



A CHRISTIAN MODEL OF FORESIGHT:
An Ideological and Socio-Rhetorical Analysis of Revelation 2:1-7

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How should Christian communities approach their future horizon? This paper will argue from John's letter to the church of Ephesus in Revelation 2:1-7, that his implicit model of foresight combines both *futurum* and *adventus*, or eschatology and futurology. John's prophetic model informs a Christian model of foresight for today's Christian organizations. The application of futurology in today's model will differ greatly from John's model due to a broader availability of information sources.

The Church of Ephesus

The message to the church of Ephesus was the first of seven letters to individual churches. The Revelation was written as an apocalyptic message speaking of the culminating conflict between universal good and evil. Viewing today's Ephesus, an insignificant Turkish city of ruins separated from the harbor by a floodplain of silt,¹ one may question "why was Ephesus the first church singled out for attention?" However, at the time of the writing, Ephesus was the largest city in proconsular Asia with an estimated population of 300,000 people.² As the capital of the wealthy province of Asia with an excellent harbor at the intersection of major land and sea routes of the era,³ Ephesus boasted of many impressive Greek-influenced public buildings.⁴

Built on a high point of the city and visible to all Ephesus, the magnificent Temple of Artemis – four times the size of the Parthenon in Athens – was one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World.⁵ Many held that the huge statue of Artemis came down from heaven (Acts 19:35). Paul refers to Christian believers as fitted together into a holy temple as a dwelling place of God (Ephesians 2:21-22), perhaps in contrast to this looming edifice over Ephesus.

If John wrote the Book of Revelation during the reign of Domitian (a point discussed later in this paper), the large imperial temple built by Domitian would have

¹ Doud, Warren, ed., "Grace Notes." Materials on the history and geography of Ephesus were compiled using the following sources: Unger, Merrill F., *Bible Dictionary; Encyclopedia Britannica*; Bean, G.E., "Aegean Turkey: An Archeological Guide"; Conybeare and Howson, "The Life and Epistles of St. Paul." <http://www.realtime.net/~doud/ephesians/eph00g.html> (accessed September 16, 1998).

² "Ephesus." *Nelson's Illustrated Bible Dictionary*. (Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1986). *PC Study Bible for Windows (Version 2)*. CD-ROM (Biblesoft, 1996).

³ Brisco, Thomas V., *Holman Bible Atlas: A Complete Guide to the Expansive Geography of Biblical History* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1998), 254-255.

⁴ Doud.

⁵ Bruce, F.F. *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Book of Acts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1988), 287.

been along the main thoroughfare of Ephesus.⁶ The Ephesians would have daily passed the huge library of Celsus, the impressive columns of government buildings, the great amphitheater seating 2,500 people, public bath complexes, and gymnasiums.⁷

The house churches in this city had a strong Christian foundation. Paul started the church (Acts 19) and wrote a strong letter to the Ephesians. According to tradition, the apostle John had also ministered in Ephesus.⁸

In the letter of Revelation, the Christians in this once magnificent city again heard about the world to come, revealing an even more glorious city, the New Jerusalem, foretold in Christ's Revelation (Rev. 1). The following will examine a portion of the message given to John on the island of Patmos, using Robbin's techniques of ideological texture and socio-rhetorical analysis.⁹ Ideological texture will examine the actors; their interactions, choices, and conflicting viewpoints; and their relationships within their first century culture to discover a first century model of foresight.

Individuals and groups in their relationship to one another

John, the recorder of Christ's Revelation, and his first century world. The earliest Christian traditions hold that John was the beloved disciple who wrote the Gospel of John. No other man of the first century was so well-known that he could write an epistle from "John" with no further clarification of his position.¹⁰ This was the view of Justin (ca. 150 C.E.), Origen, Irenaeus, and other leaders in the first two centuries of the church.¹¹ In the third century, Christian scholars began to question this view.¹² Scholars

⁶ Brisco, 254-255.

⁷ Vos, Howard F., *Nelson's New Illustrated Bible Manners and Customs: How the People of the Bible Really Lived*. (Nashville, TN: Nelson, 1999), 524-525. Also, "Ephesus." *New Unger's Bible Dictionary* (Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1986). *PC Study Bible for Windows (Version 2)*. CD-ROM (BibleSoft, 1996), 182.

⁸ Gregg, Scott, ed., *Revelation: Four Views. A Parallel Commentary* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1997), 64.

⁹ Robbins, Vernon K., *Exploring the Texture of Texts: A Guide to Socio-Rhetorical Interpretation* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1996). Also, Robbins, Vernon K., *The Tapestry of Early Christian Discourse: Rhetoric, Society, and Ideology* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1996).

¹⁰ Gregg, 13-14.

¹¹ Harrington, Wilfrid J., *Revelation* (Collegeville, MI: The Liturgical Press, 1993), 8.

¹² Ibid.

continue to debate the identity of John.¹³ However, there is little evidence to support conclusively any other specific ‘John’.¹⁴

Most scholars accept that authorities banished John to the island of Patmos (Rev. 1:9) during the reign of Domitian (81-96 C.E.).¹⁵ They claim that persecution of Christians so wide-spread during this reign that it would have reached to the churches addressed in Revelation. When Domitian’s campaign of emperor worship spread throughout the Roman Empire, it forced a no-compromise social situation by the dominant society that led to persecution of Christians.¹⁶

Other scholars prefer an earlier date (54-68 C.E.) during the reign of Nero known for the extensive persecution of Christians within the city of Rome.¹⁷ Those who read predictions of the Jerusalem Temple destruction (70 C.E.) in the prophecies of Revelation¹⁸ favor Nero’s reign.

Christ. John locates Christ walking in the midst of the church of Ephesus holding the seven stars in his hand that were part of his royal introduction (Rev. 1). From his position of God and patron, Christ reminds them of His omniscient knowledge of their past and present and warns them to change their present or they won’t be part of His predicted future.

The angel of the church of Ephesus. The identity of the “angel of the church of Ephesus” (2:1) has several interpretations. The Bible uses the same Greek word “angel/messenger” for both angelic beings and human messengers (Matt. 11:10; Mark 1:2; Luke 7:24, 27; 9:52).¹⁹ Commentators have identified this “angel” variously as a guardian angel, a presiding official, and as the ‘prevailing spirit’ of the church.²⁰ In the context of this passage, the angel is one subordinate to Christ, in a dominant position over the Ephesian church, yet not chosen to record Christ’s message to the church.

¹³ Mounce, Robert H., *The Book of Revelation*, revised ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), 12.

¹⁴ Gregg, 12.

¹⁵ Mounce, 15-17.

¹⁶ Ibid., 16-18.

¹⁷ Gregg, 15; Gentry, K. L., *The Beast of Revelation* (Fort Worth, TX: Dominion, 1989).le

¹⁸ Ibid., 18.

¹⁹ Walvoord, John F., “Revelation.” *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament*, eds. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck. 1983. CD-ROM. *QuickVerse 6*. Cedar Rapids, IA: Parsons Technology, 1999.

²⁰ Mounce, 66.

The church of Ephesus. The individuals of the church of Ephesus are the specifically addressed readers of 2:1-7. Christ addresses them as their “omniscient, omnipotent judge”²¹ and commends them for their past good works (2:2-3). However, they have “left [their] first love” (2:4). Yet this is same church that Paul had once praised for their love (Eph. 1:15, 16; 6:24).²² Now they have ignored what Christ described as the greatest commandment – loving God and others (Matt. 22:37-40). So Christ commands the Ephesians to ‘repent and do the first works’ (Rev. 2:5). If the church does not repent and return their former lifestyle, Christ will remove their “lampstand” from among the other churches. He will judge them and extinguish the church.²³ In their favor, the Ephesian church had recognized and hated the false teaching of the Nicolaitans, one of the heretical sects—in this their beliefs were one with Christ (2:6).²⁴

All who read or hear the message. There are several schools of thought about who is included in “He who has ears to hear, let him hear” (Rev. 2:7). Gregg argues one of those schools – Revelation 2:7 includes all readers of the Book of Revelation (from the first century to the present and the future).²⁵ Christ will reward all the ‘overcomers’ with the privilege of eating from the tree of life that grows in the New Jerusalem (22:2).²⁶ This is a promise of return to the fellowship with God lost by Adam in the fall (22:14; Gen. 2:9; 3:22, 24; Prov. 11:30).²⁷ What will they need to overcome? John 16:33 and 1 John 5:4-5 imply that what they need to overcome is the world and the corrupting influence of the dominant society.²⁸ To do this the believer must persevere in obedience and be victorious in the predicted trials.²⁹

²¹ Radmacher, Earl D., Ronald B. Allen, and H. Wayne House. *The Nelson Study Bible (NKJV)* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1982), 2166.

²² Ibid.

²³ Gregg, 65.

²⁴ Radmacher, Allen, and House, 2167.

²⁵ Gregg, 65. According to Gregg, the Rev. 1:3 blessings for reading and obeying this prophecy (The Revelation of Jesus Christ) applies to later generations as well as first century Christians, 53.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Radmacher, Allen, and House, 2167.

²⁸ Gregg, 65.

²⁹ Radmacher, Allen, and House, 2167.

Ideological and Socio-rhetorical Relationships

Analyzing Rev. 2:1-7 using Robbin’s socio-rhetorical categories reveals the interplay of several social and cultural classifications. The social system of the first century was “the group-oriented, honor-shame” Mediterranean thinking³⁰ dominated by the Greco-Roman political system. Revelation 2:1-7 was speaking directly to the Christian believers at Ephesus, a counterculture to the dominant culture³¹ and an apparent subculture within the Christian culture.³² Exhorting them to “return to their first love” was a call to return to their previously held views within Christian mainstream thinking (which their deeds had shown as listed in Rev. 2:2-3). The Ephesians had opposed the contra cultural views³³ of the Nicolaitans, yet were still outside the dominant Christian beliefs (2:5-6).

Christ, the highest patron in the position of highest honor, called his clients to “remember” where they were, “repent,” and “do” the deeds they used to do (2:5). This public announcement of the Ephesians’ failings would have brought shame to the church, while motivating them to return to their previous position of honor based on their former love. John’s immediate motivation was for the Ephesians’ repentance and return to strong Christian beliefs to withstand the coming persecution and trials of the end times (Rev. 4-22). His goal was that the Ephesians would “overcome” (2:7) that they might live with Christ in the New Jerusalem (4:21-22).

John’s Model of Foresight

John’s model of foresight as shown in the Book of Revelation centers on a ‘God promised event yet to unfold,’ even though the timetable for fulfillment is unknown and the vivid apocalyptic imagery shrouds the events.³⁴ Peters calls this intervention into the universe *adventus* – God doing something new, not based on existing elements.³⁵ Given the apocalyptic scenario of the future (Rev. 4-22), John exhorts Christians to prepare themselves spiritually for those coming events giving his readers “signposts” to monitor so they could see the indications of the fulfillment of the future predictions.³⁶ When the

³⁰ Robbins, *Exploring*, 75-76.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid., 86.

³³ Ibid., 87.

³⁴ Klein, William W., Craig L. Blomberg, and Robert L. Hubbard. *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Dallas, TX: Word Publishing, 1993), 369-370.

³⁵ Peters, Ted. *Futures: Human and Divine* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox, 1978), 21.

³⁶ Ralston, Bill, and Ian Wilson. *The Scenario Planning Handbook: Developing Strategies in Uncertain Times* (Mason, OH: Thomson/Southwestern, 2006).

present is used to predict the future, Peters calls this *futurum* – a future developed from trends already present.³⁷

Dealing specifically with the Ephesians (Rev. 2:1-7), John's model of foresight includes both an eschatological and a futurological perspective, both *adventus* and *futurum*. John deals with the eschatological future as he encourages them to not give up. He communicates Christ's promise to those who do persevere that they will fellowship with God in Paradise.³⁸ John deals with the Ephesians from a futurology perspective as he tells them to examine their past success and their recent past trends that they might see the direction they are going. He then sets before them an alternative future scenario based on no change in their behavior – that of Christ's removal of the church.³⁹

Contemporary Application of John's Model

Today's Christian organizations still require a model of foresight that combines *futurum* and *adventus*. We are still morally responsible to examine our past and present to determine the needed adjustments for our intended future, just as the Ephesians were exhorted to do. However, today's organizations have a much broader range of information upon which to evaluate their past and present; we know more about the driving forces and trends affecting our current situation than the first century church. We have available the techniques and the experience to use to forecast plausible scenarios within our historical time horizon. We can make the best possible human choices to make those scenarios a reality. However, we will always be dependent upon *adventus*, God's intervention to provide something totally outside of existing elements and human projections – the promised New Jerusalem.

³⁷ Peters, 20-21.

³⁸ Radmacher, Allen, and House, 2167.

³⁹ Gregg, 65

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