CHAPTER 13

GOD IN THE BOOK
OF REVELATION

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I. WHO IS GOD? THE VARIETY OF
PERSPECTIVES

WHO is God? The illustrious early Byzantine dictionary *Suda*, in the entry for *theos*, differentiates between Jewish-Christian tradition and Greek tradition (Adler 1931, 698–699 nr. Theta 178). It quotes Philo of Alexandria as an exponent of Jewish tradition. Philo, who lived some decades before the book of Revelation was composed, writes, "God is one" (*heis esti ho theos*; Philo, *Spec. leg.* 1.30; cf. Deut 6:4 LXX). According to the *Suda*, his theology allows tying up Christological and Trinitarian reflections. The Greeks, on the other hand, reflect upon their religious cults in terms of philosophical doctrine, according to the *Suda*. The *Suda* quotes an old Stoic summary as their position (Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 7.147): "The Greeks think that God is an immortal living being, rational (*zōion athanaton logikon*) . . . the creator (*dēmiourgos*) of everything and like a father to all (*patēr pantōōn*) . . . he is called by many names (*pollai prosēgoriai*) according to his powers (*dynameis*)."

Whoever utilizes the distinctions made in the Suda will locate Revelation's understanding of God within the Jewish context (Bauckham 2003; Holtz 1980; McDonough 1999; Söding 2001; Stowasser 2015a; Vögtle 1976; Wengst 2010, 95–104). There are good reasons to do so: Revelation is deeply rooted in Jewish traditions. The writer argues theocentrically (Murphy 1994, 202–3) and introduces God explicitly as he "who is," the God of Exod 3:14 (Rev 1:4). Revelation takes up images and visionary scenes from Jewish prophetic and apocalyptic traditions (Rösel 2017) and uses a variant of the ancient combat myth (Rev 12; Yarbro Collins 1976). It provides a contrast to Greco-Roman life and religion, and praises God for his acts of judgment against the whore of Babylon (e.g., Schüssler Fiorenza 1985, 181).

Yet Revelation's interaction with its religious and social context is complex. The author is responding more to a perceived crisis than to an objective, external crisis of Christianity (Yarbro Collins 1984; 1986, 239–41). He picks up various forms of religious interactions, and even his opposition against Greco-Roman conceptions presupposes contact. Hence, Revelation participates in the complex religious, cultural, and social history of the early imperial Roman period. It must be read in the context of its time, correlated with monotheistic and polytheistic developments (Mitchell and van Nuffelen 2010; Rüpke 2012), and related to the religious life of the era.

The famous formula "he (God) is one" (*heis esti*), quoted by the *Suda*, may serve as an example. In general, Judaism and early Christianity use the formula as a distinctive concept. The New Testament scriptures, apart from Revelation, assume that the formula can be predicated of the one God of Israel and no one else: "He is one" (Mark 12:29, 32; Gal 3:20: Jas 2:19; 4:12).

Revelation, however, does not use the formula in its description of God, and the author may react to Greek thought by that peculiarity, since the Greeks knew an equivalent to that confession. For centuries, they had handed down the formula, "one god, greatest among gods and human beings" (*heis theos ... megistos*, Xenophanes frag. B 23). In imperial Roman times, pagan worshippers used the acclamation *heis theos* for the "one god" whom they revered in an actual situation (sources in the Addenda to Peterson by Markschies et al. 2012, 367–580). This god was their unique god in that situation; the goddess possessed individuality and imparted individuality to the worshippers in their prayer (e.g., Aelius Aristides, *Hieroi Logoi* 4.50–51).

Many Christians will clear up the matter in the second and third centuries by adding a Christological formula to the acclamation *heis theos* (Staudt 2011, 304–6). They will reclaim "the one" as a monotheistic and Christian creed. Revelation, however, develops a special sense of religious competition. It uses the idiom *ho heis estin* (the one who is) in a critical way in the seventeenth chapter, where a beast with seven heads appears. The seven heads are seven kings; five have fallen, "the one is" (*ho heis estin*, 17:10). In our author's view, the sixth king—probably the Roman emperor of his time—claims to be "the one," which makes him analogous to figures of cultic veneration. He claims power and requires reverence similar to the gods of the Greeks. All in all, a classical formula describing God (*ho heis*, "the one") proves to be part of wider patterns of religious and sociopolitical rivalries.

These contexts shape the task of the present chapter: The book of Revelation expresses its thoughts about God in a way that is not only oriented internally to the community. It transfers the Jewish-Christian understanding of God from inner-Jewish and inner-Christian use into a much wider interreligious struggle over meaning. Therefore, the following discussions will trace Revelation's perspective on God in Jewish traditions and against the background of Greco-Roman life and religions. The author of Revelation is convinced that the Jewish-Christian God is distinctive by his names and his power (Tetragrammaton/IAO, Kyrios, Pantokratôr, the Enthroned One), even if aspects of his names (see sections II and III) and motifs of his narrative description (section IV) are familiar to other religions too.

II. The Name of God: Tetragrammaton and Kyrios

Who is God? As we saw, the formula "he is the one" is not sufficient in the interreligious struggle over meaning. There is no doubt that in Revelation the one God of Israel demands an awe that is sui generis. His name in Hebrew and in Greek shows his uniqueness from the outset. That name is non-interchangeable and makes the highest claims to divine existence, creativity, and power:

1. The name of God has four Hebrew letters: *YHWH*. Some Greek scribes wrote that *Tetragrammaton* in Hebrew letters even in Greek manuscripts of the sacred texts (8HevXII; P.Oxy L 3522; McDonough 1999, 58–122; cf. Wevers 2001). The early Christians knew of this convention up to the time of Origen (*Comm. Psalms* 2.2) and Jerome (*Prol. Galeatus*), but they themselves did not spell the name. They preserved the Hebrew sound only by the short form "Yah" (the theophoric element) in proper names and idioms. We find both aspects, the theophoric element in a proper name and a loanword, in Revelation.

The importance of the theophoric name is debatable: The seer calls himself *Johannēs* (1:1.4.9; 22:8), that is, "Yah(we) is full of grace", and discloses God's grace up to the wish of 22:21 (grace may be to all humanity). Yet, he does not translate his name himself. It would be wrong to stress it.

The loanword is the more important: The book of Revelation offers the earliest written documentation for the use of the "Hallelujah" in Christianity and it is the only source to do so in the New Testament. Rev 19:1–6 introduces this Hebraism after the fall of Babylon the Great (chap. 18). The author transliterates the Hebrew expression "Hallelu-Jah," "praise Yah(we)." Readers unacquainted with Semitic languages need help for understanding the word. Our author provides it by replacing the transliteration with the Greek imperative "praise (*aineite*) our God" in 19:5, which follows a precedent in the LXX (Jer 20:13 LXX).

A marginal gloss in minuscule 2814 (the codex used by Erasmus for the first printing of the New Testament) shows the relevance of the impulse. In the Greek transmission of Revelation, the Hallelujah becomes an exclamation consisting of three terms. The glossator, therefore, writes the idiom "*al ēlē ouia*," differing form the Hebrew root. But he adds that God speaks the Hallelujah parallel to the community in Hebrew language (fol 71r ad Rev 19:3; urn:nbn:de:bvb:384-uba003076-0143-3, used 2018/09/17). The remembrance of the Hebrew language preserves the old sense ("divine praise," noted in the line of the manuscript besides the gloss).

That means that the author of Revelation wrote in Greek for Greco-Roman readers, and yet he implicitly reminds them that through the centuries the God, whom they revere, has a Semitic name: Yah(we) is the God mighty in wrath and grace, deserving respect and praise.

2. Greek-speaking Jews generally did not use the Semitic form of the name. They preferred a Greek equivalent, *Kyrios* ("Lord"), which corresponds to the word *Adonai* in the Hebrew Scriptures (Rösel 2000). The Greek Scriptures of Israel often combined this name and the designation "God" (*theos*, Hebrew *'elohim*). Where *Kyrios* represented the Tetragrammaton, they wrote it without the definite article.

The author of Revelation likes the resulting idiom. He writes *Kyrios ho theos* in 1:8; 4:8; 18:8; 19:6; 21:22; and 22:5. Most English translations transpose the article and render it as "the Lord God." This is misleading, since "the Lord" becomes an apposition instead of a name. The phrase "Kyrios, the God" may sound strange but it is more correct. A paraphrase makes good sense: Revelation discloses that "Kyrios, the God," whom we venerate, "speaks" (1:8), "is holy" (4:8), etc. At the same time, our author knows the semantics. He includes the definite article with *Kyrios* in 22:6, emphasizing that God is "the Lord" in a full sense, speaking through the prophets. Kyrios, the God is mighty and effective.

3. The semantics of "Kyrios, the God" culminate in Rev 4:11. There, the twenty-four elders expand our phrase for the sake of rhythmic acclamation. They add the article to Kyrios, along with a connecting *kai* and a pronoun: "Worthy are you, the Lord and the God of us" (*ho kyrios kai ho theos hēmōn*; I imitate the Greek word order in the translation). That expanded text recalls the rhetorical question of Ps 18:32: "who is God, but the Lord (*YHWH*), and who a rock, except our God?" The author of Revelation, however, does not refer to the Hebrew Psalm text. He uses the old Greek translation (the Septuagint) of the Psalm, since he writes in Greek for Greek-speaking addressees. The translation avoids the image of the "rock" and reads "who is God, but the Lord (*kyrios*), / and who is God, except the God of us" (Ps 17:32 LXX)? The decisive elements of the Greek psalm (*kyrios* and *theos hēmōn*) and the word order (*hēmōn* after *theos*) have counterparts in the acclamation of Rev 4:11. A reader will conclude: Our God, Kyrios, alone is worthy; there is no other lord, and no other god.

A reader born outside of Christianity and Judaism will have additional connotations when going on to line four of the acclamation. The line says that all is created "through" (*dia*) God's will. Dia is a name of Zeus. That allowed for religious contacts; centuries earlier, the letter of Aristeas had already paralleled God "the creator"—the God of the Jews—and Zeus/*Dia* of the Greeks from a Jewish perspective (*Zēna kai Dia*; Ep. Arist. 16). But how should the connection and competition be construed?

At the time of Revelation's composition, the Roman writer Cornutus makes a word play in his compendium on the Greek gods using the name and the preposition *dia*: "We call him *Dia* (Zeus) since through (*dia*) him everything comes into being and is preserved (*sozetai*)" (*Nat. d.* 2.2). The author of Revelation presents a counter. He is convinced that *Kyrios*, the God of Israel and early Christianity, outcompetes Zeus by his creative will and power (Karrer 2015, 60). Later on, in the beginning of the great Hallelujah, he adds the motif of preservation (cf. *sozein* in Cornutus) and writes: "Hallelujah! The salvation / preservation (*sōtēria*) and the glory and the power (*dynamis*) belong to our God." The Jewish-Christian God, *Kyrios*, is a God of power and universal importance, whose claims surpass those of Zeus. The correlation between name

and power, articulated by the *Suda* for the Greek understanding of God (see § I), fits the comprehension of God in Revelation as well.

4. A second contrast in the acclamation, "Worthy are you, the Lord and the God of us," in 4:11 is more widely known. Greek documents used the widespread title "lord" for Roman emperors (e.g., documents of the "Fiscus Judaicus": Vespasian CPJ 160; Titus CPJ 181; Domitian CPJ 189, 193). People acclaimed the emperors "worthy" (cf. Josephus, *J. W.* 7.71; Koester 2014, 371). The Romans honored them like gods after their death and apotheosis; and most of the provinces called them "god" even during their lifetimes. Hence, the socio-religious point of our verse engages imperial ideology.

This contrast is secondary to the contrast with the Olympic Zeus in 4:11, but it is of considerable interest. Ancient authors criticized Domitian, who probably reigned at the time Revelation was composed, for his exaggerated imperial ambitions. The sources culminate in Suetonius, *Dom.* 13:2. There Suetonius charges that Domitian dictated a letter and sent it in the name of his procurators using the formula: "Our lord and god (i.e., Domitian) bids" (*dominus et deus noster... iubet*; Mucha 2015, 186–89; cf. Witulski 2010, 68–72 who dates Revelation later, under Hadrian). One may doubt the historicity of this letter and similar reports (Cassius Dio, *Rom. Hist.* 64, 4:7; Dio Chrysostom, *Or.* 45:1). The sources are somewhat later than Revelation and scholars have improved the image of Domitian in recent years. Yet the literary analogy cannot be ignored. Suetonius uses the phrase *dominus et deus noster* for his criticism of Domitian, corresponding exactly to the Greek text of "our Lord and God" in Rev 4:11.

For a long time that observation was combined with the idea that John was an outlaw, who was stigmatized and persecuted. That opinion, however, can be challenged. John could have been on Patmos as a witness for the word without being persecuted (Rev 1: 9; cf. Karrer 2017, 243–47). If so, then, the literary observation is sociologically even more interesting: The author of Revelation writes his work at the margins of society but not outside of it. He is part of the complex anti-imperial opposition that existed in Rome and the provinces up to the second century.

5. The connection of *kyrios* and motifs of kingly reign is widespread in antiquity; Cornutus uses it in his description of Zeus, who is said to reign/*basileuein* (*Nat. d.* 2.1). Philo elucidates "Lord" (*kyrios*) by "govern" (*kratein*) and "royal power" (*basilikē dynamis*) for the God of Israel (*Abr.* 121).

Rev 15:3–4 underscores the motif by using language from Jer 10:7. The passage is missing in the Old Greek (LXX) of Jeremiah, but it appears in Hebrew and the Greek version of Theodotion, which is from about the time of Revelation: "Who will not fear (you), king of the peoples?" Theodotion goes on, "where is there anyone like you, Kyrios, among all the wise men and all the kings of the peoples?" This rhetorical question praises the God of Israel as the God who reigns universally and is important for all people in the world.

Such universalism has a place in apocalyptic expectations, embedded in the question: what happens if the people in the world reject God's reign? The usual apocalyptic response is to anticipate a turning point in time and hope for a new world. The author of Revelation transfers that idea into a Greek context. He frames a hymn that combines the

quoted prophetic reminiscence and a psalm in the Greek language. A song he ascribes to Moses and Christ the Lamb (15:3a) confirms that "Kyrios, the God" is "the king of the peoples," which includes the non-Jewish population in Asia Minor, where the address-ees live, as well as "the nations" everywhere (15:3). When asking who will not fear him and praise his name (15:4), the details depend upon the Greek texts of Jer 10:7 and Ps 85:9 LXX (de Vries 2010; Hernández 2012, 95–98). Greek communication has prominence in Rev 15:3–4. As a consequence, the text sounds optimistic ("all the nations will come and worship," 15:4).

6. God is and will be the universal king. That counters everybody thinking that Zeus reigns (see Cornutus in the beginning of point 5). Indeed, Zeus sometimes bore the attribute "king" in the Greek world, as in the cult of Lebadeia.

Besides, local cults revered indigenous "kingly" gods in many places. Thus, some inscriptions in Asia Minor are dedicated to a god called "king" (e.g., Inscr. Priene 186). It is not clear whether these gods were always identified with Zeus at the time Revelation was composed. A mythical local king might also be deified (e.g., Strabo, *Geogr.* 14.1.26; Inscr. Miletus 1384; Graf 2010, 74–77).

When we consider the Roman Empire, there too people are familiar with kings in heaven and kings on earth. Even the Roman emperor is called "king" in Greek. But Revelation rejects venerating any of them by a religious cult. Instead, people are to praise "Kyrios, the God," as King of the nations all over the world.

1–6 (Summary). The author of Revelation contours the profile of the Jewish-Christian God by the dint of his name: God's name proofs that he is awful, mighty, and gracious. He is greater than the Greco-Roman gods, Zeus-Jupiter, and all heroic and political kings. This negates any claims about a human apotheosis.

III. Designations of God: He who is, the Creator, Iaō and Aō, Father, and Pantokratōr

God has one name (*YHWH, Kyrios*), and yet, many designations. These designations (the Suda would say *prosēgoriai*; cf. § I) are elaborated in translations and transliterations of the name, in predicates and paraphrases:

1. The consonants of the Tetragrammaton (*YHWH*) recall the Hebrew verb *hāyah*, "to be"; God uses that verb when Moses asks him for his name (Exod 3:13). The Greek translation uses the corresponding verb (*einai*). The rendering of the name in Exod 3:14 was difficult, nevertheless, since the Hebrew form *hāyah* could be rendered as present or future tense: "I am who I am" or "I will be the one I will be."

Hellenistic Jews usually favored one interpretation or the other. The Old Greek translator chose the present tense with a durative aspect: "I am he who is" (*egō eimi ho ōn*) and the

shorter form "he who is" (*ho ōn*) for the name of God (Exod 3:14 LXX). Later translations of Exodus, dating from about the time of Revelation, preferred the future tense: "I will be (the one) I will be" (*esomai* [*hos*] *esomai*; Aquila and Theodotion; ms. 64 Ra.).

Both possibilities existed at the time of the first Christians. But neither Paul nor other authors before Revelation referred to them. Therefore, Revelation becomes very important for the Greek tradition of the name of God in Christianity. It holds the first occurrence of the solemn quotation in extant early Christian literature.

Our author decides against the Aquila-Theodotion version of Exod 3:14 and opens with an allusion to the Old Greek version in order to name God programmatically as "He who is" (*ho ōn*) in Rev 1:4. Moreover, our author writes *ho ōn* in the nominative, as opposed to the normal Greek syntax, where the preposition *apo* ("from") would demand the genitive case in 1:4. He uses the name indeclinably; that is comparable to the Hebrew use of names. The Greek name of God holds a Semitic background.

Some exegetes imagine a dialogue in Rev 1:4–5 (cf. Vanni 1976). Then it conveys additional connotations. The reader of Revelation (*anaginōskōn* 1:3) says, "Grace and peace be with you from," and the community answers, "He who is." The community which lives in a Greek context (the Asia) is allowed to articulate a Greek understanding of God. Nevertheless, the present durative verb tense refers more to history than to ontology; it shows that the name is continuously relevant: God "is" now and always.

2. The Greek participle *ōn* ("the one who is"/"he who is") of Exod 3:14 LXX and Rev 1:4 is a personal predication written in the masculine. This gives a personal quality to the communication, which is important.

Plato had made the neuter participle *to on* ("the being"), which is abstract and non-personal, a fundamental category in Greek philosophy. It is uncertain but possible that the Septuagint translator was acquainted with that philosophical tradition. Consciously or unconsciously, he deviated in favor of the personal sense. His version, the masculine *ho ōn*, shaped statements about the uniqueness of Israel's God in the following centuries. The preference for the masculine continued indicating that Israel's God is definitive for all that is and has "being" in the ontological sense, though, he himself is neither abstract nor neuter. He communicates personally, unlike the philosophical *on* (cf. Caquot 1978, 19–20; Rösel 1998, 55–56; McDonough 1999, 131–37).

Philosophers of the first century CE were aware of the difference. Philo of Alexandria, as a Jew, preferred the masculine *ho ōn* (*Abr.* 121; *Mos.* 1.75), whereas the Roman philosopher Seneca used the neuter; he explained the meaning by referring to the Latin paraphrase "that which is" (*quod est*; *Ep.* 58,11–12.16–22). The author of Revelation follows the Jewish approach. He distances himself from an abstract ontology while keeping in contact with philosophical reflections.

3. The author's complex interaction with his environment continues as he expands the temporal aspect of the idiom *ho ōn* ("he who is"/"the one being"): The Greeks liked tripartite statements. They developed a "Drei-Zeiten-Formel," since time embraces past, present, and future (McDonough 1999: 41–57).

Our author conveys a significant variant of the formula in Rev 1:4: God is "He who is" (present participle) "and was" (*ēn*, imperfect finite verb), "and is coming" (*erchomenos*,

present participle); there is nothing in the present or the past without him ("he was," *ēn*; 1:4.8; 4:8; 11:17; 16:5). The structure of the formula is comparable to ontological reflections from Plato (*Tim.* 37e–38a) to Plutarch (*E Delph.* 19). At first glance, we are close to philosophical perspectives.

On the other hand, our author knows of the biblical interest in God the creator (cf. Koester 2014: 116–17, 367–71). He quotes a great praise of the God who has created all what is in 4:11 (*ektisas*) and expands that idea Christologically (3:14; 5:13). One may note the difference of the verb used by him (*ktizein*) to Gen 1:1 (*epoiēsen*) and to Greek philosophy (cf. *dēmiourgos* in the Suda, § I). Read in Biblical contexts, his verb accentuates that God is "the creating founder of heaven and earth" (thus the first reference of *ktizein* [Hebrew *qānah*] in Israel's scriptures, Gen. 14:19, 22, picked up in Rev 10:6). Compared to the Greek use of the verb, God lays the basis for life in past and present (*ktizein* e.g., means founding a city). He who was and is can go on to a new creation.

4. The most interesting, however, is the third term of the formula in 1:4. Anyone knowing the translations of Exod 3:14 from about the time of Revelation would expect the future indicative "he will be" (*esetai*) or the future participle "the one who will be" (*ho esomenos*). The author of Revelation, however, avoids the future tense and thus differs from the most common form of the "Drei-Zeiten-Formel."

There may be religious competition in the background. Pausanias, *Descr.* 10.12.10 refers to the exclamation "Zeus was, Zeus is, Zeus will be, oh great Zeus" (*Zeus ēn, Zeus estin, Zeus esetai, ō megale Zeus*). The sense is that the highest god of the Greeks embraces the modes of being throughout all times. He, Zeus, will be. He will exist forever. In the formula the god's "being" is not related to anyone else. Revelation differs: The personal God constitutes and dominates all times. But he does not persist in himself. He is "coming" personally and to others.

Nonetheless, the wording in Revelation has philosophical implications: Aristotle used the tenses of the verb "to come" (*hēkein*) in his famous deliberations concerning time (*Phys.* 4.10–14, esp. § 222a). If we follow this line of thought, a real future must be expressed by the grammatical future: "he will come." But Revelation does not use the future tense. Its use of the grammatical present highlights another aspect of the event. It presupposes that "the one who is coming" has departed. He is already on the way. In Revelation God is now coming to the addressees (1:4) and to the entire world (cf. 1:8; 4:8).

This understanding of God touches the apocalyptic horizon of Revelation. The new heaven and the new earth are nearby in space and time (21:1–22:5). The coming break in time is so close that we can almost speak of a present eschatology in Revelation (Karrer 2015, 78–79; Karrer 2017, 198–99, 214–15).

This has surprised commentators since the sixteenth century. Theodore Beza, therefore, proposed altering the text in his famous edition. He inserted the future "he who will be" (*esomenos*) into the text of Rev 16:5 to fit the "Drei-Zeiten-Formel." Although lacking support from a manuscript of Revelation (but cf. Exod 3:14 Aquila/Theodotion), his text found its way into the King James Version, which reads, "O Lord, which art, and wast, and shalt be"—a charming expression of the temporal aspects of Exod 3:14 that is unique in the Bible, but is contrary to the original intention of Revelation.

5. Greek philosophers were not interested in the Semitic sound of the name *YHWH*, but some people liked it in kinds of popular religious life . The name spread from Judaism to non-Jewish contexts in the form that was spoken, that is, as a name consisting of vowels. *Iaō*, became the most common form. Jews utilized this spelling sometimes, as can be seen in the Greek Leviticus scroll found near Qumran (Lev 4:27 LXX in 4Q120, frg. 20; cf. Lev 3:12 in frg. 6 of the scroll = 4QLXXLev^b; first cent. BCE, fragmentary). Greeks were acquainted with the pronunciation and spelling from the first century BCE onwards (Diodorus Siculus, *Library* 1.94.2). Romans knew it as well and related it to "Chaldean mysteries" from about the same time (Varro according to Johannes Lydus, *Mens.* 4.53.40).

A name consisting only of vowels fascinated people. It looked very powerful. Hence, it was often used in magical incantations (PGrM IV, 593; XXXVI, 35–36; CVI,1–10 etc.; Fauth 2014: 5–36; McDonough 1999, 58–122). There is good evidence that the author of Revelation was aware of these practices. He himself associated the name, perhaps, with the seal that bears God's name, of 7:2 (cf. 14:1; Aune 1998a, 452–54; 1996).

Yet his interest was to ensure that Greeks would not incorporate *Iaō* into their magic and the pantheon of polytheism (*IŌ* evoked Seth; cf. Merkelbach 1996: 320–21). Rev 1:8 elucidates that matter. There God presents himself by saying "*I* am the *Alpha* and the *Omega*." Given the way the vowels of God's name are embedded in a sentence, speaking them in an incantation is not allowed. But the name is visible: see the three vowels of *Iaō* in italics. The initial iota is reflected in the "I am" (*egō eimi*), which is followed by the alpha and omega. That means that God alone "is" in the strict sense; every rival god and goddess is irrelevant.

6. The letters Alpha and Omega are the beginning and end of the Greek alphabet and an abbreviation for all vowels (cf. Aune 1997, 57). By using them to identify God in 1:8, the writer emphasizes the breadth of God's power. He brings to mind that the alphabet was used for writing, speaking, and counting in antiquity. Since the letters were used to form words and numerals, his implication is that every human thought, every communication, every reflection, and every numeric calculation involves God's presence. God is the beginning and the end of human life, and he is equally the beginning and the end of wisdom and logic.

The author of Revelation emphasizes that breadth of God's influence by using the formula "Alpha and Omega" as a literary frame for the book around the visions. God presents himself as the Alpha and the Omega at the beginning in 1:8, where the formula follows the first visionary image (1:7). At the end of the book, God again calls himself the Alpha and Omega in 21:6, adding that he is "the beginning and the end" (Aune 1998b, 1126–1127). This verse then leads to the last vision, the heavenly Jerusalem (21:9–22:5). Thus, God covers the revelation reported in John's book as well as all human comprehension. The name *Iaō* and the formula "Alpha and Omega" relate to one another. The name of God expresses his universality. The first and last letters of the Hebrew alphabet (*aleph* and *taw*) would also fit this interpretation, but that is of less importance (cf. du Rand 2009).

7. The attribute "father" was widespread in ancient reflections on the highest god (cf. the Suda in I, Zeus as father, Dīs-pater etc.). The Greco-Roman culture might even have

used it in a wordplay together with the "*A* and *Ō*." A palindrome was excavated in Pompeii-Herculaneum speaking of Sator (Saturn?). This non-Christian "Sator-Rotas-Square" can be read as "pater noster" ("our father")/"*A Ō*" if one transposes the letters (Ernst 1991, 429–49). Revelation does not presuppose this palindrome (for recent examples, see the Internet s.v.). Nevertheless, a typological comparison to the palindrome and to the attribute of Zeus is worthwhile: Rev 1:6 remarks (two verses before the *A* and *Ō*) that God is the "father" (*patēr*) of Christ (cf. 2:28; 3:5, 21; 14:1; Huber 2015, 144–45.), and 22:13 (the end of the text) transfers the *A* and *Ō* to Christ. At the same time, Revelation avoids the expression "*our* father" throughout. Hence, Revelation combines the "*A* and *Ō*" with Christology rivalling ancient religions (Karrer 2015, 70–72). It reinforces the distinctiveness of the Jewish-Christian tradition Christologically, not via the famous prayer "Our Father."

8. The Hebrew Scriptures expanded the name of God to "Yahwe (Lord) Sabaoth" about 285 times. Some Jewish translators rendered the phrase as "Lord of the (heavenly) hosts" (*Kyrios tōn dynameōn*, 2 Kgdms [2 Sam] 6:18). Others combined Greek and Hebrew, creating *Kyrios Sabaoth* (Isa 45:13, 14 LXX). Still others preferred to paraphrase the idiom as Lord, the almighty God (Amos 3:13 and often in the Minor Prophets) or Lord Almighty (*Kyrios pantokratōr,* Hab 2:13).

Some early Christians adopted the archaizing form Kyrios Sabaoth (Rom 9:29, Jas 5:4). The author of Revelation, however, favors the expression *pantokratōr* (cf. 2 Cor 6:18), enabling him to assert God's uniqueness and power in Greek contexts: The Greeks had used the attribute *pankratēs* ("almighty") for Zeus since Aeschylus (*Eum.* 918). Even the noun *pantokratōr*, "the Almighty," was not totally strange to them, as some scholars thought earlier. The feminine form of the noun was used for Isis before the time Revelation was composed (SEG VIII 548,1–3), and the masculine form was later used for Zeus (I. Nikaia 1121; 1512).

Thus, the author of Revelation competes with Greco-Roman cults by calling God "the Almighty one" (nine times). He is sure that Israel's God alone has the powerful government. Moreover, he implicitly counters the Roman emperors; for they were called by a similar composite noun: *autokratōr* was the Greek equivalent for the Latin *imperator* ("emperor"; Plutarch, *Galba* 1–2), literally meaning that the emperor reigns "by himself" (Greek *autos*). By way of contrast, the God of Israel and the early Christians reigns over "all" (Greek *panta*); the universal aspect of the title *pantokratōr* elevates him over the *autokratōr* (Zimmermann 2007, 238–40, 266–67; more cautiously Stowasser 2015b, 151–53).

9. The attribute "Pantokratōr" (God the "Almighty") is normally derived from *kratein* with a genitive object and designates the Almighty in a strong sense (*omnipotens*) that includes God's ability to destroy (cf. the wrath of God in 16:14; 19:15). On the other hand, *kratein* can be constructed with an accusative object; that construction expresses also the power for conservation and giving good things (*omnitenens*). The latter sense is actualized in Ep. Aristeas 185, where a Jewish priest wishes that God the Almighty (*pantokratōr*) might bless someone with the good things he has created (*ektisen*). Revelation also includes those connotations (cf. Bauke-Ruegg 1998, 369–72), since 4:8

designates God as "Almighty" and 4:11 praises him as creator (cf. § 3); no verse of the throne vision mentions God's ability to destroy.

However, our author does not fully integrate both meanings and constructions of *kratein* (with. gen. or acc.). He does not resolve the tension in his visions between God's creative and destructive capacities, God's graciousness and judgment. Rev 21:22, the last reference to *pantokrator*, leads to a contradiction; 21:24–25 speak of open doors and invite to the heavenly Jerusalem, 21:27 however excludes everybody who is unclean.

It seems that our author is torn between his hope for all humanity (cf. § II 1 concerning 22:21) and the shock that many people and powerful humans reject the God of Israel and his Christ. The *pantokrator* is in his view, therefore, a warrior (cf. the tradition of Sabaoth/hosts) as well as a savior. The violent images serve the goal of removing all evil from the world (Bauckham/Hart 1999, 140; cf. Spilsbury 2007, 143). We can understand them against the background of the Greco-Roman interest in the powers of a great God (cf. the *dynameis* in the Suda § I); but for God the creator and preserver, the line of grace must win the priority, sometimes against our author (Bachmann 2002, 19–21, 182–92; cf. Karrer 2015, 73–75).

1–9 (Summary). The author of Revelation construes the name of God (*IAŌ*) and central predications (creator, father, almighty) in response to the challenges of his time. Some of his motives, the *ho ōn* as well as the *IAŌ* and *AŌ* are singular in the New Testament. Thus, our author's idioms and images have an outstanding quality. In remembering the Suda (cf. I), we can say: he declares and clarifies the Jewish understanding of God within a Greco-Roman context.

IV. God in the Narrative:
The Enthroned One, Unique Against the Foreign Gods, Saving and Judging

The book of Revelation narrates visions and auditions in a very complex way. The author combines the tradition of the vision report with the form of vivid image description, the *ekphrasis* (cf. Whitaker 2015). The first *idou*, "see" (1:7), of the *ekphrasis* even foregoes the first *eidon*, "I saw" (1:12), and the last *idou*, "see," is spoken by Christ after all the visions (22:12; the last *eidon*, "I saw," is found ex ante, in 21:22). As a result, a sequence of heavenly signs forms the body of the work in Rev 4–22. Such signs call for interpretation and reaction. Some aspects complete Revelation's understanding of God:

1. A thoroughgoing element of the narrative is the image of God's throne. The author of Revelation draws on the motif from 1:4 onwards and discloses it in chapter 4. That chapter is built like a vision (*eidon* 4:1), but the sketch of the throne is formed as an *ekphrasis* (*idou*, see 4:2). The next *eidon*, "I saw," does not follow until 5:1, the section of the text speaking of the heavenly Christ. Theologically, the author of Revelation

differentiates between the explication of God's presence and Christology. Christ can be seen (chap. 5); God must be described in a vivid and yet abstract imagery, since he is personally invisible.

That peculiarity in the descriptions allows for building up a soteriological suspense lasting to the last vision: The saved ones will see God personally, face to face; that is to be found in the sketch of the heavenly Jerusalem (22:4). Thus, the saved ones will see more than John on Patmos. They will encounter God on his throne and the lamb (*arnion*) immediately in a holy worship (image of the throne in 22:1.3). They will belong to God and Christ unreservedly, as shown by God's name on their foreheads (22:4). The understanding of God has a soteriological aim and is joined by Christology.

2. The description of chapter 4 (Gallusz 2014, 21–76, 95–141; Schimanowski 2002; Tóth 2006, 196–218) refers to the first chapter of Ezekiel (*merkabah*), that had influenced apocalyptic and mystical texts before (1 En. 14:18–23; QShirShabb). Therefore, Revelation is a part of that strand of Jewish literature. Our author combines other scriptural elements with that tradition. God's designation as "the one sitting on the throne" (*ho kathēmenos*, 4:2–3, cf. 1 En. 14:20) opens a broad horizon for his power. In the prayer of Hezekiah, the enthroned one alone is God (*theos monos*) over the kingdoms of the world, since he created heaven and earth (4 Kgdms 19:15 LXX [2 Kgs 19:15 MT]); he is the "Almighty" (*pantokratōr*, 4Kgdms 19:15, Antiochian text, perhaps the oldest form of the Greek translation of 2 Kings.). And the Trisagion of Isa 6:3 (combined with Amos 3:13 LXX in Rev 4:8) evokes God's holiness. As a result, God resides in heaven, possessing cultic holiness and power.

3. Revelation develops the idea of the enthroned God against that background in the visionary corpus. Chapter 4 includes the topics of God's overwhelming power (*pantokratōr*, 4:8) and God as creator (4:11). Rev 7:15 accentuates the veneration of the holy God; the "enthroned one" is revered in heaven day and night (that prepares for the image of salvation in chaps. 21–22). Rev 15:3–4 praises the Almighty, the Lord, who is king over the people of the world and "alone is holy" (*monos hosios*). Rev 21:5 refers to the creative power of God sitting on his throne; in his authority, he makes all things new.

Earlier we noted the difficulties of Revelation calling God *heis*, "one," within a Greco-Roman religious context (§ I). Now, we see a necessary complement: the attribute *monos* ("the only one") characterizes God correctly. The God of Israel and early Christianity "alone is holy" (15:4). None of his rivals in heaven and on earth deserves awe as he does.

4. Psalms and prophetic texts explained that "the enthroned one" sits "above the cherubim" (Ps 98:1 LXX; Od 4:54 = Dan 3:55 Θ; Isa 37:16). Ezekiel elaborated the picture and described "living beings" (*zōa*) surrounding and carrying the throne (Ezek 1:5–24). Drawing on the *merkabah* tradition of Ezek 1, the author of Revelation avoids the term "cherubim" throughout his work. Instead, he introduces the famous image of the four living beings or living creatures into Christianity.

Rev 4 changes the order of the living creatures and other details that are found in Ezek 1. Yet taken as a whole, the scene of the *zōa* forms a Jewish-Christian counterpart to the Greek understanding of "God" as "living being" (*zōon*; see the *Suda* in § I): The God who alone is holy is invisible and therefore is not called a "living being" himself. As an

alternative, he is accompanied by "living beings" and elevated above them; he is greater than any "living god" of the Greco-Roman world.

5. This clarification is important since many elements in the description in Rev 4 have parallels in Greco-Roman religion. Throughout the Mediterranean region, people honor Zeus/Jupiter as the enthroned god par excellence. Pausanias, *Descr.* 5.11.1 describes the statue of Zeus at Olympia: Zeus sits on the throne; he can be seen, contrary to the God of Rev 4 but—but if we follow Revelation—inferior to Rev 22:3–4. Zeus wears a reposing eagle on his scepter; in Revelation the eagle of the heavenly God is flying (4:7). Zeus holds the figure of Victory in his right hand, whereas Revelation attributes all victory to its God, who achieves it through Christ (5:5–6; Karrer 2015, 58–59).

Other elements augment the cultural parallels. The hymnic praises in Rev 4:11 and other passages evoke the hymns of the Greek chorus (Schedtler 2014). The precious stones mentioned in Rev 4:3 recall the view on earth in Plato's *Phaedo* (sardis, jasper and emerald are highlighted there in 110d).

The parallels are too extensive to be incidental. Revelation draws on the *merkabah* and Israel's prophetic traditions in order to develop a view of worship supplanting the Greco-Roman devotion to the gods, including Zeus/Jupiter, the highest god of the Romans and Greeks.

6. The same contrast holds true with regard to all Greco-Roman gods. People in antiquity differentiated between the gods of Olympus like Apollo and the gods of the Underworld like Hades. Revelation assumes that these gods are active in some way; our author argues from a monotheistic perspective without denying the existence of other transcendent beings. However, the foreign gods bring death. Revelation insists, in effect, that an Olympic god is no less dangerous than death—personified as Thanatos—and the god of the Underworld, Hades. Conversely, Death and Hades (cf. 6:8) are overwhelmed by the resurrection of Christ (1:17–18), and the Olympic gods are devalued through the narrative of Revelation.

As an example, the Destroyer and angel of the abyss in Rev 9:11 is called Apollyon. That designation alludes to Apollo. He, the god preferred by Augustus and the god of the oracles from Delphi, Klaros, and Didyma, is the most confrontational of the Olympic gods in Revelation. Today Apollo is known as the god of the arts, but beginning with Homer (*Il.* 1.10), Apollo was also known for his power to destroy. A popular etymology connected his name and the verb *apollynai* ("destroy"; Archilochos, frag. 26.5–6; cf. Aeschylus, *Ag.* 1081–82; Macrobius, *Sat.* 1.17:9–10). Hence, Rev 9:11 poses a sharp challenge: Apollo is depicted as "Apollyon," a destroyer, and the implication is that he cannot prevail against God and Christ (Karrer 2012, 228–30).

7. The narrative makes a critical point. Revelation marks a great line to salvation, as we saw, and yet the narrative urges its readers to heed the warning signs that are sketched out in the visionary corpus.

These signs are patterned after the Exodus tradition and prophetic predictions (Sommer 2015; Gallusz 2008). Moses warned the pharaoh once, and now God warns people again through the visions of the seven seals, the seven trumpets, and the seven bowls in Revelation. Whoever does not heed the warning will meet with the wrath and

judgment of God (Rev 15–20). God does not hesitate in his righteousness (15:3–4). His wrath is coming (16:19; 19:15; cf. 11:18; 14:10). He will judge Babylon (18:10; 19:2) and his throne will be established for the judgment of all human beings according to their deeds (20:11–13). God, the judge, dominates parts of Revelation.

This tendency influences even the depiction of the actions in the heavenly cult. Cultic bowls are in use there (e.g., for offering prayers; 5:8). But if the world refuses to join in worshiping God, the cultic bowls become a means of judgment (Aune 1998a, 879–80; Gallusz 2008, 29). The bowls are used, then, to pour plagues of God's wrath on those who oppose him (15:7–16:21).

One must ask if the author of Revelation succeeds in counterbalancing this line of God's wrath and judgment with the line of his grace. The reception history was sometimes more fascinated by the dark motives. Against that, the grace of God must be given priority theologically and hermeneutically (cf. the hints of a wish for universal grace in 22:21 § II 1, the salvific perspective of the heavenly Jerusalem § IV 1 etc.).

1–7 (Summary). The author of Revelation actualizes Jewish traditions and rivals with ideas regarding the gods in the Greco-Roman religions throughout the visionary corpus of Revelation. One may ask if he thoroughly succeeds in balancing judgment and grace. But in his way, he shows the power, uniqueness, acts, and judgments of God impressively. His presentation of the heavenly God, enthroned and acting full of salvific as well as judging power strikes the nerve of his time.

V. CONCLUSIONS

Older concepts of religious history strictly separated Jewish apocalypticism and Greek reflection. The book of Revelation was understood to be a witness to apocalyptic thought and Jewish-Christian theology, foreign to the environment of its addressees in the early Roman Empire. Matters have been considerably changed by new data:

The Jewish-Christian character of Revelation is undoubted; its notion of God definitely draws on Jewish traditions, beginning with the name of God (§ II) and going on to his designations (§ III) and the development of the Merkabah tradition (§ IV). The author of Revelation, however, also engages the multifaceted society of the early Roman Empire and its variegated religious views. He combines the reception of Israel's scriptures and apocalyptic ideas with a feeling for the actual questions, language, and interests of the world surrounding his addressees.

That way, the author of Revelation is the first to give the understanding of God as "the one who is" (*ho ōn*) a place in Christianity (1:4). He actualizes the Greek *Dreizeitenformel* and dares to formulate the succinct paraphrase of God's name that results in the famous "Alpha and Omega" (1:8; § III). He contrasts God, the "one who alone is holy" (*monos hosios*; 15:4), with the foreign gods of his time, the Olympic Zeus (cf. chap. 4) and Apollo (9:11), as well as the chthonic Hades and Thanatos (in 1:18). He narrates that God is father

and creator (§ III), sitting on this throne, saving, and judging, in elaborate images (§ IV), deeply embedded into the Mediterranean world.

The combination of reflections and visionary images looks strange to the modern reader. Our author builds a fascinating bridge between biblical and Greek traditions, e.g., from the name of God (*ho ōn*) to Greek thoughts and corrects an abstract ontology in favor of a personal theology. He is thus a great theologian. On the other hand, he narrates God in bold and sometimes ambiguous signs. He plays up the omnipotence of the almighty God and stresses his wrath besides his grace. Hermeneutics must take into consideration these theological tensions and look for a balance in the understanding of God by using the impulses of the book of Revelation beyond its ambiguities.[1]

NOTE

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