

Leading from the Future: An Ideological Text Analysis of the Revelation of John

Abstract. The book of Revelation is perhaps one of the least read books of the Bible by modern churchgoers. The message of judgment and destruction contributes to the sense that the book has nothing positive to say. However, the book of Revelation should be read from a perspective of renewal and hope. Revelation articulates a future where God's sovereignty and justice upon the earth are restored. Moreover, John's vision is a reminder that we live in a world filled with chaos, complexity, and change. To survive, we must imagine a new future and one that is inclusive and seeks to build the community. This essay provides an ideological text analysis of John's Letters to the Churches of Asia. In doing so, it examines the methods John uses to craft a vision for the future.

Keywords: strategic leadership, future, vision, eschatology, ideological text analysis, social rhetorical criticism, seven letters to churches of Asia

Introduction

The book of Revelation is the last book of the Christian canon. It is presented as the final chapter of God's plan for humanity. The book describes not so much what has happened, but it details what will happen in the future. Without Revelation, the story of God and salvation history would not be complete. The future in John's revelation is highly eschatological in that it makes claims about the impending destruction of the earth. Bultmann (1957) argues that eschatology is the doctrine of the end of the world and of its destruction. Eschatology is taken from the Greek words *eschatos* and *logos*, meaning the doctrine of the last things.

Furthermore, the book of Revelation is apocalyptic because it envisions the destruction of an old-world order and the creation of a new-world order (Hill 2002). The new-world order envisioned by John is a world where sickness, death, and injustices would no longer exist (Revelation 21). However, before this new world can be realized, the old-world and the power structures associated with it would have to be destroyed. To this end, Revelation is a story of God's triumph over evil.

For modern readers of Revelation, the images and language used by John to construct his vision of the future seem detached from reality. The imagery of dragons,

demons, and angels stands in sharp contrast to modern images of nuclear weapons, terrorist attacks, global pandemics, and climate change. Moreover, the fact that John writes with certainty and conviction suggests that the future of humankind is sealed: “I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: If anyone adds anything to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book. And if anyone takes words away from this book of prophecy, God will take away from him his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book” (Revelation 22:18-19).

To explore John’s perspective of the future, I utilize ideological text analysis developed by Vernon Robbins, *Exploring the texture of text: A guide to socio-rhetorical interpretations*. According to Robbins (1996), ideological text analysis is concerned with the social location, values, biases, opinions, preferences, and stereotypes of a particular writer and reader (Robbins 1996). Robbins (1996) explains that the origin of ideological analysis begins with the interpreter, then other peoples’ interpretation of the text, and then the text itself. For the purpose of this article, the ideology of John will be examined through the lens of the Seven Letters to the Churches of Asia.

The Church in Peril

In the opening of John’s revelation, he communicates to his audience that time is near, and the events outlined in the revelation will soon take place. Moreover, he communicates that what he is about to say is not of human origin, but by the authority of God. Hence, John is a recipient of God’s word and is acting by divine authority. He also alludes to the fact that he is suffering because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ. He is directed by God to write down all events that he sees and communicate this to the seven churches.

John’s letters address specific concerns and issues that are present in the communities of Asia. For example, to the church of Ephesus, the issue is falling away from God or apostasy, while the issue present in the church of Pergamum is idol worship of Balaam. The church of Thyatira has also fallen apart, and sins of sexual immorality are present within the church. In the church of Sardis, the issue is the lack of awareness and vibrancy as John warns them to wake up. For the church of Laodicea, there is a wrong relationship concerning wealth and material possessions. John’s letter to the church at Laodicea is in contrast to the church of Smyrna, who are seen to be rich because of their poverty and lack of wealth.

Conversely, the church of Philadelphia is esteemed by John as an ideal church – a church that is likened to a pillar in the temple of God and one that is worthy of God’s inscription. For this reason, John states: “Since you have kept my command to endure patiently, I will also keep you from the hour of trial that is going to come upon the whole world to test those who live on the earth” (Revelation 3:10). Moreover, John tells the church that a new Jerusalem will come down out of heaven from God. John’s problem is that Jerusalem is filled with falsehoods: Jews and Apostles, who claim to be representatives of God and who are not; and people who claim to have faith and security associated with wealth and possession and who do not.

Ideological Analysis of the Future

Based on an ideological analysis of John’s revelation, the future is not all fire and brimstone. Although John issues a series of chilling indictments against sin, immorality, and superficiality in the church, the methods he uses to construct the future is based on hope, renewal, and repentance. Specifically, John employs inclusive rather than exclusive language to create his vision of the future. Richard (1995) argues that persecution is not the underlying problem in Revelation, but oppression and exclusion. God’s new Jerusalem and God’s new earth is a place where the doors would always be open and never shut. John himself, who is living in exile on the Isle of Patmos, may be viewed as a person on the outside of the community looking in. To this end, John is not writing from a dominant cultural position, but as a member of an oppressed community. For John, old-world boundaries would be replaced with new-world boundaries based on love, trust, and mutuality. Thus, John offers a revolutionist response to the world by destroying it and thereby allowing a new social world to come into fruition.

Furthermore, John uses a sensory-aesthetic texture that allows the reader to see, touch, and feel the future as it is unfolding (Robbins 1996). For example, John uses words like stars, Satan, crowns, death, and suffering, all of which create positive and negative emotions. John just does not hear a voice from God; he hears a loud voice that sounded like a trumpet. To the church of Laodicea, John states: “I know you aren’t cold or hot. I wish you were either one or the other! But you are lukewarm. You aren’t hot or cold. So, I am going to spit you out of my mouth” (Revelation 3:15-16).

In addition, John’s view of the future is more linear than nonlinear and more certain than uncertain. Central to John’s ideology is authority and confidence in his revelation because he is acting as an agent of God. He offers very detailed and prescriptive information concerning events that are to happen before God’s new era is to begin. However, one must exercise caution when outlining specific and detailed analysis

concerning the future. Hill (2002) asserts that the problem with eschatology and end-time prophecies concerning the second coming of Christ is that Christ has not returned yet as predicted. The Apostle Paul, for example, when faced with this same dilemma said: “Now, brothers, about times and dates we do not need to write to you, for you know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night” (1 Thessalonians 5:1-3).

However, John’s future is open and flexible. Divine history can be altered if members of the community change their lifestyles and behaviors. In his letter to the church at Ephesus, John writes: “Repent and do the things that you first did. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place” (Revelation 2:5). Hence, John offers an introversion response to sin, which suggests that the world is irredeemably evil, and salvation is only attainable by completely withdrawing from it. By renouncing the world and the material pleasures thereof, people can purify themselves and live in the right relationship with God and each other (Robbins 1996).

Application to Church Leadership

John’s letters to the churches may be viewed as seven futures that churches and faith communities can learn from. For John, the future is multi-dimensional, but singular in the sense that it is not a matter of if, but when these events will occur. In John’s worldview, time is of the essence, and the return of Jesus Christ is more imminent than previously believed. Therefore, church leaders must actively engage in planning for the future in anticipation of Christ’s return. The book of 2 Peter 3 describes the end of the earth and challenges us to consider how we live in the present and what kind of people we desire to be in the future.

Through the application of strategic leadership principles – environmental awareness, strategic visioning, and imagination – church leaders can position themselves to lead from the future and not from the past. For example, the decline in religious affiliation among millennials, cultural values differences, and the dominance of social media and virtual technology will undoubtedly impact the church for decades to come. Ultimately, John’s revelation is a reminder that the future is in God’s hands, but the decisions we make can help shape that future. According to 2 Peter 3:9, “God does not want anyone to perish, but to come to repentance.” Thus, church leaders must be open to new possibilities so that more people can receive salvation and experience the fullness of God’s grace.

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