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A Perfection of Misunderstandings: John's Role as Author in the Book of Revelation



by Syd Hielema

Note: This essay needs to be read with the Bible opened to the book of Revelation.

I. Introduction

Some time ago when I was teaching the book of Revelation, I found myself enjoying the manner in which a number of biblical scholars playfully yet prudently explored the variety of ways sevens are employed in this intriguing final part of Scripture. Seeking to practice this art, I discovered that on seven occasions scattered throughout Revelation John misunderstands what he sees and is corrected by someone else. As I worked with these seven

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misunderstandings, I came to the conclusion that they provide the reader with the comforting permission to misunderstand along with John, because providing perfect understanding is not the ultimate goal of the book. Rather, the book seeks to provide a limited but sufficient understanding that evokes from the reader outbursts of abandoned praise in response to the wonder of what God has done and continues to do. Freed from the anxious tyranny of needing to understand perfectly and completely what John writes, we are also freed to surrender in humble and joyful awe before the one who sits on the throne.

This thesis concerning the significance of the seven misunderstandings requires two statements concerning the literary character of Revelation. First, its genre may be described as an epistolary apocalypse that is frequently interrupted for worship. The visions that John describes are clearly apocalyptic in character. They represent descriptions of life on God's earth from the perspective of the heavenly throne room, a perspective which strikes the earth-bound perceiver as surreal. Time moves in circles rather than in straight lines. Symbols with multiple meanings come and go, only to reappear again with different twists. Cycles of sevens spin around the listener, overlapping as the end of one cycle signals the beginning of the next. The surreal, circular, multi layered character of apocalypse tells us that the book of Revelation cannot be treated as a puzzle to be deciphered. We are not called to find an earthly correspondent for every number, symbol, and time frame referred to. Rather, this is learning by immersion; the listening

community is called to swim in the ocean called Revelation and feel its refreshing waters, taste its saltiness, hear its crashing waves, and be renewed. In a sense, it is the perfect end-of-the-millennium postmodern read: we are not to decipher it, but to participate in it, to experience it. The early Christians would have heard the book read in its entirety during worship; its many choruses of praise would have evoked from them worshipful participation concluded with the celebration of the Lord's Supper. Such a setting reinforces the experiential character of reading the book with, as Eugene Peterson says, "the praying imagination."¹

But this apocalypse is written as an epistle, flowing from the heart of a humble pastor. Whereas Paul usually highlights the apostolic authority he has received from God in the introductions of his epistles, John is much more modest: "I, John, your brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus" (1.9) constitute his words of self-introduction, and the terms 'brother' and 'companion' signal his deep identification with those believers whom he is unable to be with in person. John takes pains to emphasize his own ordinariness. He is about to describe for them incomparable heavenly visions, but these visions are not to function as gnostic mysteries which elevate John on the spiritual hierarchies of the day and thereby further isolate him from his churches. To prevent such misreading, John's seven misunderstandings sprinkled throughout the book remind the listener that John is truly our brother and companion, one like us, a fellow-grappler with heaven-described earthly wonders. In the author of Revelation, we meet one whose human eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord, but these human eyes strain to see through a glass darkly more than any other New Testament writer's eyes.

Second, we need to say a word about the multitude of sevens that occur in Revelation. In ancient Jewish literature sevens signify fullness, completion, and perfection. Items that occur seven times represent the totality of what they refer to. I will argue that the seven misunderstandings of the author John point to the struggle experienced by all of God's children to tune their eyes to heavenly visions and to fix their eyes upon Jesus in order to run the race set before them on this earth. I will

also argue that these seven misunderstandings are arranged in the form of a chiasm; that is, there is a symmetrical structure within them that can be expressed in the pattern ABCDCBA (see Appendix 1). Chiastic structures serve to point the reader to the climax or central thesis of what is being written, that is, the D section, while also situating this climax within a larger, comprehensive framework. Discovering this chiastic pattern served to convince me that these seven misunderstandings provide a legitimate and promising door into the world of this book.

II. The seven misunderstandings

The opening chapter of Revelation describes a dramatic encounter between "someone like a son of man" and the exiled apostle, and this encounter produces the first misunderstanding of the book. "When I saw him," John writes, "I fell at his feet as though dead. Then he placed his right hand on me and said, 'Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last. I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades'" (1.17f.). John is so utterly overwhelmed by what he sees that he collapses to the floor in awe, worship, terror, and confusion.

John does not know who has come to him. This majestic son of man, described here in phrases appropriate only for the high priestly king of all creation, reaches out that all-powerful universe-upholding right hand to steady his trembling child and follows that touch with the oft-repeated biblical refrain of reassurance, "do not be afraid." Having ministered to John's terror, he then ministers to his confusion, as if to say, "you do not know who I am. Allow me to present my calling card, my credentials:" "I am the First and the Last. I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the key of death and Hades."

In a few short sentences John is taken from his lonely, isolated exile and situated within the entirety of redemption history. It is as if the Lord has said to him, "John, you are not alone on a God-forsaken isle divorced from the lordship of Jesus and the daily life of his church. You are in the presence of the one in whom the entirety of God's way with the world, the entirety of redemption history holds together. He is the first and the last; yes, death has invaded God's good creation, but this

someone has died and is now alive for ever and ever, and furthermore, his life is not simply a personal victory: he now holds the power over death and the abode of the dead, Hades, for he is the first-born from the dead. This someone whom you see is Jesus Christ the Lord; he represents the entirety of God's way with his creation, and he has not abandoned his own, for he walks among the seven lampstands, his body on earth, the church."

John's first misunderstanding leads to a foundation for this book: his terror and confusion are ministered to; his aging eyes will serve as the vehicle to transmit what flows from the Lord's eyes like blazing fire; he is but an awestruck companion and brother of his fellow believers, called to pass on what he sees, to minister in turn to their dimmed visions of serving the risen Lord amidst a mocking, faith-demeaning culture. This first encounter leads to seven letters to seven churches, letters declaring that Jesus does reign, that the promises inherent in his kingship are firm, and that thus his struggling children are called to be faithful amid difficulty.

A second misunderstanding occurs during the next dramatic encounter of the book. In chapter 4 John is shown the heavenly throne room, and he sees there a variety of creatures praising the one on the throne, and a sealed scroll which no one is able to open. John's response to this apparent problem in this scene of overwhelming power and praise is passionate: "I wept and wept because no one was found who was worthy to open the scroll or look inside" (5.4). The terror and confusion of ch. 1 give way to deep grief in ch. 5. The aloneness of ch. 1 had been transformed into hope and longing kindled by the extraordinary visit of the son of man, further fueled by this vision of the heavenly throne room, and now this promising road appears to have reached a dead end. John weeps, not only as a child of God, but as a pastor, bringing into the throne room the hopes and fears of all the years that he has accumulated in ministering to God's children in Asia Minor.

Why such weeping over a scroll when all else in the picture points to unparalleled splendor? John recognizes that what he sees in this heavenly throne room contains the fullness of redemption history. He sees there many items that were also part of the furnishings and adornments of the temple in Jerusalem, the rainbow which signaled God's

promise to Noah, twenty-four elders representing the 12 tribes of the Old Covenant and the 12 apostles of the New, and the four living creatures that point to the four corners of the earth and thus all creation. The heavenly throne room is an earth-saturated place, a dynamic signpost of the Lord's intense intimacy with all that he has made. And yet, just as the most profound wonder is easily marred by the one seemingly small item that mocks the coherence of its wonder, the 'fly in the ointment' as it were, so this sealed scroll appears to laugh derisively in the face of the majesty and power of this place by hiding within itself the key to

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redemption history. John's tears bring before God's throne the tears of God's children everywhere whose dimmed eyes are further clouded by the salt of their sorrow.

An elder comes to minister to John's grief, repeating with new words what the son of man declared to John in the first chapter: "'Do not weep! See, the lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has triumphed. He is able to open the scroll and its seven seals.' Then I saw a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing in the center of the throne, encircled by the four living creatures and the elders" (5.5f.). John's descriptions of the incomparable power of the one he saw in the first chapter are now seen in the seven horns of the Lamb, and those "eyes like blazing fire" are now "seven eyes which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth." Through his seven eyes this Lamb is present to the ends of the earth, and God's struggling children are present at the coronation scene, for each of the living creatures and the elders "were holding golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints" (5.8). The intimate bond between Jesus and John affirmed in chapter 1 is now clarified as intimacy between heaven and earth. As the heavenly host breaks forth into an uncontrollable eruption of praise, John and the seven churches are drawn in, singing the words of

Psalm 30, "you turned my wailing into dancing, you removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy, that my heart may sing to you and not be silent, O Lord my God, I will give you thanks forever."

These first two misunderstandings on John's part concern the person and work of Jesus Christ. The clarifications of these two misunderstandings are similar, though the second expands and enriches the first. The similarities between these two provide an important function for the participating listener: the first occurs on Patmos, the second in the heavenly throne room. Thus, these first two misunderstandings form a bridge from the perspective of exile to the perspective of heaven. John's response of terror-stricken worship on Patmos is followed by the response of the hosts of all creation who are lost in wonder, love, and praise in the throne room. John's seven congregations travel with him from Patmos to the heavenly throne room. In his first two misunderstandings, they recognize their own dim-eyed understandings of the Lamb who reigns, and as John's eyes are ministered to, they share in the healing of his vision.

After this revelation, the seals of the scroll are opened one by one, and we perceive glimpses of history in pain. God's good world is driven by powers of darkness, and God's children are killed as they cry out for the final judgment to banish the darkness. But the scroll's unsealing is interrupted by a sealing in ch. 7, first 144,000 from the tribes of Israel, and then a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language. As this multitude falls down and worships the one on the throne, we encounter a third misunderstanding. When John is asked by one of the elders who these multitudes in white robes are and where they come from, he does not know, but his ignorance does not disturb him. Freshly encouraged by the choruses of incense-freshened praise in the previous vision and the elder's wondrous response to his previous grief, John calmly replies, "Sir, you know." And he does: "these are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb" (7.14).

John is invited to identify what he sees, the only time in the book of Revelation that John is asked a question, and he does not know the answer. But it does not matter; he does not even need to confess

his ignorance. Instead, calmly and trustingly he replies to the elder, "Sir, you know." Twice before, John has seen things that confounded him, and both times his misunderstandings were clarified in ways far beyond what he could imagine. Twice before, the misunderstandings culminated in awe-struck worship and adoration. This time the worship is already in full swing. The innumerable host has already erupted in praise of God and the Lamb, and with their joyful choruses resonating in his heart, John is a child at peace. "Sir, you know," and the elder does know. And after he names this white-robed host, the praise continues, but now it has expanded to incorporate the elder's answer within it. The naming of the multitude gives them permission to be included in the hymn, which expands outwards from the glory of God and the Lamb to encompass this redeemed host. The Lion of Judah who has revealed himself as the slain Lamb in the second misunderstanding now comes more clearly into view as the Lamb who is the Shepherd of this redeemed multitude.

John's child-like, peace-filled response to his misunderstanding, enveloped by these hymns of praise, surely draws in the tear-streaked faces of his hearers in Asia Minor as they hum to themselves a New Covenant transformed interpretation of Psalm 23: "The Lamb is my Shepherd, I shall not want, he leads me to springs of living water, I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever, serving him day and night in his temple." And though the heavenly version omits the central portion of the 23rd Psalm, John's hearers could add these verses on their own: "though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me, your rod and your staff they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies, you anoint my head with oil, my cup overflows." Living in the midst of a world in which the seven seals are being unleashed, John's congregations know that as the unsealing progresses, a sealing is also occurring. They have heard the angel call out, "Do not harm the land or the sea or the trees until we put a seal on the foreheads of the servants of our God" (7.3).

Now we move to a fourth misunderstanding in which John, the peace-filled child of God in the previous scene, is now the confident scribe. An angel appears who bears a number of similarities to

the son of man of chapter one, and we read, "he gave a loud shout like the roar of a lion. When he shouted, the voices of the seven thunders spoke. And when the seven thunders spoke, I was about to write, but I heard a voice from heaven say, 'Seal up what the seven thunders have said and do not write it down'" (10.3). To this point, we have witnessed a Christological progression from the son of man to the lion to the lamb to the shepherd of the redeemed multitudes; this progression shows how John was led from confused terror to hopeless grief to child-like trust. But this fourth misunderstanding is much different. Confident John is commanded to seal up the words he hears. Worship does not surround this event. What are we to make of this?

Many commentators theorize that, coming near the midpoint of this heavenly tour, this chapter functions as an interlude, a half-time break to refresh and strengthen this pastor-prophet who has been given such an arduous task. Thus, the message is for him alone, a private word of strength and encouragement to nourish him for the remaining half of his task. This interpretation is strengthened by the latter part of this chapter, in which John is given a scroll to eat and, after doing so, is told, "You must prophesy again about many peoples, nations, languages and kings" (10.11). In other words, your break is over.

I wish to argue that the weight of this chapter does not point to such a conclusion. Rather, two features of this passage suggest instead that this fourth misunderstanding functions as the climax of the chiasm, that here we have reached the pinnacle towards which all the previous chapters have been moving and from which all that remains will flow. The first feature is John's confident demeanor. John does not appear to stand in need of a half-time refreshing. He has been refreshed greatly by the wonders he has seen and the worship he has heard. The beginning of his task was the arduous part, but having been ministered to in his terror and his grief, he is now fully equipped for the ministry he has been given. When we compare John's demeanor here with that of Daniel who was clearly in deep physical and emotional agony after receiving visions and dreams (cf. Dan. 7.28, 8.27), and that of various other OT prophets who struggled and suffered through their calling from the Lord, it is hard to describe these happenings as a necessary

half-time interlude.

Furthermore, that it is the seven thunders speaking leads one to question this theory as well. Strangely enough, excepting this reference to the seven thunders in ch. 10, thunder is referred to seven times throughout the book of Revelation, beginning in 4.5 and concluding in 19.6. Each time, thunder points to the power and majesty of God sitting on the heavenly throne and revealing his presence to the creation. There are no references to thunder prior to our entrance into the heavenly throne room in ch. 4, nor after the coming together of heaven and earth in ch. 21. Thunder

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occurs at climactic points in the narrative, symbolizing the intimate link between the almighty, transcendent, heaven-enthroned God and his earthly creation. If thunder is such a powerful symbol of God in relation with his creation, and sevens indicate fullness and completion, can we understand the speech of these seven thunders to be but a private word for one of God's children?

I would suggest that the combination of John's confidence and the significance of the thunders throughout Revelation suggest something greater than personal ministry. This chapter proclaims the climax of the history of redemption; the seven thunders are announcing the transformation of the entire cosmos through the work of the Lamb who was slain, but describing this wondrous work of transformation lies beyond even the Spirit-shaped imagination of God's servant John. The coming of the new creation occurs in expanding concentric circles. The risen Lamb who was slain is the first-fruit of the new creation (chs. 1,5); God's spirit-filled children, the body of Christ, constitute the next step in the coming of the new creation (ch. 7). Finally, the renewal of the entire creation signifies the completion of God's work of making all things new. Cosmic transformation is sure and certain, but its description is too wonderful for the human eye and ear. The seven thunders signal the climax of this redemption journey, a climax whose content

remains unknown to us.

Even so, glimpses of the thunders' message trickle throughout the remainder of the book, rising to a veritable river of life by the last two chapters. After John has been commanded to seal up the thundering words, the angel continues by declaring, "in the days when the seventh angel is about to sound his trumpet, the mystery of God will be accomplished, just as he announced to his servants the prophets" (10.7). When the seventh angel does sound his trumpet, our first glimpse of this mystery does indeed point to cosmic transformation through the work of the Lamb, as the worshipping chorus proclaims in those words that so inspired George Frederick Handel, "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever" (11.15). In this worshipful chorus we hear the central climax of the book of Revelation. It provides only a glimpse, but that glimpse is enough: the goal of redemption history has been reached. In the announcement of that pinnacle, this journey through the heavenly throne room is able to continue its course through redemption history, but now its focus will change. The hymn which follows in ch. 11 signals this change in focus: the time has come for the judgment that will bring the creation to its final crisis. Thus, the hallelujah chorus of 11.15 is followed by the judgment chorus (11.17f.), which in turn is followed by flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, an earthquake and a great hailstorm.

The chapters that follow are among the most chaotic and confusing in the book of Revelation. Beasts, dragons, strange numbers and cascading series of sevens surround the hearers as history endures the tumult of spiritual warfare. For almost one-third of the book, from chapters 10-17, John's responses to what he sees and hears are absent. But as the violence and horror gradually escalate, John is unable to continue as the silent recording secretary. In ch. 17 he sees the great prostitute, Babylon the Great, "drunk with the blood of the saints, the blood of those who bore testimony to Jesus. When I saw her," John writes, "I was greatly astonished" (17.6), and his astonishment constitutes the fifth misunderstanding.

Why is John astonished? This fifth misunderstanding bears the closest resemblance to the experience of John and his churches. In light of this

experience, his astonishment seems puzzling, but in light of the journey that he has taken through these first 17 chapters, his astonishment is understandable. The visions he has received have taken him from confused terror to despairing grief to trusting calmness to confidence. These visions have helped him to see the power of the Lamb and his protection of his flock; he has glimpsed the transformation of the entire creation, but now this. All is upside-down, and after being carried through four stages of worship-inspired awe and wonder, John is now astonished; here there is no worship.

But the angel explains that John need not be astonished, for the only ones who will be astonished are those "whose names have not been written in the book of life from the creation of the world" (17.8). As we follow the chiasmic structure of these seven misunderstandings, we see that this fifth one parallels the third. While the third resounds with the praise of those who have come through the great tribulation and washed their robes white in the blood of the Lamb, this fifth one describes that great tribulation. And yet, in spite of its gruesomeness, its tone is calm and sure: "the Kingdoms "will make war against the Lamb, but the Lamb will overcome them because he is Lord of Lords and King of kings--and with him will be his called, chosen and faithful followers" (7.14); "God has put it into the hearts of the beast and the ten horns to accomplish his purpose by agreeing to give the beast their power to rule until God's words are fulfilled" (7.17).

This fifth misunderstanding reveals a theme also prevalent in the writings of Paul: our present sufferings can be understood rightly only when they are situated within the context of the entirety of redemption history. The sufferings of chapter 17 cannot be compared with the glories of ch. 7 nor the thunderous speech in ch. 10. The saints whose blood flows freely are firmly anchored in redemption history: their names have been written in the book of life from the creation of the world, and the power wielded by the forces of evil has been given to them by God until his words are fulfilled. The woman rules over the kings of the earth, but the lamb is the Lord of lords and the King of kings. The description of the present experience of John and his churches cannot occur until the book has reached its climax. In ch. 1 the claim that "Jesus is indeed

Lord" is what appears astonishing to John's hearers. The fact that by ch. 17 the sight of a woman drinking the blood of the saints astonishes John signifies that this heaven-perspectived tour is accomplishing its purpose: our present sufferings are indeed astonishing, but when placed in the context of redemption history and the Lordship of Jesus Christ, they can be rightly called, in Paul's words, "our light and momentary troubles" (II Cor. 4.17).

In chapters 18-20, the end of this time of suffering is proclaimed. In chapter 19, echoes of chapters 5 and 7 resound as the heavenly multitudes erupt in worship again. The coronation of the Lamb, which flowed from the second misunderstanding in ch. 5, is now paralleled with the announcement of the wedding of the Lamb, which in turn leads to the sixth misunderstanding as a chiasmic counterpoint to the second. The redeemed whose robes were washed in the blood of the Lamb in ch. 7 are now named the bride, and "fine linen, bright and clean, was given her to wear." After the hymn is done, we read:

"the angel said to me, "write: 'blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb!'" And he added, "these are the true words of God." At this I fell at his feet to worship him. But he said to me, "Do not do it! I am a fellow servant with you and with your brothers who hold to the testimony of Jesus. Worship God!" (19.9f.)

A new confusion envelopes John, and it is not clear to John's hearers nor to us just what it is that provokes this confusion. Is the distinction between the son of man whom he met in ch. 1 and the angel with whom he now speaks not clear? That is well possible; at various times in Revelation angels are described in words and phrases that are very similar to the descriptions of the son of Man in ch. 1. Furthermore, the Lamb is not pictured in the vision that John sees in ch. 19, so he may well have wondered if the one speaking with him was the Lamb. Falling to worship is clearly analogous to his act in ch. 1 in response to his mysterious visitor. John knows that worship is the only fitting response to all that he has seen and heard, but his overwhelmed heart is not clear as to the proper means for expressing what is overflowing within it.

The final misunderstanding occurs at the end of the closing section in chs. 21 and 22. The words of the seven thunders have been sealed up, but their

proclamation of the entire creation's transformation continues to seep through the cracks. The cryptic "God will wipe away every tear from their eyes" which ends ch. 7 is now expanded to say "he will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away" (21.4). The saints who serve him day and night in his temple in ch. 7 are now the bride, described as a city more fabulous than any temple imaginable. Thus, John does "not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple" (21.22).

"Our first task is not to comprehend but to adore."

The apocalyptic visions come to an end, and the farewells of chapter 22 highlight for us how confusing matters can still be this late in the journey. In vs. 6-8, we the listeners are addressed, in turn, by the angel, Jesus, and John. Once again John falls prostrate before the angel and is quickly commanded to worship God alone. Just as the first two misunderstandings are interwoven with worship of the Lamb, so the last two are misguided attempts to worship the Lamb. This second bout of angel worship is understandable, as the angel's closing words in vs. 6 are followed by an apparent declaration from the Lamb himself, likely spoken through the mouth of the angel.

These last two misunderstandings serve two purposes in the book. First, they highlight the interweaving of the epistolary and apocalyptic elements in the book of Revelation. The first and last misunderstandings occur within the book's epistolary bookends. Before the visions begin and after they have ended, John addresses his readers with words of introduction and words of closure, words rooted in Patmos. The second and sixth misunderstandings, which bear strong similarities to the first and seventh, occur in the midst of wondrous apocalyptic visions. Their similarities within the overall chiasmic structure form a bridge from earth to heaven and back to earth again, a bridge which symbolizes the intimate interweavings between the heavenly vantage point and earthly realities.

Secondly, these last two misunderstandings highlight something of the culmination of reconciliation in God's mighty work of redemption. Redemption involves at its heart the breaking down of barriers, and in these last two chapters of Revelation the walls come tumbling down everywhere. Gone are the barriers between heaven and earth, land and sea, day and night. The wedding feast of the Lamb and the bride anticipates intimate union between the two. The Lamb is the king of kings; his servants the bride, we read, will reign with him for ever and ever (22.5). There is a kind of fluidity throughout the book of Revelation that points us to this breaking down of barriers. Each of John's seven misunderstandings involves a conversation partner: first the Lamb, then two times an elder in the heavenly throne room, and the final four an angel. As the Lamb speaks through the angel in 22.7, it is no wonder that this fluidity has John baffled, and it may well be that this barrier-destroying fluidity contributes to the need to seal up the words of the seven thunders in ch. 10. Words are by definition boundary-setting entities. How can the proper words ever be found to express that which transcends the capabilities of human speech? It is not surprising to us that in the first, sixth and seventh misunderstandings John's worship is speechless; he worships with a prostrate body, not a praising tongue. It is also not surprising to us that at several junctures John grapples for words to describe that which appears to transcend the limitations of human speech. John's seventh and final misunderstanding is not the fruit of dim-witted vision, but rather the fruit of a child of God who has come full circle: from awe-overwhelmed terror to awe-overwhelmed praise that feels helplessly inarticulate in the face of wonders too great to comprehend.

IV. Conclusion

John's seven misunderstandings help us to see different dimensions of Spirit-led living that longs for the fullness of the new creation. His confusions signal that this living is not primarily characterized by complete and perfect understanding. In dethroning clear understanding as the necessary response to the book of Revelation, John names a more appropriate response: the response of passionately abandoned worship. "Our first task," writes the Reformed theologian Herman Bavinck, "is not to

comprehend but to adore." When comprehension functions as a primary goal, it furthers the end of self-sufficiency; when adoration is primary, dependent intimacy is fostered.

The primacy of worship as the response of the child of God to the acts of God demonstrates that on one level the entire book of Revelation is a response to Psalm 137. 4: "How can we sing the song of the Lord while in a strange land?" Like the plaintive Psalmist, John is in exile, but, unlike the Psalmist, he is not in a strange land. Rather, he is in the Spirit, and where the Spirit is, there is the presence of the Lord, there is the temple. The book of Revelation declares along with Paul that, though we live in exile, "we are more than conquerors through him who loved us," and thus we are convinced that nothing "in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 8.37, 39).

But it's too easy to stop there. There is much more to this book than a Hallelujah chorus, central though that chorus is. At times the worship cannot begin until misunderstandings are ministered to, at times the act of worship itself is enveloped by misunderstanding, and at times there is tear-stained astonishment that loses its worshipping voice. Worship that is lost in wonder, love, and praise is not naive concerning the distinction between the now and the not yet; it does not engage in ever-louder victory chants in a desperate effort to outshout the noise of battle. Yes, we sing in Babylon, but our songs do not take us out of Babylon. John's visions appear to take him out of the world, but in fact they immerse him in this world more deeply than he had imagined possible. It is precisely this penetrating immersion that awakens the difficult paradox of passionately abandoned worship in the face of dragons, beasts, and bloodied saints.

This interplay between the intense presence of God and the worshipful response of his saints in spite of misunderstandings is a fruit of the thorough interweaving between the realms of heaven and earth. The book of Revelation is overflowing with symbols of this interweaving: thunder and lightning crash from the heavens to earth, prayers of the saints fill the heavenly throne room with smoky incense, and the heaven-sent Spirit indwells the saints while angels run their errands. The interweaving is far richer than our minds can compre-

hend, but the fact of its existence is all that matters.

Finally, these seven misunderstandings alert us to the rhythm of life lived before the face of God. It is not a rhythm in which God reveals himself to us, we reason it out, and then act in accordance with our reasoning. Rather, it is a rhythm in which God acts, and we respond in worship as best we can. And as we worship we are strengthened in the knowledge of whose we are and who we are, we seek sufficient clarity to walk another mile, and we persevere as God's kingdom children pointing to his present and coming reign in the midst of Babylon. At the book's close, we are told that the Spirit and the bride say "Come." That word is on our lips, the Spirit-led bride, summing up the Lord's prayer in that one word, "Come." As G. C. Berkouwer has written, "just as the prayer of the saints in

Revelation immediately released visible and audible power on earth—'peels of thunder, loud noises, flashes of lightning, and an earthquake'—so the prayer 'thy Kingdom come' is no stammering monologue, but a prayer that expects an answer. And every time we pray the Lord's Prayer there is reason for us to go and stand at the window of expectation."²

END NOTES

1. *Reversed Thunder, The Revelation of John and the Praying Imagination*. (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), p. xiv.
2. *The Return of Christ*, tr. James VanOosterom. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), pp. 452f.

APPENDIX 1

Seven Misunderstandings of John in Revelation

D. "but I heard a voice say,
'seal up...'" (10.4)

C. "Sir, you know." (7.14)

C. "I was greatly astonished." (17.6)

B. "I wept and wept..." (5.4)

B. "Do not do it!
Worship God!" (19.10)

A. "I fell at his feet
as though dead." (1.17)

A. "Do not do it!
Worship God!" (22.9)