

# The Fiction of the Seven Letters in the Apocalypse: Representing Heavenly Authority in the Shadow of Paul\*

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## ■ Abstract

While scholars have traditionally taken Revelation's "letters to the seven churches" (Rev 2–3) as documentation for the experiences of the Christ-movement in those cities, this article argues that the letters amount to a fictional device—that the Apocalypse appropriates epistolary forms in response to the increasing authority of early Pauline collections among the late first-century Asia Minor Christ-movements. With its divine epistolary authority and heavenly sevenfold "collection," the Apocalypse attempts to exceed and denigrate Pauline authority in the Christ-movement, and it elevates a Jewish Christ-devotion based in priestly apocalyptic traditions. In the end, we can see John of Patmos both as a competitor to the Pauline tradition and as a witness to the earliest circulation of Pauline collections.

## ■ Keywords

Book of Revelation, ancient letter collections, Pauline authority, apocalyptic literature, Jewish Christ-belief, early Christian prophecy, epistolary fiction

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## ■ Introduction

The Book of Revelation includes in its introductory section seven “letters” to congregations in specific cities in Asia Minor (Rev 2–3). It has been customary for commentators to take these letters, each dictated by an aspect or emanation of God, as somehow directed to or addressing the specific *ekklēsiai* (assemblies) in each city and so actually capturing their social situations: local persecution or dissension, prophetic rivalry, heresy, levels of spiritual commitment, and harassment by so-called Jews. By reading these letters as historical messages to individual assemblies, scholars can thus ground their larger assumptions about the Christ-movement in Asia Minor (especially with regard to Roman persecution or relations with Jews). If these letters—individually, together, or together with the visions (as a single *biblion*<sup>1</sup>)—were intended for physical circulation among the assemblies of Smyrna, Laodicea, and the rest, then they must reflect those assemblies’ individual social realities. Thus, one can read the seven letters as (slightly veiled) documentation of their various struggles in the first century. This has been a dominant approach to Revelation’s historical context from Ramsay and Hemer until now.<sup>2</sup>

In this article, however, I argue that the so-called “letters to the seven churches of Asia” were never directed to actual assemblies of Christ-believers; that they address deviant or beneficial practices only of the most general or allusive sort (i.e., not keyed to specific local situations); and that the letter collection as a whole represents a repudiation of the earliest Pauline letter-collections (i.e., from the later

<sup>1</sup> Given the range of meanings for this word, from “book” and “codex” to otherworldly scripture and even “letter,” I leave it untranslated.

<sup>2</sup> Principal proponents of this approach: William Mitchell Ramsay, *The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia and their Place in the Plan of the Apocalypse* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1904); Colin J. Hemer, *The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia in their Local Setting* (JSNTSup 11; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1986); Charles H. H. Scobie, “Local References in the Letters to the Seven Churches,” *NTS* 39 (1993) 606–24; Frederick J. Murphy, *Fallen Is Babylon: The Revelation to John* (New Testament in Context; Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press, 1998) 48–49; David L. Barr, *Tales of the End: A Narrative Commentary on the Book of Revelation* (Santa Rosa, CA: Polebridge Press, 1998) 20, 42–51; Greg Carey, *Elusive Apocalypse: Reading Authority in the Revelation to John* (Studies in American Biblical Hermeneutics 15; Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1999) 111, 138; Paul Trebilco, “John’s Apocalypse in Relation to Johannine, Pauline, and Other Forms of Christianity in Asia Minor,” in *The Oxford Handbook of The Book of Revelation* (ed. Craig R. Koester; New York: Oxford University Press, 2020) 185–201; Ralph J. Korner, *Reading Revelation after Supersessionism: An Apocalyptic Journey of Socially Identifying John’s Multi-Ethnic Ekklesiai with the Ekklesia of Israel* (The New Testament after Supersessionism; Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2020); David L. Mathewson, *A Companion to the Book of Revelation* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2020) ch. 3. Notably, scholars who take more literary approaches to Revelation are able largely to sidestep these assumptions about the letters: e.g., Christopher A. Frilingos, *Spectacles of Empire: Monsters, Martyrs, and the Book of Revelation* (Divinations; Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004) 107–10; Sarah Emanuel, *Humor, Resistance, and Jewish Cultural Persistence in the Book of Revelation: Roasting Rome* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020) 95–125. On Revelation as circulated as a single roll: R. H. Charles, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Revelation of St. John* (2 vols.; International Critical Commentary; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1920) 1:25.

first century). Indeed, this act of repudiation corresponds to the author's general rejection of Pauline teachings about sexuality, kashrut, and Jewishness. If various Asia Minor Christ-assemblies were developing standards for end-time religious practices based on a collection of Paul's letters, well then here would be a divine set of epistolary proclamations from none other than the Lord-Angel, the regent of the God of Israel himself (who now incorporated the risen Christ), that condemned Paul's halakhic advice.

In this sense the epistolary forms in chapters 2–3 (and 1:4–5, 11) represent a literary fiction, a conceit, in the sense of a text that appropriates elements of another literary form to advance claims of authority, verisimilitude, antiquity, and authorial presence without the performative functions to which this form was typically put (i.e., a letter never actually sent, a stela that was never erected, a book that never actually existed). Ancient religious texts often claimed to come from buried scrolls, exotic inscribed stelae, and other such mysterious derivations, to inspire awe or a sense of immediacy and certainly a sense of authority in the readers or audiences.<sup>3</sup> Fictional letter collections and pseudo-epistolary frames, with their pretense to personal connection, offered analogous authority.<sup>4</sup>

## ■ Use of Epistolary Forms in the Beginning of Revelation

The Apocalypse is a prophecy first and foremost (1:3a). It exemplifies and presumes in its environment a range of prophetic phenomena, from possession by a major spirit to otherworldly visions and travel. Generally, there are no hard and fast boundaries between such manifestations: prophets ascend or fly, speak as spirits, go into trances, and even perform their journeys or messages through gesture and prop. One notes in Revelation the oscillations in the first and last chapters between the author's ego and the speaking voice of his multi-named primary spirit.<sup>5</sup> This possessing spirit is said to have visual features of divine manifestations from Daniel 7 and Ezekiel 1, and the evidence of its titles suggests it has also assimilated the

<sup>3</sup> Wolfgang Speyer, *Bücherfunde in der Glaubenswerbung der Antike. Mit einem Ausblick auf Mittelalter und Neuzeit* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1970); Jacco Dieleman, *Priests, Tongues, and Rites: The London-Leiden Magical Manuscripts and Translation in Egyptian Ritual, 100–300 CE* (Religions in the Graeco-Roman World 153; Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2005) 254–75. See, e.g., stela fictions: *Holy Book of the Great Invisible Spirit* [NHL III,2; IV,2]; PGM XII.450–55; sacred scroll or book fictions: PGM XXIVa; CXXII.

<sup>4</sup> Patricia A. Rosenmeyer, *Ancient Epistolary Fictions: The Letter in Greek Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001). See also Émeline Marquis, "Introduction: Epistolary Fiction versus Spurious Letters," in *Epistolary Fiction in Ancient Greek Literature* (ed. Émeline Marquis; *Philologus* Supplementary 19; Berlin: De Gruyter, 2023) 1–20. Compare the use of epistolary fictions to frame two spells in the Paris Magical Papyrus: PGM IV.154–285, 2006–125.

<sup>5</sup> Boring astutely captures the confusion of voices, although his form-critical approach shows itself less useful for such phenomena: J. Eugene Boring, "The Voice of Jesus in the Apocalypse of John," *NovT* 34 (1992) 334–59. On the fluid range of prophetic performances/experiences in antiquity see Robert R. Wilson, "Prophecy and Ecstasy: A Reexamination," *JBL* 98 (1979) 321–37. In noting the fluidity between "possession" and "vision" in Revelation, I am thereby disputing David E. Aune, *Revelation 1–5* (Word Biblical Commentary 52A; Dallas: Word Books, 1997) 82.

risen and transfigured Jesus as well. But at the point that it presents itself to John of Patmos it is a divine spirit, a manifestation of the divine agency of the God of Israel (Rev 1: 8, 13–15), and so I will refer to it as the Lord-Angel.<sup>6</sup>

These features recommend that we place this text not only in the well-crafted literary tradition of Daniel, 4 Ezra, 2 Baruch, and the Enoch corpus but even more in the oral performative milieu of millennialist prophets, who go into trances during ceremonies and both report visions and serve as vehicles, mouthpieces, of heavenly beings.<sup>7</sup> Now, prophecies were certainly issued in literary forms too, but this one is meant primarily for an oral mode, with writing serving mostly to fix its message: “Blessed is the one who *reads aloud* the words of the prophecy, and blessed are those who keep what is written in it, for the time is near” (1:3); “I warn everyone who *hears* the words of the prophecy of *this biblion*; if anyone adds to them, God will add to that person the plagues described in this *biblion*” (22:18).

The appropriation of epistolary features to supplement these prophetic details must then reflect an effort by the seer to establish authority: not only for the visions that occupy the main part of the Apocalypse but for the prophetic voice itself—that is, the status of the Lord-Angel as the source of visions, textuality, and admonitions about purity and pollution. First we have a proper epistolary introduction: “John, to the seven assemblies in Asia. Grace to you and peace from”—and then John clarifies the voice speaking through his hand—“the One who is and was and is to come,” as well as the spirit of the risen “Jesus Christ, the witness, the faithful one, first-born of the dead” (1:4–5).

This introduction is followed by praise-declarations and oracles (1:5b–8). Then the text shifts to an apocalyptic call-narrative (1:9ff). And then comes a second epistolary introduction: the Lord-Angel commands him to “write in a *biblion* what you see and send [it] to the seven assemblies: in Ephesus and in Smyrna and in Pergamum and in Thyatira and in Sardis and in Philadelphia and in Laodicea”

<sup>6</sup> See esp. Christopher Rowland, “The Vision of the Risen Christ in Rev. 1.13ff: The Debt of an Early Christology to an Aspect of Jewish Angelology,” *JTS* 31 (1980) 1–11; Christopher Rowland, *The Open Heaven: A Study of Apocalyptic in Judaism and Early Christianity* (New York: Crossroad, 1982) 94–113. I do not see the sense in calling the heavenly being in Rev 1:10–18 (and dictating in chs. 2–3) “Jesus” (as most commentators assume). While there are certainly indications that this spirit has assimilated the risen Christ (e.g., 1:18), it is nowhere named Jesus; and the titles refer to aspects of God, as Rowland makes clear. Note that in the *Ascension of Isaiah* (2nd cent. CE, probably Asia Minor) God is “the One who is not named” (8.7).

<sup>7</sup> See esp. primary sources in Asc. Isa. 6; Tertullian, *De anima*, 9; Firmilian/Cyprian, *Ep.* 25.10.2–5. On such early prophetic milieus in the Christ-movement see David E. Aune, “The Social Matrix of the Apocalypse of John,” in *Apocalypticism, Prophecy, and Magic in Early Christianity* (ed. idem; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006) 175–89; Stephen Mitchell, *The Rise of the Church* (vol. 2 of *Anatolia: Land, Men, and Gods in Asia Minor*; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993) 46–47; Enrico Norelli, *Ascension d’Isaïe* (Apocryphes; Turnhout: Brepols, 1993) 66–78, 87–99; Richard Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy: Studies on the Book of Revelation* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993) 87–91, 152–53. In general on reconstructing possession performance in early Christ-assemblies see Giovanni B. Bazzana, *Having the Spirit of Christ: Spirit Possession and Exorcism in the Early Christ Groups* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2020) 167–205.

(1:11). This commission sets up the entire visionary narrative as a sort of letter to be distributed to seven assemblies (with a conclusion in 22:21). *Biblion* reflects the substance of the visions to follow (chs. 4ff); but its “sendability” (to the same destinations as the seven letters) indicates that it is also a kind of letter. The Apocalypse as a whole seems to constitute a single, concrete missal (as *biblion*) to be communicated to seven assemblies.<sup>8</sup>

Following the call-narrative and the halting epistolary elements of the introduction (1:4–5), the messages to the seven assemblies explicitly imitate epistolary convention: “To the angel of the assembly in Ephesus, write. . . .” But these messages also appropriate the language of royal proclamation: “Thus says the one who. . . .” Laura Nasrallah has reminded us that the “sense” of the letter in Roman antiquity would have been influenced not only by occasional writing materials—codices, rolls, sheets—but also the public inscriptions that marked and informed the various spaces of the Roman city.<sup>9</sup> In these epigraphical media people might even encounter, occasionally, letters; but more often they would be confronted by other sorts of communications from afar, such as royal or imperial proclamations, which emphasized the authoritative voice of the speaker. Indeed, David Aune has argued that the seven “letters” in chapters 2–3 are, in fact, proclamations imitating an imperial voice, normally carried through the medium of inscription.<sup>10</sup> But both forms—epistolary and imperial/epigraphical—seem to be interacting in an intentional hybrid: the epistolary elements dominate (recapitulating the epistolary introductions from earlier: 1:4, 11), while the language of proclamation or edict reflects the supreme authority of the speaking Lord-Angel.

Aune further suggests that this imitation of royal proclamation was meant as a political critique of Roman imperial authority (a critique that clearly continues in the visions, chs. 13, 18).<sup>11</sup> But the incorporation of this form would also represent the seer’s effort to convey the suprahuman authority behind these messages, which standard epistolary forms might diminish. Of course, prophetic letters in the names of gods are well-known from earlier times: Yahweh through Jeremiah to the exiles in Babylon (Jer 29), for example.<sup>12</sup> But in the world of millennialist prophecy, and especially in the context of polemic, genre conventions (or those we impose)

<sup>8</sup> Prophecies communicated in “books”: Jeremiah 30:2; 36:2, 32; 51:60; Isa 30:8. In general, see Aune, *Revelation 1–5*, 85–87. Cf. 4 Ezra 14:45–46: books are made public or shared with the wise but not sent out. *Biblion* used for “letter”: Rosenmeyer, *Ancient Epistolary Fictions*, 19.

<sup>9</sup> Laura Nasrallah, “The Formation of a Pauline Letter Collection in Light of Roman Epigraphic Evidence,” in *Authority and Identity in Emerging Christianities in Asia Minor and Greece* (ed. Cilliers Breytenbach and Julien M. Ogereau; Leiden: Brill, 2018) 281–302.

<sup>10</sup> Aune, *Revelation 1–5*, 126–27, 141–42; cf. Ramsay, *The Letters to the Seven Churches*, 26, who compares the letters to “imperial rescripts.”

<sup>11</sup> Aune, *Revelation 1–5*, 124. In general on Revelation’s critique of Roman authority see Frilingos, *Spectacles of Empire*.

<sup>12</sup> Meindert Dijkstra, “Prophecy by Letter (Jeremiah xxix 24–32),” *VT* 33 (1983) 319–22.

will inevitably be subject to social and polemical context, and we should expect hybrid forms.<sup>13</sup>

The rest of the text, of course, consists of visionary narrative interspersed with oracles and hymns, until the very last line, an explicit closing formula reminiscent of Paul's letters: "The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all the saints. Amen" (22:21).<sup>14</sup>

Thus, John the seer, in his performative/textual effort to demonstrate the authority of his divine messenger-spirit, appropriates elements of epistolary convention, combined with royal proclamation forms, as a hybrid genre for divine communication.<sup>15</sup>

## ■ Prophecy by Letter

But why epistolary convention anyway? It is probably not to imitate Jeremiah's letter to the exiles; moreover, it is a *textual* genre that pales as a replacement for prophetic performance and the immediacy of inspired speech.<sup>16</sup> Apocalyptic texts (such as we designate them in literary studies) more often begin with narrative frames,<sup>17</sup> while prophetic discourses commence with references to a divine call in order to establish the authority of oral performance.<sup>18</sup> Revelation does have a narrative frame in 1:10 ("I was in the spirit on the Lord's Day, and. . ."), but this narrative is enveloped in the series of epistolary and oracular forms that precede it. The challenge in introducing such texts, Judith Lieu has pointed out, lies in the specification of a fictive audience—one both deserving of reception and capable of further (fictive) transmission in the world (so that the text can be known). Revelation creates this fictive audience (and transmission) beyond the prophetic performance through its epistolary features—its imaginary recipients.<sup>19</sup> But the prominent use

<sup>13</sup> Aune notes that prophetic letters in general are a very diverse genre: David E. Aune, "The Form and Function of the Proclamations to the Seven Churches (Revelation 2–3)," in *Apocalypticism, Prophecy, and Magic in Early Christianity*, 212–32, at 225.

<sup>14</sup> Letters both Pauline (e.g., Phil 4:23; 1 Thess 5:28) and deutero-Pauline (e.g., Col. 4:18; 2 Thess 3:18) have almost identical closing formulas, with the final Amens appearing in some manuscript witnesses but not in others. See the chart in David E. Aune, *Revelation 17–22* (Word Biblical Commentary 52c; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998) 1238–41. A significant difference in Rev 22:18 is the declaration that grace be on "the saints" rather than "you" (as in all the Pauline and dtr-Pauline versions), a detail that may indicate a more restricted sense on John's part of who deserves this grace—that membership in a Christ-assembly is not enough. (Aune regards this feature of Rev 22:18 as simply "a distinctive touch," *ibid.*, 1241).

<sup>15</sup> Aune (*Revelation 1–5*, 130) notes that such proclamations and edicts rarely occur in collections, which recommends the dominance of the epistolary form. I make no assumptions regarding the name "John," which may be pseudonymous, as argued by John-Christian Burell, "Reconsidering the John of Revelation," *NovT* 63 (2021) 505–18, but *pace* Burell, unlikely to appropriate the name of the (anonymous) Fourth Gospel author, since the Apocalypse uses no Johannine language.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. 1 Cor 13:1; 14:3–5, 22, 24–25, 31–32. Paul claims that the Corinthians receive his skilled epistolary "presence" as a poor substitute for his non-charismatic performance: 2 Cor 10:10.

<sup>17</sup> E.g., 4 Ezra, 2 Baruch, Similitudes of Enoch, Apocalypse of Peter, Shepherd of Hermas.

<sup>18</sup> E.g., 5 Ezra 1:44–5, 12; 6 Ezra; Apoc. El. 1:1.

<sup>19</sup> Judith M. Lieu, "Text and Authority in John and Apocalyptic," in *John's Gospel and Intimations*

of epistolary forms *in addition to* narrative frame (1:9–10) and prophetic call (1:12–20)—and even more, to designate the text’s genre (1:4; 22:21)—suggests that, at the time of Revelation’s composition, the letter had gained some authority as a genre and—one might infer from the sequence of seven messages—as a material collection.<sup>20</sup> That new authority in the circulated letter collection most likely derives from the Pauline assemblies and their rudimentary collections of Paul’s letters.

How would Paul’s letters have influenced Revelation? One already notes the text’s explicit imitation of Pauline language in 1:4 (cf. Rom 1:7; 1 Cor 1:2–3; 2 Cor 1:1–2) and 22:1 (cf. 1 Cor 16:22b–23). Furthermore, there is good reason to take the unique use of “apocalypse”—indeed, of *apokalypsis Iēsou Christou* in the text’s *incipit*—as a reference to Paul’s own use of the phrase to characterize his epiphany in Gal 1:12. What Paul uses to refer to an authorizing experience in Galatians, John of Patmos appropriates to designate his text (although in neither case can we speak of a “genre category”).<sup>21</sup> These mimetic devices linking the Apocalypse to Pauline phraseology do not mean that John of Patmos seeks “to claim the authority of Paul for his work of prophecy,” as Schüssler Fiorenza avers,<sup>22</sup> since Paul himself as a charismatic character or model appears nowhere in Revelation, and (as I will discuss shortly) John of Patmos firmly repudiates Pauline teachings. Nor does it mean that John of Patmos had actually read Galatians or other Pauline letters, since the introduction of a phrase like *apokalypsis Iēsou Christou* and other Pauline epistolary conventions could conceivably have been received and transmitted apart from actual letters.<sup>23</sup> What these Pauline stylistic features suggest is John’s appropriation of the *letter itself* as a form then popularized in Pauline assemblies. Lieu points out that the “legitimizing strategies” of apocalyptic texts are “constructed in relation to existing models of ‘authoritative book,’” like the Torah or Sibylline or Egyptian oracle traditions. In the case of Revelation, I am arguing, Pauline letter collections provide just such an existing model, and for just such a function.<sup>24</sup>

*of Apocalyptic* (ed. Catrin H. Williams and Christopher Rowland; London: Bloomsbury, 2013) 235–53, at 239–40.

<sup>20</sup> Edgar J. Goodspeed, *New Solutions of New Testament Problems* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1927) 21–22. See now Antonia Sarri, *Material Aspects of Letter Writing in the Graeco-Roman World* (Materiale Textkulturen 12; Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018) 107–21, who sees a new attention in the early Roman period to formal features of the letter, graphically setting off greetings and farewells.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *The Book of Revelation: Justice and Judgment* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985) 150–51. On the highly idiosyncratic use of *apokalypsis* in Galatians see Morton Smith, “On the History of APOKALYPTO and APOKALYPSIS,” in *Apocalypticism in the Mediterranean World and the Near East* (ed. David Hellholm; 2nd ed.; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1989) 9–20, at 14–19.

<sup>22</sup> Fiorenza, *The Book of Revelation*, 149. Cf. Carey, *Elusive Apocalypse*, 99–100.

<sup>23</sup> Fiorenza, *The Book of Revelation*, 149–50, suggests that John was a close reader of Paul, but the correspondences could be taken in other ways as well. See below on oral aspects of the deceptive (Pauline) teachings John combats.

<sup>24</sup> Lieu, “Text and Authority in John and Apocalyptic,” 242. It should be noted that John of



Now, most of the discussion of Revelation's witness to a Pauline corpus has focused on the relative dating either of an early Pauline corpus or of Revelation itself.<sup>25</sup> I will return to issues of dating in the Conclusion, where I note that the potential availability of Pauline collections as an authoritative model for others indicates a later first-century period for Revelation itself. But what do we know about the circumstances of Pauline letters in the first century?

The most promising recent models for the production and circulation of the earliest Pauline letter collections have proposed a kind of epistolary workshop, conceivably initiated by Paul himself, where short letters, jottings, and discourses were combined as letters in his name, appended to others, and sent off.<sup>26</sup> As such workshops continued (and perhaps proliferated) over the first and second centuries their collections could have ranged from one letter to the ten that Marcion inherited in the second century.<sup>27</sup> And in whatever rudimentary collections that Pauline letters circulated in the second half of the first century CE, they were clearly establishing a new form of textual authority: the letter as a new means of constructing leadership, proposing uniformity, bridging the space between far-flung assemblies, creating—in Lieu's words—"a distinctive social sphere, with its own internal conventions, its own sets of relationships, its own language of relationality."<sup>28</sup> Thus we see its impact on Ignatius of Antioch (his seven-fold corpus a later creation), the two letters of Peter (and whatever they were appended to), and the three letters of John—all deliberate expressions of the new Christian epistolary style and all from the late first and early second centuries. The Pauline collections, that is, in whatever form or number, mutated in literary function and meaning from informative and pertinent

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Patmos also constructs authority in his visions by reference to classic images in Isaiah and Ezekiel, but these visionary paradigms do not pertain to the authority of the Apocalypse as a book in itself.

<sup>25</sup> Goodspeed, *New Solutions of New Testament Problems*, 21–28.

<sup>26</sup> I am entirely convinced by Ian J. Elmer, "The Pauline Letters as Community Documents," in *Collecting Early Christian Letters: From the Apostle Paul to Late Antiquity* (ed. Bronwen Neil and Pauline Allen; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015) 37–53. Cf. Robert M. Price, "The Evolution of the Pauline Canon," *HvTSt* 53 (1997) 36–67, at 51; Harry Y. Gamble, "The New Testament Canon: Recent Research and the Status Quaestionis," in *The Canon Debate* (ed. Lee Martin McDonald and James A. Sanders; Peabody MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2002) 267–94, at 288–86.

<sup>27</sup> Jason D. BeDuhn, *The First New Testament: Marcion's Scriptural Canon* (Salem, OR: Polebridge Press, 2013) 213–18. For Walter Bauer and Jonathan Z. Smith, Marcion's compilation of letters represents the primary witness and possible fountainhead of Pauline letter-collecting; see Walter Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity* (trans. Robert A. Kraft and Gerhard Krodel; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971) 221–22; Jonathan Z. Smith, *Drudgery Divine: On the Comparison of Early Christianities and the Religions of Late Antiquity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990) 110–11 n.44. Gamble alone proposes a sevenfold collection as the earliest Pauline letter collection, with the implication that John of Patmos copied the Pauline number: Gamble, "New Testament Canon," 283–84.

<sup>28</sup> Judith M. Lieu, "Letters and the Topography of Early Christianity," *NTS* 62 (2016) 167–82, at 175; See also Robin Lane Fox, "Literacy and Power in Early Christianity," in *Literacy and Power in the Ancient World* (ed. Alan Bowman and Greg Woolf; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994) 126–48, at 134–38. The Hymn of the Pearl (probably 2nd cent. CE) exemplifies the use of letters to bridge vast geographical gulfs.



communication to specific assemblies to something more than the sum of its parts: a charismatic text bearing the memory, agency, and authority of the apostle.<sup>29</sup>

If this was the situation of Pauline epistolary authority in the late first century, then what would it mean for John of Patmos to draw on that authority? Revelation is not particularly wed to the authority or the conventions of the letter as a communicative device. Epistolary forms are dropped in chapter one after verse 9, then only alluded to in verse 19, and apparently combined with imperial proclamations in the seven messages; and the closing blessing (21:27) is in fact the briefest nod (or correction) to Pauline convention. Indeed, the *source* of messages in Revelation's first three chapters is not a human letter-writer at all but the Lord-Angel himself, a divine spirit that speaks through John (1:8; 2–3; 22:7, 12–20). Thus, I argue that John of Patmos seeks to exceed, even denigrate, the rising authority of Pauline collections and their teachings through mediating letters from the Lord-Angel himself, displacing his own authorship (1:4) for the authorship (ultimately) of God and systematically shifting textual authority from the letter to that of the apocalyptic vision. A letter from some human apostle, it seems, would pale against a letter from the Lord-Angel himself!

Already in the mid-first century the supernatural source of revelatory and didactic authority proved a consuming issue, as Paul himself makes clear in several letters (Gal 1:1, 11–12; 1 Cor 9:1; 15:1–9; 2 Cor 12:1–9).<sup>30</sup> So letters that convey “the words of him who has the sharp two-edged sword” (2:12) and the like would certainly be intended to exceed “Paul, an apostle sent . . . through Jesus Christ” (Gal 1:1). Yet this impulse to exceed Pauline authority also corresponds to the actual admonitions of the Lord-Angel in these letters, which clearly repudiate Pauline practices.<sup>31</sup> As I have argued elsewhere, the accusations against prophets “Balaam” and “Jezebel” of eating *eidolothytia* and advocating *porneia* (2:14, 20) must refer to (as caricatures) Paul's liberal approaches to end-time halakhah (1 Cor 7–8).<sup>32</sup>

<sup>29</sup> In respect to the distributed charisma and agency of a mythicized author through the medium of the letter, the Pauline collections are comparable to the 1891 letter of Wovoka, prophet of the messianic Ghost Dance that spread among western American native peoples in the late 19th century. See James Mooney, *The Ghost Dance Religion and the Sioux Outbreak of 1890* (Washington DC: Government Printing Office, 1896) 780–81.

<sup>30</sup> See esp. Jennifer Eyl, *Signs, Wonders, and Gifts: Divination in the Letters of Paul* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019) 144–69. This issue hardly died out in later centuries either, as testified by Firmilian's 256 letter to Cyprian of Carthage about a spirit-possessed woman: Cyprian, *Ep.* 75.10; see David Frankfurter, “Where the Spirits Dwell: Possession, Christianization, and Saints' Shrines in Late Antiquity,” *HTR* 103 (2010) 27–46, at 30–32.

<sup>31</sup> The foundational statement of John's repudiation of Pauline practices is Ferdinand Christian Baur, *Christianity and the Christian Church of the First Three Centuries* (ed. Peter C. Hodgson; trans. Robert F. Brown and Peter C. Hodgson; Cambridge: James Clarke, 2019) 67–69.

<sup>32</sup> If these figures are cyphers for actual people, they would be people who thought of themselves as exponents of Pauline teaching. See Barr, *Tales of the End*, 50. Efforts to distance these caricatured teachings from those articulated in Paul's letters tend to be based on precritical idealizations of Paul and his “meaning”: see, e.g., Alex Cheung, *Idol Food in Corinth: Jewish Background and Pauline Legacy* (*JSNTSup* 176; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999) 174, 201; Joel Willitts, “John of

Furthermore, the “so-called Jews” who are attacked in two letters, if read without the canonical acrobatics typical of most exegetes, are not ethnic Jews but Pauline gentile believers referring to themselves as Jews (2:9; 3:9; cf. Rom 3:17–29).<sup>33</sup>

To understand how an early text promoting Christ’s heavenly nature could be anti-Pauline, it is necessary to grasp its perspective on Jewish practice and eschatological purity.<sup>34</sup> John of Patmos clearly views *Ioudaios* as an insider’s designation, falsely imitated by those he deems outsiders (2:9; 3:9); and his vision of the eschatological community involves—primarily if not exclusively—members of the twelve tribes of Israel (7:4–8). Further glimpses of the “saints” comprise those who “keep the *entolas* of God” (12:17; 14:12; cf. 22:14)<sup>35</sup>—that is, the commandments of the Torah. Even more, John conveys that celibacy—*partheneia*—is essential for attaining holiness: the “144,000 who have been redeemed from the earth [are those] who have not defiled themselves with women, for they are *parthenoi*” (14:3–4). Revelation presents *partheneia* not as a discipline in itself, as in (e.g.) the Acts of Paul and Thekla, but rather as purification against defilement—akin to how the Qumran scrolls enjoin the *Yahad* to holy war celibacy.<sup>36</sup> Celibacy is purity; sexuality is pollution—the strict eschatological position from which Paul steps away in 1 Cor 7 (cf. v. 1). In the Apocalypse this heavenly *partheneia* is required for the extraordinarily intimate access to the altar of the heavenly Temple that John and the 144,000 acquire (11:19; 15:8). In this respect the *parthenoi* are virtually

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Patmos and the Apostle Paul: Antinomy or Affinity?” in *The Early Reception of Paul the Second Temple Jew* (ed. Isaac W. Oliver and Gabriele Boccaccini; London: T&T Clark, 2020) 131–48.

<sup>33</sup> See esp. David Frankfurter, “Jews or Not? Reconstructing the ‘Other’ in Rev 2:9 and 3:9,” *HTR* 94 (2001) 403–25; Martha Himmelfarb, *A Kingdom of Priests: Ancestry and Merit in Ancient Judaism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006) 136–37; Elaine Pagels, *Revelations: Visions, Prophecy, and Politics in the Book of Revelation* (New York: Viking, 2012); Korner, *Revelation after Supersessionism*, 55–71 (with not altogether convincing adjustments). Pace Aune, *Revelation 1–5*, 162–65; Paul B. Duff, *Who Rides the Beast? Prophetic Rivalry and the Rhetoric of Crisis in the Churches of the Apocalypse* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001) 49–51; Mikael Tellbe, “Relationships among Christ-Believers and Jewish Communities in First-Century Asia Minor,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Book of Revelation*, 153–67. On the canonical or ecclesiastical assumptions behind making John’s “non-Jews” into “Jews,” see John W. Marshall, *Parables of War: Reading John’s Jewish Apocalypse* (Studies in Christianity and Judaism 10; Waterloo, ON: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2001) 12–16 and *passim*. On motivations for non-Jews to claim a Jewish self-definition see now Katell Berthelot, “To Convert or Not to Convert: The Appropriation of Jewish Rituals, Customs and Beliefs by Non-Jews,” in *Lived Religion in the Ancient Mediterranean World: Approaching Religious Transformations from Archaeology, History, and Classics* (ed. Valentino Gasparini et al.; Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020) 494–515.

<sup>34</sup> Paula Fredriksen offers the important reminder that Paul, too, was urging people into a Jewish movement of its own sort: Paula Fredriksen, “Why Should a ‘Law-Free’ Mission Mean a ‘Law-Free’ Apostle?,” *JBL* 134 (2015) 637–50. John’s criticisms, then, are essentially intra-Jewish within a particular world of eschatology.

<sup>35</sup> Stephen Goranson, “The Text of Revelation 22.14,” *NTS* 43 (1997) 154–57.

<sup>36</sup> 1 QM 7.3–7, based on biblical holy war rules: Exod 19:15; Lev 22:1–9; Deut 23:10–11. See Adela Yarbro Collins, *Crisis and Catharsis: The Power of the Apocalypse* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984) 129–31.

angels, who in Jewish antediluvian myth women really did defile.<sup>37</sup> Angelic status as conceived according to Jewish priestly traditions is critical for intimacy with the heavenly Temple and for entrance into the new Jerusalem, whose walls will never be penetrated by anything *koinon* [unclean],<sup>38</sup> “nor [by] anyone who practices *bdelygma* [abominations] and *pseudos* [falsehood]” (21:27). In advocating such a strict ideology of Jewish (priestly) purity and commitment to the commandments of the Torah, Revelation resists categorization as “Christian” except in the vaguest, most confessional sense (as a member of the Christian canon, for example).<sup>39</sup> Even as it elevates the risen Christ to enthroned status the Apocalypse maintains a Jewish frame of reference vis-à-vis bodily purity, cosmology and angelology, and eschatological sanctity in general.<sup>40</sup> And it is from within this frame of reference that John of Patmos and his spirit, the Lord-Angel, repudiate Pauline teachings—as boundary-breaking, as polluting, and as creating false “Jews.”

The seven letters (or “letters”) thus represent John’s effort *both* to represent a vividly supernatural voice through a particularly human genre, *and*, in that way, to eclipse Paul’s authority—epistolary and apostolic both (cf. 2:2b). It is, of course, notable that the Lord-Angel attributes Pauline errors not to his actual letters but to *oral* teachings and claims: “Balaam’s” *didachē* (2:14); “Jezebel,” who *didaskei kai plana* (2:20); as well as the *blasphēmia* of those who say [*legontōn*] they are Jews but are not (2:9; 3:9). John of Patmos, we may infer, fights not within an epistolary exchange—that is, letters written in response to other letters (cf. 2 Thess 2:1–3)—but against the authority of Pauline letters overall.

Part of Revelation’s essential literary conceit is the sevenfold sequence of letters, each notably linked by the conjunction *kai*. (The use of the conjunction joins the letters as a rhetorical string—as a single set of communications). The sequence is probably not a reflection of a sevenfold Pauline letter collection, for which we have no evidence in the first century.<sup>41</sup> In fact, there were probably various compilations of Pauline letters in circulation and ownership by the second half of the first century.<sup>42</sup> But given the Apocalypse’s proclivity for arranging things in sevens throughout the text, I would argue that the sevenfold sequence of letters represents another feature of the divine voice: after all, the seven *ekklēsiai* correspond to seven lampstands and

<sup>37</sup> 1 En. 7.1; 10.11; 15.3; 59.5; 1QGenApoc.

<sup>38</sup> See BAGD 438A: “impure.” Cf. Acts 21:28.

<sup>39</sup> See especially Marshall, *Parables of War*.

<sup>40</sup> There is no reason to assume that this elevation of the risen Christ to enthroned status would have been, in the first century, particularly scandalous or apostasizing to other Jews, despite claims otherwise in Acts (e.g., 18:13) and John (e.g., 5:18; 7:27–30; 16:1–3).

<sup>41</sup> The main sources for supposing an initial seven-fold Pauline collection are Revelation itself, the Ignatian corpus, and the considerably later (3rd–5th cent. CE) Muratorian fragment. But there is no reason to assume this heavenly enumeration of letters arose before Revelation itself, *pace* Gamble, “New Testament Canon,” 283–84.

<sup>42</sup> Elmer, “The Pauline Letters as Community Documents.” See also Brent Nongbri, “Pauline Letter Manuscripts,” in *All Things to All Cultures: Paul among Jews, Greeks, and Romans* (ed. Mark Harding and Alanna B. Nobbs; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013) 84–102 at 97–101.

seven stars (1:20). No matter how many letters of Paul might have been circulating together in Asia Minor or in the Christ-culture of John of Patmos, the sevenfold sequence would signify divine arrangement and divine authority.<sup>43</sup>

The idealized nature of the seven letters is also suggested in their pointing back to the single *biblion*, which the Lord-Angel commands to be sent to the seven *ekklēsiai* (1:11). We are in the realm of prophetic vision and heavenly ordering, and in that context it seems misplaced to view the seven letters as either independently coherent missals or as presuming or responding to a putative sevenfold Pauline collection. The epistolary elements in the beginning of Revelation serve the emergence of the voice of the Lord-Angel and the articulation of his divine nature, his titles, and his authority.

### ■ Epistolary Verisimilitude and the Omniscience of the Lord-Angel

At this point we should move into the contents of the letters, since their admonitions and commandments seem to imply the Lord-Angel's discernment of actual goings-on: local geographies, local tribulations, local conflicts. This verisimilitude of local knowledge has, since William Ramsay, justified a method of using archaeology (and even heresiography) to match allusions in the seven letters to historical and artifactual data for Thyatira, Ephesus, and the rest.<sup>44</sup> But this is wishful archaeological positivism. For one thing, four of the letters conclude with the admonition to "hear what the Spirit says to the *assemblies*" (2:29; 3:6, 13, 22)—in the plural, suggesting their individual messages do not concern individual local situations. For another thing, the situations to which the Lord-Angel alludes are highly schematic, if not incoherent:

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. [2:10]

Yet you have still a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes; they will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy. If you conquer, you will be clothed like them in white robes, and I will not blot your name out of the Book of Life. [3:4–5]

I know your works; you are neither cold nor hot. I wish that you were either cold or hot. So, because you are lukewarm and neither cold nor hot, I am about to spit you out of my mouth. [3:15–16]

<sup>43</sup> See Bauckham, *Climax of Prophecy*, 7–15.

<sup>44</sup> Ramsay, *The Letters to the Seven Churches*; Hemer, *Letters to the Seven Churches*, 20–26; Scobie, "Local References in the Letters to the Seven Churches"; Louis Painchaud, "Assemblées de Smyrne et de Philadelphie et congrégation de Satan: Vrais et faux Judéens dans l'Apocalypse de Jean (2,9; 3,9)," *LTP* 70 (2014) 475–92, at 486–88. Note important critiques of Ramsay and Hemer in Leonard L. Thompson, *The Book of Revelation: Apocalypse and Empire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990) 202–4.

This is oracular language and does not in any way require actual situations in local Christ-assemblies. Such declarations of supernatural certainty confirm a spirit's characteristic omniscience and discernment and its capability to threaten, bless, or explain recent fortunes according to community behavior. Yet such declarations are issued in ways that, in their ambiguity, may require active interpretation on the part of recipients, observers, or readers.

The letters also contain some apparent references to occurrences among individual assemblies, *suggesting* historical experiences: in Ephesus: activities of "Nicolaitians" [2:6]; Smyrna: activities of "so-called Jews" [2:9]; Pergamum: Death of Antipas [2:13], activities of the prophet "Balaam" [2:14], and activities of "Nicolaitians" [2:15]; Thyatira: activities of the prophet "Jezebel" [2:20–23]; Philadelphia: activities of "so-called Jews" [3:9]. While the Lord-Angel specifies each occurrence as something historically recognizable in the individual assembly, it is important to note that (apart from Antipas) they *duplicate* key polemics: against "so-called Jews" (2:9/3:9), against prophets teaching *porneia* and *eidolothyta*-eating (2:14/2:20), and against Nicolaitians (2:2/2:15). Does John—or the Lord-Angel—mean accurately to locate specific enemies in the specific assemblies they are afflicting, or do these three types of enemies represent *types* of rivalry on the margins of John's world—a kind of *Gegnerfiktion*, in Michael Sommer's convenient formulation: "opponent-fictions"?<sup>45</sup>

Such a typological interpretation would not mean that synagogues of Satan and false prophets of *porneia* weren't in some sense historical enemies for John of Patmos and his spirit, or that "Jezebel" could not have been a prominent prophet *somewhere*, only that their *specific* activities with the specific assemblies enumerated in the letters would be fictions. For example, given John of Patmos's overwhelming concern for eschatological purity, including celibacy, the far looser practices and religious boundaries promoted in the Pauline wings of the Christ-movement would have posed a crisis. Harsh polemical language like *porneia*, *eidolothyta*, and "synagogue of Satan" all reflect the extremity of this crisis for John and his spirit. Still, while the threats of impure practices among Pauline Christ-assemblies were all real and pressing, they would not exclusively have afflicted Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, and Philadelphia.<sup>46</sup> They amounted to a general crisis in John's world. As for the tribulations and "endurance" to which the letters make repeated reference, these need not refer to specific persecutions or lynchings in these specific cities.

<sup>45</sup> Michael Sommer, "Die Nikolaiten und die Gegnerfiktion in der Offenbarung des Johannes: Eine Annäherung an einige hermeneutische Probleme der Apokalypselektüre," in *Shadowy Characters and Fragmentary Evidence: The Search for Early Christian Groups and Movements* (ed. Joseph Verheyden, Tobias Nicklas, and Elisabeth Hernitscheck; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017) 49–67; *pace* Aune, *Revelation 1–5*, 131, 148–49.

<sup>46</sup> This argument should settle one of Korner's principal discomforts about a generalized anti-Pauline polemic: that the letters isolate such polemic to Ephesus, Pergamum, and Thyatira, while "so-called Jews" are located in Smyrna and Philadelphia (Korner, *Revelation after Supersessionism*, 66). But if a generalized polemic is creatively distributed across seven fictional letters, then we no longer have to contend with isolated *ekklēsiai*.

Leonard Thompson has shown that *thlipsis* refers both to Jesus's suffering and to the assemblies' own discordance with the world, phrased as an eschatological sign.<sup>47</sup>

The reference to Antipas the *martys* of Pergamum stands out here: "you did not deny your faith in me even in the days of Antipas my witness, my faithful one, who was killed among you, where Satan lives" (2:13). Most interpreters would take this passage as the Lord-Angel's gesture to authentic collective memory among an assembly in Pergamum: an appreciation of the assembly's hero and history. If so, the reference to Antipas would be a clearly pertinent allusion to a specific assembly's historical experience, a detail that would support an assumption that the Pergamum letter (at least) sought to communicate with a real Christ-assembly in Pergamum. And yet it is important to consider ways in which the brief passage obscures historical specificity. *En tais hēmerais* of Antipas suggests a time passed, of legend rather than recent memory,<sup>48</sup> its heroic character expressed also in the very titles *martys* and *pistos* bestowed by the Lord-Angel. At the same time, "killed among you, where Satan dwells" is so incoherent as to resist any concrete historical reconstruction: what is *par 'humin*—a place or a relationship? Where did Satan dwell, and how? If it merely restates the identification of Pergamum with the "throne of Satan" (2:13a), then perhaps the Lord-Angel means only to declare that Satan dwells in Pergamum, which would align with the coincidence of *both* false prophets and Nicolaitians in the area. Overall, the Lord-Angel's allusion to a death of an Antipas may be an exception to my argument—an historical kernel in a collage of *Gegnerfiktion*—and yet its legendary and allusive features make it difficult to declare it a genuine social detail from the world of a Pergamum assembly.

If, then, the references to opponents, rivals, and crises in the various cities consist (almost entirely) of general tribulation, *Gegnerfiktion*, and types of false teachings, why arrange their threats among seven cities at all? The answer may lie in the first-person voice of the Lord-Angel himself: "*I know your works; you have a name of being alive, but you are dead*" (3:1b). "Remember then what you received and heard; obey it, and repent. If you do not wake up, *I will come like a thief*, and you will not know at what hour I will come to you" (3:3–4). "Because you have kept my word of patient endurance, *I will keep you* from the hour of trial that is coming on the whole world to test the inhabitants of the earth" (3:10). In these admonitions to the assemblies in Sardis and Philadelphia, as throughout the seven letters, the Lord-Angel (through John) performs the role of omniscient spirit.<sup>49</sup> The admonitions are either quite general or, like references to Nicolaitians, Antipas, or

<sup>47</sup> Leonard L. Thompson, "A Sociological Analysis of Tribulation in the Apocalypse of John," *Semeia* 36 (1986) 147–74. Compare 2 Thess 1:4, 6–7, on which see David Frankfurter, "The Legacy of Sectarian Rage: Vengeance Fantasies in the New Testament," in *Religion and Violence: The Biblical Heritage* (ed. David A. Bernat and Jonathan Klawans; Recent Research in Biblical Studies 2; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2007) 114–28, at 118–21.

<sup>48</sup> E.g., Luke 1:5; 4:25; 17:26; Matt 11:12; Rev 10:7; 11:6. See in general BAGD 347B, sec. 4b.

<sup>49</sup> See Wilson, "Prophecy and Ecstasy."

Jezebel, cryptic—offering the pretense of divine discernment into local activities: “*I know your afflictions and your poverty, even though you are rich . . .*” (2:9a).<sup>50</sup>

Thus the Lord-Angel uses the literary conceit of the letter collection to distribute key conflicts across a map of individual assemblies, regardless of their local relevance (or even whether John knew about them). The specific cities have no particular meaning beyond their relative size and (as Ramsay once noted) their rough configuration in a circle, which could indicate, not an historical road (Ramsay), but their improvisation from John’s geographical memory.<sup>51</sup> But more importantly, the hybrid epistolary form itself assumes and implies a localized addressee. Thus, to embrace and inhabit the epistolary form itself involves “placing” polemics, conflicts, warnings, as well as blessings and encouragements according to the geographical fiction of individual urban Christ-assemblies.<sup>52</sup> The result is the construction of an authoritative divine presence: an omniscient, discerning spirit that has appropriated the forms of letter and edict to give the impression of sweeping local knowledge and broad geographical networks. In addition, the Lord-Angel can speak through these epistolary forms in a more direct way than when couched in the narrative frames of apocalyptic literary tradition.

## ■ Some Potential Objections

While there is no evidence to corroborate the distinct occurrences claimed in these seven “letters” (beyond the anti-Pauline caricatures) and good reason to perceive a broad fictional conceit in John’s distribution of enemies across seven Asia Minor cities, we must consider the possibility that at least some of these situations—the death of Antipas, the activities of “Jezebel,” struggles with Pauline pseudo-Jews—took place in the cities with which they are associated in the letters. This possibility assumes (1) that John considered accuracy in the depiction of recipient assemblies important to his overall goals in the dissemination of the Apocalypse; (2) that he was part of a communication network of Christ-assemblies around Asia Minor and that he composed Revelation to circulate within that network; and (3) that intended recipients in these specified cities read Revelation 2–3 for accuracy in historical representation.

As for (1), while Antipas may pose a special case, as discussed above, the duplications of the other conflicts already suggests that John’s interest here lies in the conflicts themselves more than their locations. Furthermore, beyond the (mimetic and fictionalized) epistolary elements and the oracles of urgency in Rev 22 (cf. 1:3, 7), there is no indication of plans for dissemination. As for (2), while the *intra-Pauline* Christ-movement often appears like a network (especially in the

<sup>50</sup> On the import of these *oida* clauses see Aune, *Revelation 1–5*, 121–22.

<sup>51</sup> Circular arrangement = circular road: Ramsay, *The Letters to the Seven Churches*, 181–83.

<sup>52</sup> On fictional elements that create verisimilitude in letter collections (e.g., 2 Tim 4:10–15), see Nasrallah, “Formation of Pauline Letter Collection,” 300, and Marquis, “Introduction: Epistolary Fiction versus Spurious Letters,” 14.



perspective of Luke-Acts!), it by no means follows that Christ-assemblies outside of (and at odds with) the Pauline movement participated—especially in John’s case, for whom Pauline ideology represented an abomination to God’s Heavenly Temple. It seems more likely that John of Patmos stood outside the Pauline movement and so was less aware of goings-on within it.<sup>53</sup> Might these seven cities represent John’s last, Torah-observant hold-outs? Quite possibly; but it is equally possible that he imagines them and uses the cities as epistolary conceits. And as for (3), there is no evidence that the first few centuries’ readers of the Apocalypse paid attention to the letters at all. Justin, Irenaeus, Melito of Sardis, and the New Prophecy—all our earliest witnesses to the reception of the book—indicate that the book’s impact lay in its millennial vision of the New Jerusalem.<sup>54</sup> This fact doesn’t eliminate the possibility that there were initial “readers” in Thyatira or Pergamum who might have been especially attentive to the Lord-Angel’s representation of their crises. But we have no reason, apart from modern notions of letter-reading, to think that accuracy in the representation of conflicts served as a criterion for evaluating the earliest forms of the Apocalypse.

Finally, it should be noted that the invention of letters for ideological or prophetic purposes is also credible within the broader world of late antique religions. Religious texts of the period are host to innumerable invented books, from the apocalypses cited by the prophet Mani to legendary stelae and scrolls said to record ancient secrets.<sup>55</sup> The invention of details typical of an “historical” literary genre can also be found in the composition of oracles and eschatological discourses. From Mark 13 to 6 Ezra and the Apocalypse of Elijah, scribes mastered the enumeration of eschatological signs and portents in order to convey authenticity—verisimilitude in the depiction of cosmic/social boundaries. We are accustomed to reading such discourses in Dan 11–12 and Rev 13 for their *vaticinia ex eventu*, based on real political events. But just as often, these oracles could be invented out of the “whole cloth” of tradition, to give the impression of certainty, foreboding crisis, and textual authority.<sup>56</sup> I am arguing that the genre of the letter collection offered the same opportunity—and in many ways a “new technology”—to invent particular situations and distribute polemics.

<sup>53</sup> It does not require conversance with such a network to make use of specific epistolary features of Pauline letters (even “apocalypse of Jesus Christ”), as I discuss in Part 1.

<sup>54</sup> Justin, *Dial.* 18.4; Irenaeus, *c. Haer.* 3.11.8; Melito of Sardis, *Peri Pascha*, 793; New Prophecy: *apud* Tertullian, *c. Marc.*, 3.24. See Charles E. Hill, “The Interpretation of the Book of Revelation in Early Christianity,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Book of Revelation*, 395–411.

<sup>55</sup> See above, n. 3. See also David Frankfurter, “Apocalypses Real and Alleged in the Mani Codex,” *Numen* 44 (1997) 60–73. Cf. *Gospel of the Egyptians* (NHC III, 2), 68; PGM XII.407. On the invention of books to consolidate authority see Hans Dieter Betz, “The Formation of Authoritative Tradition in the Greek Magical Papyri,” in *Self-Definition in the Greco-Roman World* (ed. Ben F. Meyer and E. P. Sanders; Jewish and Christian Self-Definition 3; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982) 161–70.

<sup>56</sup> See esp. David Frankfurter, *Elijah in Upper Egypt: The Apocalypse of Elijah and Early Egyptian Christianity* (Studies in Antiquity and Christianity 7; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993) 195–238.

## ■ Conclusion A: The Seven Letters as Fictional Device

The letters to the seven assemblies in Asia Minor that begin the Apocalypse represent not actual messages to actual assemblies in those cities but a literary fiction. John appropriated the letter-collection genre then (late-first century CE) gaining authority among Pauline assemblies in order both to lend his visions a fiction of transmission and, in the voice of the Lord-Angel, to exceed and even to denigrate Pauline authority. This effort to exceed and denigrate Pauline authority corresponds to John's other halakhic and ideological repudiations of the Pauline tradition: its permission of sexuality in the end-times (obviously qualified in 1 Cor 7); its exhortation to *eidolothya* (obviously qualified in 1 Cor 8); its encouragement of Gentile believers to consider themselves like Jews (an ambiguity reflected in Rom 2:14–29)—indeed, the radical permissiveness that might arise from an ideology that distills all Torah-observance into *agapē* (Rom 13:8–10; cf. Rom 3:8).<sup>57</sup> We may conclude, then, that one of the principal contexts for the textualization—the scribal shaping—of this book of visions as “the apocalypse of Jesus Christ” and as a letter to seven city assemblies was a strident polemic against the Pauline tradition, its ideology, its claims of heavenly communication, and its growing authority. It is also probably the case, despite the notes of approval to certain assemblies in the letters (Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum), that John and the Lord-Angel have themselves been marginalized by the Pauline movement, such that the anger, urgency, and claims of heavenly authority in the text stem from an increasingly minority position.

Is it conceivable that Paul's letters (in whatever form) had such eminence in Asia Minor and that John of Patmos would have found their authority so objectionable? To the first point, it is no stretch historically to see Paul's use of the letter genre to communicate across *ekklēsiai* as a charismatic innovation, certainly by the evidence of Pauline pseudepigraphy and by second- and third-century appropriations of the genre. If at one stage *ekklēsiai* used and communicated lore in such performative contexts as prophecy and scripture interpretation (cf. 1 Cor 14:26), by the later first century the letter genre—inevitably recalling Pauline authority—was in ascendance.<sup>58</sup>

To the second point, John's urgency and outrage as precipitating these fictional conceits, we must remember the *context* of controversies over halakhah, prophecy, sexuality, and purity: that is, the very immediacy of eschatological anticipation. This is a feature of first-century Christ-movements that Paula Fredriksen and others have repeatedly underlined: the imminent anticipation of a millennial Israel, heralded by a (rumored) influx of Gentiles (Rom 8:18–25; 11:25–27).<sup>59</sup> When all parties imagined

<sup>57</sup> It is worth clarifying at this point that any clear distinction between Paul's own intentions and the ways his letters and traditions were subsequently understood across the assemblies and through time strikes me as superfluous, critically impossible, and (in the case of accusations of libertinism such as John of Patmos accused the Pauline tradition), confessionally wishful.

<sup>58</sup> See esp. Lane Fox, “Literacy and Power.”

<sup>59</sup> Fredriksen, “‘Law-Free’ Apostle?”; Paula Fredriksen, *Paul, the Pagans' Apostle* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2017) 131–66.

themselves on the precipice of the restored kingdom—“salvation is nearer to us now than when we first became believers!” (Rom 13:11)—then ostensibly minor issues like allowing *eidelothyta* or marital sexuality *really mattered*. Interpreters who negotiate the Paul/Revelation relationship in terms of sober debate and Roman household culture miss an enormously important context: the imminence of the end-times, regularly encouraged by signs in the world and in heaven.

Ultimately one cannot “prove” that the seven letters are fictional. Yet the burden of proof really belongs on the other side. That is, given that the Apocalypse specifies the letters as communicated to seven angels and as meant for the whole collectivity of assemblies (1:11; 2:29; 3:6, 13, 22), on what basis would we even imagine that these messages reflect actual situations in Christ-assemblies in these particular cities? The quest to key the cryptic language of the Lord-Angel to archaeological discoveries has excited no end of creative speculation about Roman oppression and persecuting Jews.

But rather than disputing the local nature of the conflicts one by one, I have approached the seven letters (or edicts, or messages) as a literary conceit responding to early Pauline collections and, more broadly, to the growing authority of Pauline teachings in Asia Minor. The Lord-Angel—if I may allow John’s spirit the authoritative agency here—thus triumphs over the Pauline tradition’s principal means of communication by issuing letters that “speak,” not in a merely human apostolic voice, but in the divine voice. Yet the Lord-Angel imitates the local intimacy and broad geographical communion that the Pauline letters suggested. Furthermore, if Aune is correct in observing the primary form of the royal or imperial edict in these communications, the Lord-Angel also imitates the imperial voice, in another way exceeding the humanness of the epistolary form. Consequently, he distributes enmities and conflicts over practice—halakhic observance and eschatological priestly purity, in fact—across seven cities in which John either knows of or imagines Christ-assemblies. And it is no coincidence that it is seven cities and seven letters, for Revelation is consumed with the heavenly perfection of sevens. Thus, to issue seven letters conforms to and reflects the nature of the divine voice itself; it does not mean that John of Patmos had some distinct concern for (coincidentally) seven specific assemblies. As the heavenly scroll has seven seals (ch. 5) and seven angels blow seven trumpets (ch. 8), so the epistolary admonitions of the Lord-Angel emerge in seven letters.

## ■ Conclusion B: What Do We Gain?

If we regard the letters in Revelation 2–3 as fictions, what then do we learn? What is the payoff? First, we can discuss John’s polemics in more general, rather than *ekklēsia*-specific terms. So-called Jews, false prophets teaching *porneia*, Nicolaitians, and the “deep things of Satan”—these crises should not be located or isolated to specific cities in Asia Minor. They represent John’s general (if pressing) concerns about crises within and between competing Christ-movements

in late-first-century Asia Minor. They are extremely important for the history of Christ-movements in Asia Minor, but they tell us nothing about specific cities.

Second, we gain a sense of how the Pauline tradition was interpreted by its detractors in the Christ-movement (or movements)—by a prophet who cleaved resolutely to Jewish priestly purity practices and expected others to do the same.<sup>60</sup> Indeed, we get a sense not only of how Pauline teachings were regarded but of their material media as well: the letter collection as an iconic, haptic thing, carrying its own charismatic agency.<sup>61</sup> Paul's letters (and those in his name) carried such benefits as textuality, local knowledge (or pretense thereto), intimacy with addressees, and a confident sense of geographical interconnection. Prophets like John clearly performed in oral conditions, yet—as we see in the second-century Ascension of Isaiah and Shepherd of Hermas—prophets were increasingly integrating textual forms into their communication. John, of course, is concerned for the integrity of the written word for guarding his revelations, cursing those who might add or subtract from his text (22:18–19)—a moot point in the world of oral prophecy—but he is also concerned that the book should not simply be circulated for private reading (1:3). In all these concerns he is responding to the growing use and ongoing redactions of Pauline texts in circulation.

Third, the fiction of the seven letters allows us to date Revelation in relationship to early Pauline letter collections. This may not make as big a difference in absolute terms, since Revelation remains a product of the later first century CE.<sup>62</sup> But a material/religious context for the composition of Revelation is undoubtedly an improvement on past efforts to justify Irenaeus's Domitianic dating or to find historical evidence for the particular *thlipsis* that landed John on Patmos island (1:9).<sup>63</sup> It also places the composition of this text in relationship to other material textualities (not just letter collections but oracle collections and Jewish apocalypses as concrete media) and to the increasing hegemony of the Pauline tradition among Asia Minor Christ-assemblies.

And finally, we can hypothetically place Revelation at (or potentially as) the source of sevenfold letter collections, both real and imagined. With Revelation, of course, the sevenfold structure is simply an apocalyptic device, corresponding to lampstands, seals, and trumpets. Prior to this text, there are no deliberately

<sup>60</sup> Frankfurter, "Jews or Not?," 410–12.

<sup>61</sup> See, e.g., Joe Williams, "Letter Writing, Materiality, and Gifts in Late Antiquity: Some Perspectives on Material Culture," *JLA* 7 (2014) 351–59. Much as Larsen and Letteney have explained the early adoption of the codex for gospel texts—to provide a mutable form for central texts—one can imagine that these primitive Pauline collections provided a similar mutability in content, even while the materiality of the collection constituted a sort of scripture (cf. 2 Pet 3:15–16); see Matthew D. C. Larsen and Mark Letteney, "Christians and the Codex: Generic Materiality and Early Gospel Traditions," *J ECS* 27 (2019) 383–415.

<sup>62</sup> Goodspeed, *New Solutions of New Testament Problems*, 21–28; Price, "The Evolution of the Pauline Canon," 51–52.

<sup>63</sup> Both of these historical attributions go back to church fathers: Domitianic dating: Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 3.15.3; increasing persecution in that time: Jerome, *De vir.* 9.

sevenfold letter collections in Greco-Roman culture nor in Jewish sectarian culture (where textual enumeration tends to be five-fold, reflecting the divine books of the Torah).<sup>64</sup> There is also no evidence for a sevenfold Pauline collection before the late antique Muratorian list (3rd–5th cent. CE). Yet, following the first century, we see sevenfold letter arrangements emerging as a scribal *desideratum*: Pauline collections, the Ignatian corpus, and the Catholic Epistles.<sup>65</sup> While I am suggesting here that Revelation's fictional letters serve as the archetype of such collections, one might also say that the shift from the occasional or ad-hoc letter collection to one modelled on heavenly numerology represents a shift towards "scripture" itself: that is, texts to be used to discern divine will and divine secrets.<sup>66</sup> J. Z. Smith once observed that "the primary *Sitz im Leben* of canon is divination"—that the restricted corpus of texts (or number of material objects) allows experts' attentive and meaningful interpretation of supernatural will.<sup>67</sup> That is, in the same way that a Yoruba Ifa diviner examines the specific array of nuts for direction to a traditional aphorism and an expert reader of Tarot cards studies the precise array of cards for guidance on how to advise a client, the specific, restricted selection of texts in a scripture canon allows a literate religious expert to find divine will or guidance pertinent to a worldly situation. Thus also with the letters in Revelation (which antedate Christian canon by centuries): their sevenfold collection, in its "heavenly" design, frames the assembled texts as more than occasional guidance, as (rather) meant for the conveying of divine will and divine secrets.

<sup>64</sup> E.g., Matthew's five major discourses. Cf. 4 Ezra 14: 72 + 24 books.

<sup>65</sup> Catholic Epistles, attested as sevenfold collection in Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 3.25 and Jerome, *De vir.* 2; most likely assembled in mid-to-late third century (David R. Nienhuis, *Not by Paul Alone: The Formation of the Catholic Epistle Collection and the Christian Canon* [Waco TX: Baylor University Press, 2007] 25) or after the Muratorian fragment (Kelsie Rodenbiker, "Disputing with the Devil: Jude, Michael the Archangel, and the Boundaries of Canon," in *Kanonisierungsprozesse und Identitätsbildung in Zeiten des Umbruchs* [ed. Marcel Friesen and Christoph Leonard Hesse; Wissenschaftliche Schriften der WWU Münster 10:28; Münster: Westfälische Wilhelms-Universität, 2019] 267–82).

<sup>66</sup> Cf. suggestions that the sevenfold collection offered an intrinsic "wholeness" for the contents: Nienhuis, *Not by Paul Alone*, 9–10; Rodenbiker, "Disputing with the Devil," 269.

<sup>67</sup> Jonathan Z. Smith, "Sacred Persistence: Toward a Redescription of Canon," in *Imagining Religion, From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982) 50. See also David Brakke's use of Smith for a different stage in the development of Christian scripture-canon: David Brakke, "Canon Formation and Social Conflict in Fourth-Century Egypt: Athanasius of Alexandria's Thirty-Ninth 'Festal Letter,'" *HTR* 87 (1994) 395–419.