces’ position as a symbol of Roman magistrate’s authority. In speaking of those beheaded (implying their death by fasces) as sitting in thrones judging, John reverses the symbolism of Roman authority to once again demonstrate the subversive nature of Revelation. Although those who were killed and beheaded had their deaths ordered by the Roman authorities, seemingly the highest authorities in the land, their faith and belief in God and their unwillingness to worship the beast and its image have directly caused them to be elevated to a position of judiciary power, where they can now enact judgment upon those who had sentenced them to death. In the previous chapter, we have already explored the ideas of social inversion and role reversal as both egalitarian ideal and revenge fantasy—Revelation 20 is a continuation of these themes as part of the hidden transcript formed by the wider text. Of course, in this instance, John does not portray the martyrs as the victorious conquerors, but rather as those who have been delegated the power of God, who rule alongside Christ in an egalitarian vision of the coming Kingdom of God.99

This vision of the martyrs elevated to heavenly power is clearly intended to bring great eschatological hope to the Christians who feel they are facing persecution. In writing to this community, John assures them that their suffering is worthwhile, even necessary in bringing about God's heavenly kingdom on earth—and that at the endpoint, justice will be restored to them. In resisting the evils of empire, despite the trials and hardship and the loss of livelihoods, John's audience can look beyond their current circumstance to an imminent future where their patience, loyalty and faithful witness are rewarded with elevation to God's side, and rulership alongside him.

This rulership lasts a thousand years—a contentious point among many eschatologically-minded Christians, who variously bring different interpretations to this thousand year reign (the premillennial, postmillennial and amillennial approaches respectively). One understanding that is particularly helpful is that posited by Laurie

99 Revelation 20:4 notes that they "came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years."
Guy, who argues that the millennium is intended to be understood not as a future reign of God, but rather a “backward glance to the mighty acts of a gracious God who will act in the same sort of way again and again.” In true *ekphrastic* style, Guy sees John as using vivid language that references Hebrew scripture, making use of intertexture in order to create a narrative that spoke to the Jewish people of past events. As with much of Revelation, John is weaving together Jewish, Greek and Roman influences in order to draw a picture of the coming kingdom that speaks to all people and all cultures.

4.3 *Satan’s doom (20:7-10)*

Following the thousand-year reign of God on earth, John writes, Satan is released from his prison and gathers up his followers for a final battle against God. Here, Satan’s army is described as being drawn from nations at the four corners of the earth, as well as Gog and Magog, and numerous as the sand of the sea. They besiege the “camp of the saints and the beloved city,” but are destroyed by fire from heaven. Satan is subsequently thrown into the lake of fire, the throne of God takes its place, and the final judgment is able to begin.

John’s *ekphrastic* language here could be alluding to the events surrounding the fall of Jerusalem, but seems to present an alternate ending to the event. The Roman armies, of course, did not just consist of native Roman soldiers in the legions, but were strongly

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101 Guy suggests that Revelation 20 contains allusions to Ezekiel (Gog and Magog), Genesis (Serpent), and the Exodus story (Serpent, Dragon, Shore) in creating a story which refers back to the Jewish people’s foundational myths, arguing that God will act on behalf of his people in the future as he has in the past. See Guy, “Back to the Future,” 227-238.
102 Revelation 20:8.
supplemented with auxilia, groups of non-citizen soldiers drawn from the various provinces of the Empire (peregrini). Josephus records that at various points during the Roman-Jewish war, the numbers of Rome-affiliated soldiers varied: from 14,000 at the beginning of the war, to 60,000 when Vespasian took command in 67CE. Troops were recorded as having come from a wide variety of locations: all over the Roman province of Syria, from Caesarea, and Nabatea. Of course, many more were not recorded—and historical evidence shows that the Romans recruited auxilia from almost every province they administered, covering much of the known world.

In writing about an army that comes from the four corners of the earth, John is most likely referencing the Roman army. As with the imagery surrounding the Word of God, John may be alluding to a triumph—the only occasion outside of battle where the inhabitants of the Roman Empire would have seen the entire Roman army arrayed in all its might. The army would have first made camp outside the walls of Rome, then entered the city as part of their victory procession. Alternatively, John may also be referring to the variety of gladiators and participants in the ludi, who were often slaves drawn from the different areas that Rome had conquered.

By depicting this army besieging Jerusalem, John calls to mind an image that would have been indelibly marked upon the minds of Christians and Jews of the late first century: the siege and subsequent destruction of Jerusalem by Roman troops. Here, John retells the story in the framework of the archetypal hidden transcript: the story is reimagined in such a way that the roles are reversed. In Revelation, the beloved holy city is not destroyed, but instead God’s judgmental fire is called down upon the invaders, and they are utterly destroyed. Their leader, named Satan (or the dragon, serpent, or the devil) in

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105 For more on hidden transcripts, see Chapter 5 of this thesis or Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*. Shane Wood also engages briefly with the concept; see Wood, *The Alter-Imperial Paradigm*, 245-247.
Revelation and the personification of the evils of empire, is cast into the lake of fire alongside the other enemies of God who were deceived by Satan.

Much like John’s description of the elevated martyrs, his reimagining of the fall of Jerusalem is intended to bring hope to a grieving community. As in the 60s, God’s people are besieged by representatives of cultures from all around the world, people who have been deceived into fighting against God. This time, however, God himself intervenes to deliver the victory, restoring hope to those who saw Jerusalem fall. God’s casting of fire from the sky has clear allusions to many texts in the Hebrew scriptures,\textsuperscript{106} and is generally indicative of a heavenly intervention on behalf of God’s people and a punishment for the wicked. The people of God are avenged, and the enemies of God are destroyed.

It is important to note that the victory in this case is entirely God’s. The enemies of God are consumed by a fire that falls from heaven, and in this case, the human agents of God (including the martyrs) have no part to play in causing this victory. Although they are employed alongside God as judges at the start of Revelation 20, later they are relegated to the background, perhaps to emphasise the power and reign of God. Though humans play their part, in the end, the grand cosmic struggle concludes with a victory won by God.

This divine victory addresses some of the concerns raised by some postcolonial scholars, who posit that Revelation’s inverted imagery simply helps to solidify the structures of empire amongst its audience—that by “using the emperor’s tools to dismantle the emperor’s palace,”\textsuperscript{107} Revelation does not provide a critique of empire but rather continues to justify it. I would argue that because Revelation is deliberate in

\textsuperscript{106} For example: Ezekiel 38-39, 1 Kings 18, 2 Kings 1.

showing a divine victory with little to no input from human agency, responsibility is shifted away from humans to an expectation of divine action. Human action in Revelation is limited, though important and necessary; however, it is ultimately God’s actions that bring about the heavenly kingdom on earth. Whilst humans are clearly called to defy the empire to the point of martyrdom, and to worship God, the ultimate victory remains God’s, and human action alone cannot achieve it.

This is reinforced in the scene depicting the judgment of the dead in Revelation 20:11-15; all the dead are resurrected in order to be judged by God. This excludes those Christian martyrs who were resurrected in Revelation 20:5 for the millennial reign, but does not exclude other Christians who have died; indeed, John here seems simply to be referring to all people. Rather than creating a cycle where the oppressed become the oppressors, as Bhabha and others suggest, at the heart of Revelation’s mimicry of empire lies an understanding of God as the ultimate, final power who holds authority to judge all the living and dead. John does not visualise a heavenly kingdom ruled by humans; God is always firmly in control, whether during the reign of the beasts, through the events of judgment, or after the establishment of the heavenly kingdom. Humans co-reign with God in Revelation 22, but the position of God’s throne makes it clear that he is the ultimate authority. There is no intention for God to replace Caesar—God is only placed in trappings similar to Caesar’s in order to remind John’s audience that God remains in control despite Caesar’s rule.

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109 This has been extensively discussed in the previous chapter.
5. Then I saw...

As we have seen, approaching the text of Revelation 19-20 using the three hermeneutical lenses is helpful in drawing out a variety of new understandings from the text. It is clear that the text was written with performance in mind; there are indicators and markers of performance scattered throughout the text. Stage directions, costuming, characters, and backdrops are all prominent features of Revelation, and approaching the text from a performance mode of thought helps us in identifying these features. Of course, these are all tied to the culture of both the Jews and the Greco-Romans, and identifying these markers and their reference points requires a strong knowledge of the *Sitz im Leben* of the text. Here, the techniques of visual exegesis, specifically *ekphrasis*, function particularly well in helping the contemporary reader to identify the cultural references John is making.

Finally, the question that needs to be addressed is, "Why is Revelation composed in such a visual way?"—or perhaps, better yet, "What is the significance of Revelation's imagery?" John utilises the language of the Greco-Roman performance arts within Revelation in order to display God's coming kingdom, creating a "memory theatre," imagery that called to mind specific stories or other allusions. A postcolonial perspective, particularly one that draws upon hidden transcript theory, assists us in drawing out the meaning embedded John's allusions. By calling to mind the various stories of the power of God in the Hebrew Bible, and mimicking the imagery of the Roman Empire in order to subvert it, John points at a single reality: that God is the absolute ruler over all things, to the extent that even the trappings, ceremonies, and performances of the Roman Empire could be used to broadcast his coming kingdom. God's kingdom subverts the kingdom of Caesar; it brings hope to those who listen and keep the word, and who faithfully remain steadfast in God.
Chapter 7

“See, I am coming soon”: a conclusion

Howard-Brook and Gwyther conclude their analysis of Revelation with a poignant reminder that still today, “many Christians succumb to the temptation to read Revelation as if it were speaking exclusively to our generation.”¹ This is, of course, the challenge faced by those who are attempting to speak into a contemporary setting—that the wider public does not always follow the lead of the best scholarship in interpreting the text, but often regards what scholarship has to offer with a degree of suspicion and hostility. Unfortunately, the text lies open to abuse and misuse from all sides; by scholars, interpreters and preachers, each often approaching the text with their own agenda.²

It is because of this abuse and misuse that many treat the book of Revelation with trepidation and caution. Many are often unwilling to even open the text, fearful that they will become mired in its confusing imagery, and so leave its reading “to the experts.” Though its reputation may be off-putting, the book of Revelation has much to offer to a sensitive reader, and anyone should feel that they are able to come to the text much like any other in the First or New Testaments.

Like John’s original audience, contemporary readers are pulled in different directions; we are faced with the choice “to be citizens who participate in empire blithely uncritical or studiously unconscious of the suffering it unleashes on our world,” or to “seek a more

¹ Wes Howard-Brook and Anthony Gwyther, Unveiling Empire: Reading Revelation Then and Now (Maryknoll: Orbis Press, 1999), 236.
² For specific examples, see Jon K. Newton, Revelation Reclaimed: The Use and Misuse of the Apocalypse (Milton Keynes: Paternoster Press, 2009), 1-6. Newton describes a variety of misuses of the text in six short pages, beginning with Montanus and ending with contemporary applications.
costly way... to an alternative construction of our social and planetary order.”

In order to read and understand Revelation, it is helpful for us to understand Revelation from the perspective of its original readers insofar as this is possible, allowing us to subsequently read, encounter and interpret the text for ourselves. Such an approach allows the text’s multisensory approach to demonstrate John’s “costly way” to us.

This study has sought to provide a rationale for, and examples of, a performative approach to reading the book of Revelation, an approach that seeks to highlight and enhance the performative aspects of the text. This approach considers the strong allusions to Greco-Roman performative culture found within Revelation, and seeks to bring these to the fore in the interpretive process. I have argued that doing so helps contemporary readers to visualise, hear, and understand Revelation alongside its earliest audience—to understand the text as a hidden transcript that speaks against empire and inspires hopes in its readers, embedded within a great dramatic performance.

In order to make this case, I explored Greco-Roman performance types, before then applying three key conceptual perspectives to the text, and finally interpreting the text itself, utilising a postcolonial perspective to bring meaning and understanding to the discoveries. First, I discussed the existing literature on Revelation as drama, and some other important ideas such as the early church’s attitudes toward the theatre, and the concept of ring theory. Although scholarship has often toyed with the idea that Revelation is dramatic, few scholars have attempted to methodically engage with the text from the perspective of performance. To understand why, it was helpful to discover the early Christians’ feelings toward the theatre and performing arts—influential church fathers such as Augustine were opposed to the theatre, and it was not until the Middle Ages that the church embraced the theatre as a helpful tool for teaching. It was

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also important to explore ring theory, which was seen to be both a literary form and a
way of thinking that informed ancient writing. Understanding Revelation through the
lens of ring theory highlights the centrality of Revelation 12 as the fulcrum of the
chiasm, and indicates that this is the crux of John’s message—that the Dragon,
representing empire, cannot prevail against God or the church.

I then surveyed a range of Greco-Roman performance arts, acknowledging the breadth
and variety of performance throughout the Roman Empire, and focusing particularly on
the setting of John’s audience, Asia Minor. The great theatres dominate the visual
landscape of the seven cities, but I have argued that the first century forms of
performance included far more than just tragedies and comedies; there were a
multitude of performance styles like street pantomime and mime, recitatio, religious
ceremonies, triumphs, naumachiae, and so on. John alludes to many of these as he
constructs his text in Revelation, and uses these to speak against empire.

Although past historical-critical and socio-rhetorical exegetes have made many helpful
suggestions in some of these areas, I went on to explore three key conceptual
perspectives that would allow us to discover and interpret more clearly the allusions
embedded within the text: visual exegesis (in particular ekphrasis, highly visual
language), the “performance mode of thought,” and postcolonialism’s hidden transcript
theory, all held in creative tension by a sensitivity to the questions of power sharpened
by a postcolonial framework. Each conceptual perspective complements the others, and as I have demonstrated, each is necessary to
address different questions raised by the text. Utilising three conceptual perspectives also allows for a
variety of different understandings to be drawn out of the text, rather than relying on a single critical
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language), the “performance mode of thought,” and postcolonialism’s hidden transcript
theory, all held in creative tension by a sensitivity to the questions of power sharpened
by a postcolonial framework. Both visual exegesis and performance criticism are
relatively recent methodologies in Biblical scholarship, and both are concerned with
engaging with the Sitz im Leben of the text. This has necessitated an engagement with

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address different questions raised by the text. Utilising three conceptual perspectives also allows for a
variety of different understandings to be drawn out of the text, rather than relying on a single critical
method for understanding the text.

5 Each of the critical approaches used in the text are extensive in their scope; engaging with each of them
fully would have distracted from the main goal of this thesis. Drawing concepts from each approach
reduced the need for highly specific terminology, and instead allowed the focus to remain on
identification and interpretation of John’s allusions to performance.
both history and archaeology in order to attempt to explain the various allusions in Revelation. The anti-imperial character of many of these references and allusions, when combined with their disguised nature, led to a postcolonial reading of the text that engaged with hidden transcript theory.

I then began to bring together these approaches within the text, taking a broader view of Revelation and drawing out the more immediate allusions. Here, John’s strong allusions to both imperial ceremonies and performance, seen also by other commentators, were made even more evident, from the description of God’s throne room to the *naumachiae* and allusions to the sea-beast. These allusions serve the purpose of reminding John’s audience that the Roman Empire’s claims to divinity are false, and that God’s kingdom as revealed by the sain Lamb and for which many have suffered, is the only true path.

Finally, I then took a more systematic, verse-by-verse approach to selected texts and brought all of these elements together, resulting in what I have chosen to call an exegetical exploration of Revelation 19-20 in performance mode. This involved a re-engagement with the minds of John’s first-century audience, drawing out some fresh understandings of the text as suggested by an increased awareness of visual images, hidden transcripts, and performance markers. For example, I argued that John’s treatment of women need not be seen as misogynist, but rather contextual and exaggerated, a caricature intending to make a point about the conditions of empire, rather than about sexual identity. Similarly, we discovered allusions to the Roman triumph in Revelation 19:11-21, where John reinterpreted and replayed the traumatic events of the fall of Jerusalem and the subsequent humiliation of the Jewish people (as also other ethnic groups subjugated by Empire), casting God’s enemy, Satan, as the enemy king, and depicting God as victor.

Throughout this thesis, I have consistently argued that John’s evocative writing was never intended to be read or interpreted literally, but rather that it points to aspects of
culture or empire that are in opposition to God by mimicking, exaggerating, or subverting them. When the text is understood as performance, it allows readers to interpret the text differently—propagating an understanding of the text as art form, open to “all who have eyes and ears.” The ultimate purpose of this exploration is to argue that reading Revelation in performance mode (diversely understood) assists contemporary audiences to gain an appreciation for Revelation’s imagery, poetry and strong language, understanding them as distinctives of a performative style and recognising their deliberate use in order to highlight John’s message to a people experiencing oppression.

1. Future research directions

As with any research project, there are new possibilities raised along the journey that I did not have sufficient room to explore. There are also a variety of related areas in which further scholarship would be very helpful. The most obvious example of this is archaeology—we simply do not know enough about the theatres in Asia Minor during the Roman period. More published research into this period of time would help to fill in many gaps in our knowledge, whether regarding the architecture of the actual theatres (for example, which theatres were able to be converted to host *naumachiae*), or the social impact of the theatres on the cities in which they were built (their usage and capacity, their impact on local communities and their level of influence within those communities), or even the types of performances that were regularly held in these buildings. There are numerous theatres still to be fully excavated and explored, and much work to do with separating and identifying the various layers of history.
embedded within each one. Scholars like Valentina di Napoli are presenting helpful findings, yet there is more to do.6

Another fruitful research area that is beginning to be explored more rigorously is the social profiling of Asia Minor, and the degree to which its citizens, at each level of society, embraced the culture of the Roman Empire. There is much that is unknown and speculated about, and I have done my best to stay within logical and reasonable bounds in this area throughout this thesis. But some helpful avenues would include a focus on the popular culture in the provinces of Rome, especially Asia Minor, through excavation of the poorer sections of towns, and studies of local graffiti, for example, since in lieu of formal writings from the lower classes, graffiti can provide a snapshot into their sentiments and interests. It is encouraging that scholarship is beginning to recognise the importance of grassroots cultures (such as those of peasants and slaves) in recreating a more comprehensive snapshot of the time.

Who attended the theatre, and who did not? What was the average person’s reaction to it? What were the consequences of non-participation as Christian communities developed? How did the theatre evolve as time went on? These are all questions that have been raised over the course of this thesis, and although historians, sociologists and archaeologists continue to work diligently, it is clear that these areas need to be developed further through careful analysis of existing and new literature, artefacts and other recent discoveries. For example, I attempted to survey the early Christians’ engagement with the theatre, only to discover seemingly contradictory evidence: although the early church fathers wrote strongly against the theatre, it appears as though the early Christians nevertheless continued to attend it. Further work would help clarify these questions, and provide useful resolutions.

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A final significant area for further research is into the performance arts of the Roman Empire, both within Rome and throughout the provinces. To the best of my research and knowledge, a thorough, comprehensive compilation of the variety of performance arts circa 30-100CE simply does not exist, and although there are some excellent resources in other areas (such as the visual imagery of the Roman Empire), this is an area that is sorely lacking. Unfortunately, the trends in academic literature indicate that scholars seem to be far more interested in Greek performance, and in most writings on the subject, any mention of Roman performance is often glossed over, or dealt with in a pejorative or perfunctory way. This is a research area that, if developed, has potential for promising further insights into the relationship between the powerful and the powerless, the dominant elite cultures and the majority cultures, and of course the emergence of the “Christian” subculture in the ancient world.

There are numerous other research areas and directions that might be provoked by this thesis, but I focus on three specific projects below and briefly describe what they might look like and what they could contribute to the current scholarship of Revelation.

1.1 *A comprehensive commentary on Revelation as performance*

As I have noted in other chapters, very few commentators have explored Revelation thoroughly from the perspective of performance, whether through the ideas of visual exegesis, or performance criticism. A commentary on Revelation from such a

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8 Chapter 2 provided some examples of scholarship that had engaged with Greek performance, but not Roman: Boring, Marshall, Fee and Stuart, Horn, Schüssler Fiorenza, Brewer, and numerous others. It is also worth mentioning that resources on Roman performance remain scant where an abundance of such sources exist for Greek performance.
perspective would seek to draw out the various dramatic allusions and references within Revelation, in a thematic fashion similar to John Christopher Thomas’ *The Apocalypse: A Literary and Theological Commentary.*

Apart from the fact that no such commentary currently exists, such an approach would be helpful for a variety of reasons. It would draw together a wide range of resources related to Roman (and Greek) performance art, and would act as a useful starting reference for visual performance in the Roman Empire during the first century CE—addressing one of my criticisms above regarding the lack of scholarship. Finally, it would contribute towards the growing field of performance criticism, and ideally would help scholars to think beyond the current scope of the field into a more cross-disciplinary way of approaching the text.

1.2 *A performance script of Revelation*

One of the goals associated with this study has always been to find ways to encourage contemporary readers to embrace and appreciate the book of Revelation in more life-giving ways than has often been the case. One of the best ways to do this would be to perform it, to bring the text to life as John or his audiences might have envisioned it. A script based directly on the text of Revelation, with staging directions, backdrops, costumes, and lines, would help to bring this drama to life in a new way. Audiences experiencing such a visual-aural approach would hopefully gain an appreciation for the text that would draw them closer to how it was heard in first century Asia Minor.

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9 Thomas’ work is particularly helpful given its uniqueness; few others have attempted to trace Revelation’s influence across such a broad topic.
Such a script would need to follow closely the text and vivid style of Revelation, and to retain the words of each character in order to be recognisable. This would also create opportunities for a musical setting of the various liturgical hymns and songs throughout the book, and combined with the highly visual script, this would stimulate the senses and enhance the experience and understanding of the audience.

One question that would be worth pondering in such a presentation would be the staging of Revelation’s setting—contemporary or ancient? Such a decision sharpens the question of the significance of context, not for determining meaning, but for informing it and setting plausible limits. Whilst the play itself might well be set within the confines of a theatre’s space, just as it might have been envisioned in John’s day, whether the performance should be targeted primarily at a contemporary audience or if it should remain centred in Patmos depends on assumptions about the significance of the text, the ongoing relevance of history, and the politics of power and Empire. Transposing the biblical text to a theatrical narrative is already a significant shift, and although John’s words were initially directed at the seven churches he is writing to, they may also be seen as universal and as continuing to have great relevance for us today, at historical, political, and/or theological levels.

1.3 An exploration of the structure of Revelation

As briefly discussed in the literature review, Revelation can be structured meaningfully in a number of ways. As seen earlier in the thesis, a few landmark studies\textsuperscript{10} have examined Revelation’s structure at depth, and some have even explored the possibility

\textsuperscript{10} For example, A.S. Bandy’s “The Layers of the Apocalypse.”
of structuring Revelation as a drama.\textsuperscript{11} It would be helpful, however, to have a contemporary study that takes seriously Revelation’s status as dramatic art in the hybrid and diverse Roman sense, not just classical Greek theatre, and approaches its structure as such. Of course, one must also bear in mind Adela Yarbro Collins’ assertion that there are “almost as many outlines as there are interpreters”\textsuperscript{12} with regards to Revelation, and remember that this is just one possible approach to the text!

Bowman’s study performs this task adequately, but it is now approaching fifty years old, and is not without its flaws. It suffers from a few major issues—such as Bowman’s insistence on structuring it as a Greek performance rather than a Roman one—and whilst it presents a dramatic structure for the text, I am not convinced that it is the best structure for reading Revelation as drama. I have briefly touched on this both here and elsewhere,\textsuperscript{13} and in doing so have asserted that any structure that treats Revelation as drama must take into account the various distinguishing features of Roman comedy and drama, such as (but not limited to, or defined by,) a chorus, a narrator, a series of events, a chiastic structure, and a diverse plot involving satire, mimicry, and ambiguity.

Any study focusing on Revelation’s structure in such a way would be helpful and indeed illuminating. As with art, perhaps it is time for scholars to acknowledge that there is no one correct way to view and understand a text, but rather a multitude of ways, each contributing their own value and approach to the text. In a postmodern world, Biblical texts must be understood to be polyvalent in character and embraced as such; a multiplicity of readings allows people from different backgrounds and statuses to find common ground in the same texts. As Phil Ruge-Jones helpfully puts it, an awareness of

\textsuperscript{11} Bowman, The Drama of the Book of Revelation; Fee and Stuart, How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth; Boring, Revelation; Blevins, “Revelation 1-3.”
\textsuperscript{13} U-Wen Low, “Framing Revelation as Drama” (Honours dissertation, Whitley College, University of Divinity, 2012).
the text as performance results in “a growing awareness of the multiplicity of meanings possible within a relatively fixed text.”

2. So what?

The initial question underlying this thesis was a simple one, “What does it look like to read the book of Revelation in a way that includes, acknowledges, and seeks to understand its various Greco-Roman allusions, and interprets it in the context of the dramatic and visual culture it is rooted in?” Despite this being a relatively new area of scholarship, this thesis set out to build on previous (partial) attempts and to demonstrate that it was a fruitful way to approach such vivid narrative—understanding Revelation from the perspective of performance enables us to hear and view the text with a variety of hermeneutical lenses, such as an awareness of ekphrasis, postcolonial criticism, and a “performance mode of thought.” Doing so subsequently enables readers to interpret the text as anti-imperial prophetic literature that engages with its original audience’s Greco-Roman (as well as Jewish) context in order to present a powerful challenge to the structures of Empire and message of hope to the powerless. The theological implications of understanding Revelation in this way are best explored elsewhere, but it is important to acknowledge that such a reading may be significant for many.

One of the key factors in understanding Revelation in this way was engaging with Greco-Roman performance arts, and to a lesser extent with greater Greco-Roman

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In so doing, I have sought to contribute to a particular area within scholarship: a systematic, distinctively Greco-Roman visual approach to both understanding and exegeting the text of Revelation. Other studies have already contributed greatly towards this approach, but most are tailored toward very specific aspects of the Greco-Roman world (such as Friesen’s work, which deals largely with issues related to Imperial cult worship in Rome and Asia Minor). Instead, I have drawn on a broader range of Greco-Roman primary sources, including beyond the realm of traditional Biblical scholarship, to engage with history, dramatic arts, and archaeology wherever possible in order to demonstrate how John’s audience might have heard and visualised the text.

Engaging with these Greco-Roman perspectives affirmed some alternative possibilities for interpreting difficult aspects of the text. One of these was the move towards an understanding of the text as being deliberately and theatrically allusive, helping to contextualize elements of the text in non-literal ways. This helps us, for example, in understanding the violence in Revelation—violence is performed and acted out much like in a Roman *ludi*, but it is one-sided and grossly exaggerated, and only ever enacted by God, not humans. It also assists in understanding John’s “misogynistic caricatures” of women in that many of the characters in John’s text are allusions to Greco-Roman stock characters, whose sole purpose was to fulfil the function of the plot. The women are no more ill-treated by John than the men—each are presented as they would be in Greco-Roman performances, and serving the purpose of advancing John’s message, whether through fulfilling their expected roles or through subverting them.

Understanding the text as theatre also allows readers to bring their own perspectives and experiences to the task of interpretation. Just as drama and theatrical performances are open to being freely interpreted by their audience, creating meaning separate to the

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15 The Jewish culture and texts embedded within Revelation have already been discussed at length elsewhere by a number of scholars such as G.K. Beale and Christopher Rowland, and so I have deliberately chosen not to pursue that focus here.
(alleged) author’s intent, so too Revelation should be encountered, interpreted, and then discussed. This frees the text from being bound by any one dominant interpretive strategy, instead acknowledging the richness and diversity of different readings of the text. This allows a greater breadth of contributions from marginalised and commonly unheard voices, fulfilling aspects of John’s vision of a great multitude “from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages.”\(^{16}\)

Perhaps most importantly, I have attempted to demonstrate that Revelation can and should be understood as dramatic in every sense of the word. The words of David Rhoads are particularly helpful in explaining this: exploring a text as drama “personifies the text,” helping the performer understand the text better, it redisCOVERs the emotions and humour inherent to the text, and finally it “reshapes our interpretations” by demonstrating that everyone understands the text differently.\(^{17}\) By firstly building an understanding of the original audience’s context, then invoking emotion and bringing forward the human elements of the text, this approach helps to bridge part of the two millennia-wide gulf between contemporary readers and the Christians in Asia Minor. When we cry, we cry with them; when we rejoice, we rejoice with them, as countless others have before us. Herein lies the strength of drama—it crosses boundaries and brings humans together.

In conclusion, I have aimed to provide a grounded reading of the text that strongly considers a previously underdeveloped aspect of its context—its allusions to Greco-Roman performance. Doing so has enabled a wide variety of interpretations and meanings, both recognising the text as historical artefact that speaks to its own context, and as a text that continues to speak powerfully into a variety of contemporary contexts. Revelation is indeed open to all those who have ears to hear, and eyes to see—may we gain the wisdom to approach this text carefully and humbly.

\(^{16}\) Revelation 7:9.
3. **Come, Lord Jesus! Concluding reflections**

I began this thesis hoping to discover an interpretation or a method of reading Revelation that would help contemporary readers of all backgrounds to appreciate and understand its passionate eloquence and its imagery in a grounded, contextual way. My own experience was that many Christians, preachers or otherwise, would use Revelation’s imagery as metaphor though they often claimed to be speaking the literal truth, often to advance theological and ecclesiological agendas of their own. Many claimed to be able to decipher the imagery in the text, and their futurist interpretations of the text had the potential to cause great harm to congregational members—and generated great fear and controversy.

This work represents a deliberate attempt to discover a reading of Revelation that would move away such interpretations. Revelation is a text of great beauty, of powerful hope, and of sublime artistic qualities. It is not a manual for interpreting or predicting the future, nor is it simply a record of the prevailing feelings of the cultures of the time. It is an apocalyptic performance, art made flesh, and it has the potential to speak to its hearing readers across the chasms of time and culture. To understand Revelation as rooted in the performance arts of the Greco-Roman world is to understand its context and background, giving us a strong foundation on which to build fresh understandings of the text.
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