

The Symbolism of the Apocalypse: the Original Contribution of Stylistic and Rhetorical Devices

Luca Pedroli

PONTIFICAL BIBLICAL INSTITUTE, ROMA

PONTIFICAL GREGORIAN UNIVERSITY, ROMA

RESUMEN Este estudio examina el simbolismo estrictamente conectado con el hombre y su dinámica esencial que caracteriza predominantemente el Apocalipsis de Juan. Después de resaltar sus características principales, se centra en la contribución que ofrecen algunos dispositivos estilísticos y retóricos, como el derrocamiento de la jerarquía de medios y el recurso a la ekphrasis, a la diegesis, a la mimēsis y a la deixis. Lo que sucede es cómo el uso original y creativo del autor de estos expedientes refuta la supuesta ahistoricidad de la narración de Juan y mantiene el lenguaje simbólico del Apocalipsis anclado al contexto y a la experiencia original.

PALABRAS CLAVE Apocalipsis, historicidad, lingüística, profecía, retórica, simbolismo.

SUMMARY *This study examines the symbolism strictly connected to man and his essential dynamics that predominantly characterizes the Apocalypse of John. After highlighting its main features, it focuses on the contribution that is offered by some stylistic and rhetorical devices, such as the overthrow of the media hierarchy and the recourse to ekphrasis, diegesis, mimēsis and deixis. What transpires is how the author's original and creative use of these elements refutes the alleged a-historicity of John's story and maintains that the symbolic language of the Apocalypse is anchored to an original context and experience.*

KEYWORDS *Apocalypse, historicity, linguistics, prophecy, rhetoric, symbolism.*

I. PREMISE

It is significant that in the Apocalypse of John there is an element that, as soon as it is brought into focus, imposes itself in a surprising way and becomes decisive, illuminating: what man is and does is not simply understood in itself

and for itself, but it reveals itself as the bearer of a new content that projects everything forward, making it tend towards its maximum, optimal trajectory¹.

This aspect is highlighted by John with his particular, typical way of proceeding: he takes the anthropological material in its most realistic sense, but, after having observed it with great attention and having described it in detail, he does not stop at its purely phenomenological meaning. Rather, he immediately attributes a new value to it, suggested and implemented by a symbol.

Therefore, it is more vital than ever to better specify this type of procedure, which, in fact, is somewhat of a key to a correct interpretation of both the anthropological vision and the general development of the entire book. Obviously, it is not possible in our study to treat in detail and exhaustively the broad and complex theme of the symbolism of the Apocalypse; for this, we refer to the specific contributions that have been published in this regard². Our intent is rather to highlight the dynamics that allow us to grasp and interpret the *more*, that is, the forward momentum impressed in the human sphere.

1 One of the first attempts to highlight this dynamic must be attributed to Ugo Vanni, who recently passed away and whose commentary in two volumes, with which we had the honor to collaborate, has been published posthumously (*Apocalisse di Giovanni* [Commenti e Studi biblici; Assisi 2018]). Vanni offers a synthesis of this view in "L' *homo apocalypticus*: sua struttura personale", in: G. DE GENNARO (ed.), *L'antropologia biblica* (Studio Biblico Teologico Aquilano, Studi biblici 3; Napoli 1981) 871-901. He explicitly defines this phenomenon as "una maggiorazione antropologica che incalza" (p. 874). Related, we offer our own personal contribution in: L. PEDROLI, *Dal fidanzamento alla nuzialità escatologica. La dimensione antropologica del rapporto crescente tra Cristo e la Chiesa nell'Apocalisse* (Studi e Ricerche. Sezione biblica; Assisi 2015) 39-119.

2 There are many studies that deal with this topic. Among these, the more notable are: G.B. CAIRD, "On Deciphering the Book of Revelation. I. Heaven and earth. II. Past and future. III. The First and the Last. IV. Myth and Legend": *ET* 74 (1962) 13-15, 51-53, 82-84, 103-105; M. VELOSO, "Símbolos en el Apocalipsis de San Juan": *RevBib* 38 (1976) 321-338; D. EZELL, *Revelations on Revelation. New Sounds from Old Symbols* (Waco 1977); C.A. BERNARD, *Théologie symbolique* (Paris 1978) 381-389; P. PRIGENT, "Pour une théologie de l'image: les visions de l'Apocalypse": *RHPhR* 59 (1979) 373-378; J.-N. ALETTI, "Essai sur la symbolique céleste de l'Apocalypse de Jean", *Christus* 28 (1981) 40-53; D.L. BARR, "The Apocalypse as a Symbolic Transformation of the World: A Literary Analysis": *Interp* 38 (1984) 39-50; H. GIESEN, "'Das Buch mit den sieben Siegeln'. Bilder und Symbole in der Offenbarung des Johannes": *BiKi* 39 (1984) 59-65. For a summary, see the recent study by I. ROJAS GALVEZ, *Los símbolos del Apocalipsis* (Qué se sabe de... ; Estella 2013).

II. THE SYMBOLISM OF THE APOCALYPSE AND ITS SPECIFICITY

It is well known that symbolism is a linguistic process that John takes from the Old Testament; but, within a specifically apocalyptic lens, he revises it with his own original and unique creative perspective³.

It is probable that this practice was originally linked to a school or some esoteric movement, since we find numerous examples in Jewish literature, as well as in the rest of the New Testament; however, it is difficult, if not impossible, to establish this literary setting precisely. The fact remains that the author of the Apocalypse, consistent with the literary model by which he is inspired, usually attributes to the elements a *further* meaning, one that goes beyond the real, more literal and immediate one.

This also responds to a very practical and concrete need faced by John, namely having to express the supernatural character of the mystery of God and of his salvific plan within the context of an eschatological, celestial dimension in which the latter sees realized its fulfillment. John has recognized, from the beginning, the inadequacy of everyday language that is limited to purely human experience. For this reason, he makes use of a different, metaconceptual discourse, which allows him to make things intelligible and to communicate these new transcendental realities⁴.

In fact, from the perspective of all the grammatical anomalies that characterize the Greek of the Apocalypse, not to mention the repeated attempts, hypotheses, and theories, as based on manuscript traditions, to offer correction to these asperities, the fact remains that these linguistic difficulties, which cannot fail to leave us perplexed, are not attributable to the author's incompetence

3 This creativity in re-elaborating the data obtained from the Old Testament emerges constantly throughout the text, as a characteristic trait, typical of the author. It is enough to consider, in this regard, the example of the garment, an element that was already in the Old Testament tradition, and especially in Isaiah, that was used to indicate the condition of one or more persons; however, in the Apocalypse, it reaches an exceptional symbolic valence, as regards precisely the relational life and the contact with the risen Christ. Likewise, you can think of the four horses of chap. 6, which John takes from Zechariah (cf. Zech 1,8-10; 6,1-3). Their colors, only mentioned by the prophet, are revised and charged with a completely new meaning. In reference to these dynamics, we refer to our own contribution: "Dos esposos adornados para las bodas. La metáfora esponsal del Apocalipsis": *EstB74* (3/2016) 411-431. Also see: L. GARCÍA UREÑA, "Colour Adjectives in the New Testament": *NTS* 61 (2/2015) 219-238.

4 "The entire presentation stretches the limits of human vocabulary and thought to emphasize the glorious reality of God dwelling among his people" (R.H. MOUNCE, *The Book of Revelation* [NICNT; Grand Rapids, MI – Cambridge, U.K. 1998] 380).

or distraction. This is very much evidenced by the simple fact that, alongside the irregular forms, the correct ones are normally found⁵; moreover, he certainly appears to be a cultured person, undoubtedly of Jewish origin, but with an impressive mastery of the Greek language, as shown by the richness of his vocabulary. Notably, John is influenced by his predilection for learned terms and by the stylistic devices used⁶.

Therefore, to try to understand and justify these repeated anomalies, we need to refer to what we have just said regarding the use of symbolism: that is, the author, feeling constrained, even *caged*, by the linguistic system in which he operates, does not hesitate to *force* the system so as to create those conditions which reveal the content of the “mystery”, while, at the same time, suggesting that it is in itself something inexpressible⁷.

Even more so, it is this same basic intent that motivates John in his unique use of symbols: that is, to allow the reader to glimpse as much as possible, while, at the same time, articulated in veiled language so as to respect the mystery, attempting to remove barriers to of the *latter* realities⁸.

5 It is sufficient to cite, as examples, the case of 1,4 where, alongside the correct use of ἀπό followed by the genitive (ἀπὸ τῶν ἑπτὰ πνευματικῶν ἃ ἐνώπιον τοῦ θρόνου αὐτοῦ), we also find the same preposition with the nominative (ἀπὸ ὃ ὦν καὶ ὃ ἦν καὶ ὃ ἐρχόμενος), and the case of 5,6, where the terms ἀρνίον and πνεύματα, clearly neuter, are accompanied by two masculine participles, ἑστηκός and ἀπεσταλμένοι, respectively.

6 The contributions offered in the past should be noted with regard to this topic: R.B.Y. SCOTT, *The Original Language of the Apocalypse* (Toronto 1928); G. MUSSIES, “The Greek of the Book of Revelation”, in: J. LAMBRECHT (ed.), *L’Apocalypse johannique et l’apocalyptique dans le Nouveau Testament. Actes de la XXX^e session des journées bibliques de Louvain, 28-30 août 1979* (BETHL 53; Leuven, Gembloux 1980) 167-177; S.E. PORTER, “The Language of the Apocalypse in Recent Discussion”: *NTS* 35 (1989) 582-603; J.E. HURTGEN, *Anti-language in the Apocalypse of John* (New York 1993); A.D. CALLAHAN, “The Language of Apocalypse”: *HTR* 88 (1995) 453-470.

7 In this regard, Vanni clarifies: “Come per quanto riguarda la lingua si trova a disagio nel sistema linguistico in cui opera, e fa delle forzature brusche della lingua stessa, così, ma in maniera molto più approfondita e raffinata, e veramente geniale, sa trasformare il mondo che vede in un altro mondo che esprime non delle fantasie, non le utopie di una mente delirante, ma dei valori in cui l’autore crede e che vede in continuità col mondo fisico nel quale vive. [...] Il simbolismo, meglio la simbolizzazione, direi proprio il passaggio che l’autore fa dal puro fenomeno fisico a questa realtà nuova, questa costante di passaggi indica appunto una mentalità da parte dell’autore il quale sente che il mondo sta passando, sta diventando qualcosa di diverso, di nuovo” (U. VANNI, “Il cosmo nell’Apocalisse. Fenomenologia dell’incrocio di due culture: dal primo mondo al mondo escatologico”, in: G. DE GENNARO [ed.], *Il cosmo nella Bibbia* [Studio Biblico Teologico Aquilano; Napoli 1982] 495-526: 505). The same author will develop this concept also in U. VANNI, *L’Apocalisse. Ermeneutica, esegesi, teologia* (SRivBib 17; Bologna 1988) 17-22.

8 In this regard, Donatien Mollat distinguishes the symbolism of the Apocalypse: “Questo linguaggio ha le sue chiavi e le sue leggi ben precise [...] come: l’accumulazione dei simboli, l’approssimazione, l’enfatismo, la smisuratezza, l’assenza apparente

1. A RICH, SYMBOLIC TYPOLOGY

From the anthropological perspective, that, as has been stated, constitutes the privileged place for the implementation of John's symbolic method, it is possible to identify some categories of symbolism that are uniquely connected to man, or rather, that creatively involve man and exert a direct influence on man⁹.

In this sense, one can speak first of all of a *cosmic* symbolism, for which all the elements of the universe — let us think of the moon, the stars, the sky, the clouds, the sea — are perceived with a new value, which expresses the presence and the powerful and saving action of God¹⁰. An emblematic example is the sun, which indicates the light of Christ, with that new life which covers humanity and creation¹¹.

Separate, but related, is the symbolism of cosmic upheavals, those violent, catastrophic scenes, which often — interpreted literally, in a realistic way — have provoked and still provoke in the readers a sense of bewilderment and fear¹². We hear, in fact, of stars falling from the sky¹³, the moon becoming dim or like blood¹⁴, the sun losing its light¹⁵, the waters that suddenly become bitter and undrinkable¹⁶, and so on. In reality, through these images the author

di coerenza" ("Principi d'interpretazione dell'Apocalisse", in: *L'Apocalisse* [Studi Biblici Pastoralis 2; Brescia 1967] 9-36: 19).

9 This refers to the categories identified by Vanni in his article: "Il simbolismo nell'Apocalisse": *Greg* 61 (1980) 461-506.

10 For this type of symbolism, see the specific study: P. S. MINEAR, "The Cosmology of the Apocalypse", in: W. KLASSEN – G. F. SNYDER (eds.), *Current Issues in New Testament Interpretation* (Fs. O.A. Piper; New York 1962) 23-37.

11 This is why the woman in chap. 12 is dressed in sun (cf. 12,1). This appears explicitly in 1,16 where, in the preparatory vision of the *Son of Man*, it is expressly said that the face of the Risen One "resembled the sun when it shines in all its force" (ἡ ὄψις αὐτοῦ ὡς ὁ ἥλιος φαίνει ἐν τῇ δυνάμει αὐτοῦ). The sun is the creature that dominates the universal picture. It is the most precious, so it lends itself really well to presenting the innovative power of God, in action in the world and in the history of humanity. See also 10,1 in this sense and 19,17; 21,23; 22,5.

12 These kinds of disasters in the Apocalypse are analyzed in: P. VAN DEN EYNDE, "Le Dieu du desordre. Commentaire synthétique d'Apocalypse 6,9-11": *BVC* 74 (1967) 39-51; also see: VANNI, "Il cosmo nell'Apocalisse", 506-508.

13 Cf. 6,13 and 8,12.

14 Cf. 8,12 and 6,12.

15 Cf. 6,12; 8,12; 9,2.

16 Cf. 8,11.

wants to nurture the awareness that the Lord is at work in history, to profoundly transform creation, in view of his project for the world¹⁷.

We also find *theriomorphic* symbolism, characterized by the reference to animals, according to the typical use of apocalyptic literature. Among these animals, the one that has the most important role is certainly the lamb, because of its close identity to Christ; however, throughout the book, we meet several others, such as the dragon¹⁸, beasts¹⁹, grasshoppers²⁰, the horse²¹ and living beings in general²².

With this symbolism, John wants to indicate a band of reality that can be placed below divine transcendence, but at the same time that is impossible to fully understand and control. It is an element, therefore, that exerts a not insignificant grip on men, for the blameless dynamism and the unpredictability that characterizes its action.

Particularly influential on the human sphere is also *arithmetical* symbolism, which is abundantly attested in the Old Testament and even more so in Jewish apocalyptic literature. Both qualitative as well as quantitative, though not actual, values are attributed to some figures: thus, for example, 7 indicates totality or fullness; 3 and a half (half of 7), a limited amount of duration; 12, the tribes of Israel or the apostles; 24, the union of the Old and the New

17 In particular, see the study of: R.J. BAUCKHAM, "The Eschatological Earthquake in the Apocalypse of John": *NT 19* (1977) 224-233, in which the author interprets all the cosmic upheavals described in the Apocalypse as the manifestation of God's action in history which aims to remove every trace of evil and change the surrounding reality. Vanni goes beyond this perception, and adds: "Ci sarà una trasformazione del livello attuale del cosmo, una trasformazione che arriverà a presentarci non solo un cosmo rinnovato, ma un cosmo che avrà una sua logica, un suo sistema, delle coordinate al di là di quello che noi possiamo figurarci adesso" (VANNI, "Il cosmo nell'Apocalisse", 507-508).

18 The center of chaps. 12 and 13.

19 These are also the protagonists of chap. 13, and later chap. 17. In this regard, it should be pointed out that, in addition to the dragon (12,17), there are two beasts that openly act against Christians. The negative activity of the first explicitly emerges in 11,7 and 13,7, while that of the second is found in 13,12-16. In their actions, they are assisted by other creatures from the sphere of evil, such as the three unclean spirits (16,14) and the kings mentioned in 17,16-17 and 19,19. For an excellent treatment of this dynamic, see: J. LÓPEZ, *La figura de la bestia entre historia y profecía. Análisis teológico bíblico de Ap 13,1-18* (TGr.T 39; Rome 1998), as well as in his following essay: *ib.*, "La bestia dell'Apocalisse nell'esegesi moderna", in: E. BOSETTI – COLACRAI (eds.), *Apokalypsis. Percorsi nell'Apocalisse di Giovanni* (Fs. U. Vanni; Assisi 2005) 443-457.

20 Cf. 9,3.7.

21 Specifically found in chap. 6.

22 Cf. 16,3.

Testament; 1000, contact with the sphere of God and with the salvific action of the Lord in history²³.

Often then the author combines different numbers through simple arithmetic operations, creating more complex images to interpret. The most significant case in this sense is certainly represented by the one hundred and forty-four thousand that are marked with the divine seal: 144000 is obtained in fact from the multiplication of the square of 12 by 1000. This number, thus, indicates the totality of the people of God, both of the ancient and of the new covenant, now gathered under the salvific influence of Christ's action²⁴.

Finally, we have *chromatic* symbolism, according to which each color would recall particular characteristics or prerogatives. It is primarily a phenomenon that we found in clothes. John, in fact, shows a great sensitivity for colors²⁵, not so much for aesthetic purposes, but because they are visible, and therefore capable of communicating values and the most intrinsic qualitative aspects. In this line, "white" (λευκός) indicates a strong reference to the resurrection of Christ; "green" (χλωρός), on the other hand, gives rather the idea of transience, with a precise allusion also to death; "black" (μέλας) always suggests a negative aspect, while "red" (πυρρός) implies a link with the demonic sphere.

23 In A.M. FARRER, *The Revelation of St. John the Divine* (Oxford 1964) 217, the author states that, if 12 is "the sacred number of the people of Israel", 1000 is "the number of the history of salvation". Regarding the symbolism of all these numbers, however, it may be useful to consult the picture offered in E. CORSINI, "I numeri nell'Apocalisse", in: BOSETTI – COLACRALI, *Apokalypsis*, 391-415.

24 Regarding this symbolic figure and its meaning, see what is summarized in U. VANNI, "'Questi seguono l'agnello dovunque vada' (Ap 14,4)", *PSV* 2 (1979), 171-192. In particular, the juxtaposition and overlapping of the 12 tribes and 12 apostles is very significant, in view of the development of the divine plan; in this regard, Sebastián Bartina points out that there are two Revelations, that of the Old and that of the New Testament; but only one is God's saving economy (*Apocalypsis de San Juan* [Madrid 1967] 833).

25 Vanni particularly evidences that "un confronto con il resto del Nuovo Testamento mette in risalto l'uso del colore e di certi colori da parte dell'autore dell'Apocalisse: λευκός ("bianco") ricorre nell'Apocalisse 15 volte su un totale di 24; le ricorrenze di πυρρός, πύρινος, ὑακίνθινος, θειώδης ("rosso", "rosso fuoco", "color giacinto" [azzurro zaffiro] e "color zolfo" [giallo intenso]) sono le uniche; κόκκινος ("rosso porpora") ricorre 4 volte nell'Apocalisse e solo 1 volta altrove; χλωρός ("verde") 3 volte nell'Apocalisse e 1 volta altrove" (VANNI, *L'Apocalisse*, 49, footnote 43). For a more detailed study of the use of colors, see: GARCÍA URÉÑA, "Colour Adjectives in the New Testament".

2. A MULTIVALENT, SYMBOLIC STRUCTURE

With regard to these symbolic categories that are intimately connected to the human sphere, it must be emphasized that a different meaning is not always applied to these elements; in fact, in some cases, they can also simply keep their real meaning. When necessary, the context will provide the clues for a correct interpretation. The fact remains, however, that John uses symbolism as soon as he wants to introduce or reveal to us the highest sense of what he is trying to portray. Thus, to be aware of John's method is essential for understanding the deeper significance that is revealed in the text²⁶.

In this sense, it should be noted that most of the time the author does not limit himself to simply replacing the *real* meaning with a new one, but usually inserts it into a more complex symbolic structure to be decoded.

Vanni distinguishes three levels in this regard²⁷. First of all, a *continuous construction* can be encountered, with many elements to be interpreted, one after the other, almost in parallel. This is the case, for example, of the description of the four horsemen, in 6,1-8 where, once the meaning of each symbol is understood by a step-by-step approach, a linear, coherent image is obtained, which allows us to grasp the scope of the whole message²⁸.

Secondly, and in most cases, the structure develops not in a continuous manner, but through sudden and violent interpretative interruptions in the chain of symbols. We can, then, speak of a *symbolic column*, given that we can recognize several successive layers, which proceed separately with an interpretative pause between each layer. This mechanism is clearly evident in the presentation of Christ the Lamb, in 5,6: he is described as "standing" (ἑστηκός), then "as slaughtered" (ὡς ἐσφαγμένον), then "having seven horns" (ἔχων κέρατα ἑπτὰ) and, finally, "having seven eyes" (καὶ ὀφθαλμοὺς ἑπτὰ). Each of these expressions constitutes a successive click, which moves further and further away from the realistic meaning and which does not allow us to

26 Already St. Jerome had realized how important it was to recognize and be familiar with this type of elaboration, so much so that in *Epistola* LIII he states: "Apocalypsis Joannis tot habet sacramenta quot verba. Parum dixi pro merito voluminis. Laus omnis inferior est: in verbis singulis multiplices latent intelligentiae", where *sacrament* is to be understood precisely in the sense of "hidden, mysterious meanings" (HIERONYMUS, *Epistola* LIII, 8 [Ad Paulinum], PL 22, 540-549: 548-549).

27 Cf. VANNI, *L'Apocalisse*, 55-58.

28 Several examples of this type can be identified, such as the scene of reaping and harvest in 14,14-20, and the same dramatic representation of the city of Babylon in chap. 18.

reconstruct an overall visual image. This requires, then, that we stop at each interruption, that the gap between one level and another be first filled, and that it is only later that we proceed to decode the next data. In fact, the material creates an imaginary discontinuity, so that, immediately after analyzing an element, it is necessary to set it aside, in order to be ready to accept and to interpret the next one²⁹.

Finally, however, at times the symbolic construction has the intent only of emphasizing in a hyperbolic way a single detail, in order to amplify its meaning. This is the case of what we call a *amplified structure*. We find an example of this type in 9,16, where, in the context of the description of the sixth trumpet, it is said that “the number of cavalry troops was two hundred million” (ὁ ἀριθμὸς τῶν στρατευμάτων τοῦ ἵππικοῦ διςμυριάδες μυριάδων). In this case, the number has no precise meaning to be drawn, but serves only to arouse in the reader a strong sense of astonishment confronted with the frightening force of evil³⁰.

3. THE TASK OF THE INTERPRETING SUBJECT

A final consideration regards the subject who is called upon to interpret a symbol. This is another essential element for the Apocalypse, as it is assumed that the listener or the reader of the message become personally active in its decoding. Sometimes, it is the author himself who directly involves him, suggesting the correct path for the elaboration and reception of a symbolic image³¹; in fact, such imagery only makes sense to the extent that it is viewed as the privileged communication of an experience or a value that relates to the reality and the concrete life of the reader.

29 This complex structuring can also be found, for example, in the initial vision of 1,9-20, in the presentation of the four living beings in 4,6-8, and in the description of the woman in chap. 12 (cf. 12,1-6).

30 This symbolic typology also includes the very long and meticulous list of precious stones in 21,19-20, whose intent is to bring out all the splendor and glory of the heavenly Jerusalem; in 14,20, the author highlights the astounding power of God in the destruction of evil, saying that from the great vat of his anger came blood “as high as the horse’s bridle (ἄχρῳ τῶν χαλινῶν τῶν ἵππων), for a distance of one thousand six hundred stadiums (ἀπὸ σταδίων χιλίων ἑξακοσίων)”.

31 There are many references to this dynamic: cf. 4,5; 5,6; 11,8; 12,9; 19,8. The author, by making suggestions, indications, or even starting the interpretation himself, stimulates the reader or listener to get personally involved in the process of understanding.

This is what John has tasked himself with from the beginning, when addressing a specific listening group/reader. He invites the reader/group, ideally in a liturgical context, to react to a message presented before him, to then decipher it, and ultimately apply it to his own story³². This same dynamic also applies to anyone else who is in contact with this text at any time. Through the use of all his faculties, the reader is called upon to work out the interpretation of the symbol proposed to him. As such, the reader is brought into harmony with the author, and, resultingly, the creative process, first initiated by the author, is brought to completion.

From this perspective, there is a term that occurs in the text proper that effectively summarizes this interpretative dynamic: it is *μυστήριον*³³. In fact, whenever it appears, it acts as a link between the symbol itself and its elaboration³⁴. This phenomenon stands out distinctly in 1,20 and 17,5.7, where, after the presentation of the symbolic material, its interpretation begins with a statement of the desire to explain “the mystery” of what has just been proposed. This expression then reveals the intrinsic need for symbolic images to be read and decoded.

It is significant to note that this procedure is nothing other than a manifestation of man himself, or, more specifically, the act of concretely fulfilling the sapiential dynamism to which he is called and which we find summarized in the terms *νοῦς* (cf. 13,18 and 17,9) and *οἶς* (cf. 2,7.11.17.29; 3,6.13.22; 13,9). In fact, in this process, the symbols are elaborated and applied to the concrete life, to the history, and to the reality that is being lived: it is the attitude of constant discernment required by the author directed toward man. This is what

32 It is this group with which John enters into dialogue from the beginning in 1,3, and with which he will remain in constant contact throughout the rest of the book. As far as his role as interpreting subject is concerned, see the studies of U. VANNI, *Apocalisse. Una assemblea liturgica interpreta la storia* (LoB 2.15; Brescia ¹¹2000); *Id.*, “L’Assemblea ecclesiale ‘soggetto interpretante’ dell’Apocalisse”: *RdT* 23 (1982) 497-513; *Id.*, *La struttura letteraria dell’Apocalisse* (Aloi 8a; Brescia ²1980) 107-115.

33 The scope of *μυστήριον*, in relation to the sapiential attitude to which man is called in the Apocalypse, is specified in VANNI, *L’Apocalisse*, 65-66.71-72. This is also indicated in: L. MAZZINGHI, “I ‘misteri di Dio’: dal libro della Sapienza all’Apocalisse”, in: BOSETTI – COLACRAI, *Apokalypsis*, 147-181. Here, the author analyzes the categories of *mystery* and *mystery of God* in the Apocalypse, reading them from the perspective of the concept of wisdom; see in particular, pp. 147-151.176-181.

34 Another formula that carries out this same task as *μυστήριον* in the narrative plot of the Apocalypse is *οὐτοῦ εἶπεν*: cf. 14,4.

confronts man, leading him to evaluate every situation, applying the message received in the most appropriate way³⁵.

Also, a further suggestion is offered to us by the fourth and last recurrence of *μυστήριον*, in 10,7, which speaks of the “mystery of God” (*τὸ μυστήριον τοῦ θεοῦ*) that is about to come to fruition, according to the words of the prophets. From the context, it is understood that, this time, the reference is to the project of God, a project that, due to its nature, does not have a realistic language suitable to express it; for this reason, John resorts to symbolic language that, when received and actualized, demands a precise interpretation, a sapiential reading. This reading will allow man to see the way in which God is concretely realizing his plan of salvation in history and in each individual life.

III. A MEDIUM OF REVERSED HIERARCHY

It has been highlighted so far that, on a communicative level, what distinguishes the Apocalypse of John is its preponderance of symbolic language connected to man and his main dynamics. In this sense, the Apocalypse requires that the reader/listener perform a hermeneutical operation similar to that of a prophecy. Like prophecy, the message is mediated by symbolic forms, that is, communication is not immediate. This is what Claudio Doglio clearly affirms when he says that the reader/listener

non deve sforzarsi di trovare risposte predeterminate ad una serie di domande enigmatiche (l'Apocalisse e la Profezia non sono una raccolta di indovinelli!), né cercare di identificare quali personaggi o fatti storici si nascondano dietro ai vari simboli, bensì compiere un esercizio di

35 Regarding the interpretative dynamics that are presupposed in the Apocalypse, see: W. POPKES, “Die Funktion der Send-schreiben in der Johannes-Apokalyypse. Zugleich ein Beitrag zur Spätgeschichte der neutestamentlichen Gleichnisse”: *ZNW* 74 (1983) 90-107, 103. Here, the author affirms: “Vor allem aber vermißt man einen Interpretationsrahmen. Die Apokalypse bietet weithin der Interpretation bedürftiges, nicht bereits interpretiertes Material, zumindest in der Optik des Lesers”; Vanni goes beyond this consideration and specifies: “La riflessione sapienziale che realizza il passaggio dal simbolo all'identificazione non è un momento sporadico, ma costituisce nell'Apocalisse una costante, un atteggiamento ermeneutico permanente richiesto nella comunità ecclesiale che ascolta la lettura” (U. VANNI, “La riflessione sapienziale come atteggiamento ermeneutico costante nell'Apocalisse”: *RivBib* 24 [1976] 185-197).

attualizzazione e adattamento alla propria concreta situazione, senza sostituire il simbolo con una forma concettuale o una identificazione storica. Il simbolo deve rimanere simbolo; comunica solo se rimane simbolo³⁶.

The specificity of apocalyptic communication is that of “holding together” (συμβάλλειν) the symbol and the symbolized reality. When the distance between these two increases, the symbolic discourse can continue and develop through the insertion of new images. These new images overlap and intersect with each other, forming what Vanni calls a “symbolic column”. The resulting symbolic representation is thus profoundly different and enriched by these new levels as compared to the original one³⁷. This is eloquently demonstrated in the story of the vision of the Lamb of Rev 5, already mentioned. This description has a very pronounced symbology. In v. 6, we speak of a “lamb” (ἀρνίον), “as slaughtered” (ὡς ἐσφαγμένον), which refers first of all to the sacrifice of Christ, who takes upon himself the sin of the world, comparable to the ἀμνός (cf. Jn 1,29.36). At the same time, however, it is specified that the lamb is found “standing” (ἑστηκός), a symbolic condition of the resurrection, and that it is filled with the power of God (the “seven horns”) and the fullness of his Spirit (the “seven eyes”). Together, these affirm Christ’s prerogative to carry out his saving mission³⁸.

When John describes a vision, therefore, he simply tries to translate into symbols what God communicates to him. He accumulates things, colors, and symbolic numbers, without worrying about the effect created concretely on a visual level: he does not bother to establish a coherent, imaginable, plastic representation.

Rather, the symbol tries to penetrate the listener or reader of the Apocalypse. John tries to impress upon him, to move him by his own innate strength. Therefore, to listen to or read the Apocalypse, we must not approach it from the perspective of a code of equivalences: this means this. The reduction of

36 C. DOGLIO, “L’Apocalittica del Nuovo Testamento”: *Credere Oggi* 14/2 (1994) 46-65: 61.

37 Cf. VANNI, “Il simbolismo nell’Apocalisse”, 493-498.

38 With regards to the question of continuity in theology from the ἀμνός of the Fourth Gospel to the ἀρνίον of the Apocalypse, see our contribution: “L’Agnello e le sue nozze, come inclusione del Corpus Joanneum”, in: M. CRIMELLA – G.C. PAGAZZI – S. ROMANELLO (eds.), *Extra ironiam nulla salus. Studi in onore di Roberto Vignolo in occasione del suo LXX compleanno* (Biblica 8; Milano 2016) 669-696.

the symbol to a concept is a distortion, depriving it of its evocative value; rather, its aim is to envelop the reader and the listener, introducing it into a mystery, by means of a unique language, that it would be impossible to guess and communicate in any other way.

From this perspective, a very significant datum emerges. While, in fact, in the prophetic texts the element of vision is present at the initial encounter — usually at the moment when God entrusts the prophet with the task of being his spokesman, and then leaving room for the word³⁹ — in the Apocalypse, this “media hierarchy”, as Robyn J. Whitaker says, is turned upside down⁴⁰. For John, the predominant vehicle of meaning is sight⁴¹. John receives revelations not through the word he hears (as in the case of the prophets), but through a vision (cf. 1,2: ὅσα εἶδεν)⁴², and he is asked to write what he sees (cf. 1,11: ὁ βλέπεις γράψον εἰς βιβλίον). This confirms a significant change in the typical transmission dynamic of the revealed message⁴³.

Rebecca Skaggs and Thomas Doyle point out that, out of the 44 places in the text where there are elements of hearing, 36 contain elements of vision that precede the auditory event:

39 This dynamic is quite evident at the beginning of the book of Ezekiel. In this regard, Massimo Grilli suggests three aspects proper to the visions of prophecy: 1) they have a counterpart in real history (cf. Jer 1,11-12, where the almond branch and the boiling pot are daily events); 2) they are oracular visions (כַּהֲ אִמְרֵי יְהוָה), in which the center of everything remains the word; 3) they do not reveal mysteries that transcend man, but messages connected with the current historical moment. The oracles of prophetic visions, then, can be classified according to different categories: exhortation, consolation, threat. Cf. M. GRILLI, *Il Pathos della Parola. I profeti d'Israele* (Milano 2000) 36.

40 Cf. R. J. WHITAKER, *Ekphrasis, Vision, and Persuasion in the book of Revelation* (WUNT 2/410; Tübingen 2015) 7-20; 60-69; 219-222.

41 John J. Collins points out that visual images appear in considerably greater quantities than those present in other apocalypses, which include, in addition to images, other forms of revelation. While in the apocalypses the revealed symbolic visions need a mediator who explains their meaning, those of Revelation possess a revealing autonomy: they express their own meaning. Consistently connected to each other, through both the use of literary devices and narrative itself, they endow the reader with a series of hermeneutical tools that allow him to move easily within this symbolic universe. Cf. J.J. COLLINS (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Apocalypticism* (New York 1998) I, 129-161.

42 It is significant that the verb εἶδεν, having the narrator as subject, structures the narrative rhythm in frequent intervals (it recurs 45 times), introducing a new vision each time and guiding the reader.

43 It is enough to think once again of Ezekiel, who is asked to proclaim the words of God, and not to tell what he has seen; the importance of the word is central and is emphasized in different scenes, such as that in which the prophet eats the scroll and God promises to speak through him (cf. Ez 3).

There are two major patterns of sight and hearing within Revelation: one where sight precedes hearing (sight/hearing) and the other where hearing occurs first (hearing/sight). Of the 44 analogues all but 8 have sight first. [...] What is “heard” clearly adds to or enhances what is “seen” without the meaning of either being changed. In contrast, there are only eight instances of the hearing preceding the vision. In each of these cases, what is seen more than adds to what is heard; what is heard is reinterpreted by what is seen. The classic example of this is the lion/Lamb imagery in Rev 5, where John hears the lion introduced and then turns to see the sacrificed Lamb. Here, in a passage that we initially explored relative to such audio/visual details, what is seen enhances what is heard in order that the readers’ understanding is broadened to include a new perspective⁴⁴.

The fact therefore that the media hierarchy undergoes a reversal does not mean that the auditory element is totally set aside. In fact, the book of the Apocalypse appears to be rich in acoustic elements such as vowels, diphthongs, alliterations, assonances or onomatopoeias that activate a bond of cause-effect, sound-meaning that cannot be grasped until after a careful observation. David Seal, in his study “Sensitivity to Aural Elements of a text: some acoustical elements in Revelation”, argues that the sound of words actually constitutes a medium for transmitting and understanding a message. He further explains that this is true if you recognize that the language is never neutral, both in relation to meaning and to emotional charge. Rather, it constitutes a modality of knowledge and experience. Seal offers, as an emblematic example, the analysis of a passage in which the protagonist is the onomatopoeia:

[...] in Rev 8,13 it is used to depict a striking image of God’s judgment. The motif of judgment is depicted by an eagle, a bird of prey crying out in a threatening voice. The passage creatively employs onomatopoeia to allow the audience to experience this cry of judgment. The bird is described as hovering over the inhabitants of the earth, their end is imminent. This warning is enhanced by the shrill cry of the

44 R. SKAGGS – T. DOYLE, “The Audio/Visual Motif in the Apocalypse of John through the Lens of Rhetorical Analysis”. *JBPR* 3 (2011) 19-38: 21-22.

bird, λέγοντος φωνῆ μεγάλης· οὐαὶ οὐαὶ οὐαὶ (“crying with a loud voice... ‘woe, woe, woe’”) where the thrice repeated οὐαὶ, sounds like the call of the eagle.⁴⁵

IV. THE USE OF EKPHRASIS, DIEGESIS, MIMĒSIS AND DEIXIS

The word that the prophet announces can be defined as a prophecy in action. In fact, he immediately announces, in a performative way, without the need for filters; he “not only says what will happen, but makes what he proclaims exist”⁴⁶. This performativity is expressed through rhetorical expedients that have not only a formal character, but are rooted in the history and life of the prophet. The numerous actions and symbolic meanings are therefore not mere illustrations of specific content, mere literary techniques or artifices conveying a truth, but reality itself. In the face of a prophetic word, therefore, we must not carry out any exercise of stripping the form to arrive at the content.

In this sense, it is the very life of the prophet that is a metaphor or an omen of what God has done or is about to do. One of the most emblematic cases is the marriage of Hosea to a prostitute (cf. Hos 1,2), which ends up rising to revelation and testimony of God’s fidelity to a people always on the verge of betraying. Isaiah also roams the streets of Jerusalem naked (cf. Is 20,2), metaphorically foretelling the fate of Egypt to which Israel blindly is anchored. Likewise, Isaiah has a son who is called *שָׂאֵר יִשׁוּר*, which means “a remnant will return”; this name refers to the fact that the children of Israel cannot remain dispersed and fall into ruin before the eyes of God, because he shows himself faithful by showing mercy towards them. Thus, the prophecy utilizes a filter-less, immediate, and alternative rhetoric.

When we consider the Apocalypse, we find a phenomenon that is unique in many ways. Both the study of the apocalyptic genre in itself and the use of a synchronic approach to the Apocalypse have increasingly highlighted how

45 D. SEAL, “Sensitivity to Aural Elements of a Text: Some Acoustical Elements in Revelation”: *JBPR* 3 (2011) 46. It is interesting how in the Old Testament the eagle is often a reference to divine judgment: see, in a particular way, Dt 28,49; Ger 4,13 ed Ez 17,3.

46 P. BOVATI – P. BASTA, “*Ci ha parlato per mezzo dei profeti*”. *Ermeneutica biblica* (Lectio 4; Roma 2012) 132.

John uses a real rhetorical strategy. This supposition is entirely justified given the contemporary presence of famous specialized schools in Palestine, Asia Minor and Syria. The author's aim was probably to create an impact on the recipients, according to a model found in 1,3 (μακάριος ὁ ἀναγινώσκων καὶ οἱ ἀκούοντες), which presupposes “the one who reads” and “those who listen”. On the basis of the singular reader and plural listeners, we can then deduce that the book of the Apocalypse was to be read as a rhetorical speech, before an assembly⁴⁷.

One of the rhetorical techniques that John uses the most is *ekphrasis*, describing God vividly through the characteristic features of ἐνάργεια (“vividness”), σαφήνεια (“clarity”) and λῆξις (“appropriate style”), and using verisimilitude and a language that amplifies the element of vision⁴⁸. This has the effect of allowing the reader to experience what he physically does not see, through the involvement of emotions and the transport of the senses. This presupposes that the narrator had at his disposal an assortment enriched by Jewish theophanic imagery and mythical Greek-Roman texts⁴⁹.

According to Whitaker, the descriptions of the Apocalypse — emblematic are the cases of 4,1-11 and 5,1-14 — had the function of generating in its listeners/readers, a mental representation of Christian divinity, one that intended to counter the physical images of the emperor and other gods who were abundantly found in the cities of the Empire. To achieve his aim, the author employs literary strategies commonly used in the ancient world, among which *ekphrasis* is of special importance. As Ruth Webb well states, *ekphrasis* does not simply concern the artistic production itself, but constitutes a style. This rhetorical device produces a triple effect on the listeners/readers. These are: first, the curiosity effect, which strongly attracts the recipient's attention;

47 These issues must always be considered within the liturgical framework, which are the ideal context in which to read the whole development of the Apocalypse, as already demonstrated at the time by Vanni in his study “Liturgical Dialogue as a Literary Form in the Book of Revelation”: *NTS* 37 (1991) 348-372. Particularly significant as well is: A. R. NUSCA, “Liturgia e Apocalisse”, in: BOSETTI – COLACRAI, *Apokalypsis*, 459-477 as well as the recent dissertation of C. MANUNZA, *L'Apocalisse come "actio liturgica" cristiana. Studio esegetico* (AnBib 199; Roma 2012). In these, the authors highlight the liturgical setting of the whole book.

48 For an in-depth examination of the typical traits of *ekphrasis*, see the aforementioned study by WHITAKER, *Ekphrasis*, 45-53.

49 Cf. *Ibidem*, 60-69. A similarity between the Greek-Roman literature and Revelation can be found in the structure surrounding the *ekphrasis*, according to which an anonymous narrator or the author himself can play the role of guide or instructor (as in the case of the *angelus interpres* of 1, 1; 17,7-18; 22,1-6).

secondly, the paradoxical representation of a “visible transcendence”; and thirdly, the contribution to the organization and interpretation of the text as a whole⁵⁰.

This triple effect is clearly visible at the beginning of the fourth chapter, in 4,2b-3, where one reads:

^{2b}ἰδοῦ θρόνος ἔκειτο ἐν τῷ οὐρανῷ, ^cκαὶ ἐπὶ τὸν θρόνον καθήμενος,
^{3a}καὶ ὁ καθήμενος ὅμοιος ὄρασει λίθῳ ἰάσπιδι καὶ σαρδίῳ, ^bκαὶ ἴρις
κυκλόθεν τοῦ θρόνου ὅμοιος ὄρασει σμαραγδίνῳ.

In narratology, when one studies the pragmatics of a text, that is to say, the effects that the text produces on the reader, one speaks of “narrative tension”. This is what Raphaël Baroni alludes to, when he points out that narration has a “thymic function”, that it uses certain techniques which are capable of arousing emotional states such as “suspense”, “curiosity” and “surprise”. “Curiosity” is generated by a delayed exposure of information; “suspense” comes from the uncertainty created by the chronological succession of events; “surprise” is “une émotion éphémère, définit essentiellement par le moment de son surgissement et non par sa durée; par conséquent, cette émotion n’est pas en mesure de configurer une intrigue, mais plutôt de connoter ses ‘moments forts’”⁵¹. If faced with “suspense”, then the reader wonders: “what will happen?”, and predictions will be made. In the case of curiosity, the reader asks “what happens?”, or “what happened?”, and the reader will seek to diagnose the event.

In our case, it seems that the author constructs the beginning of the fourth chapter in such a way that the description itself presents a “narrative tension” that seduces the reader and arouses his curiosity. First of all, the description of the vision begins with ἰδοῦ (“behold”, 4,2b), which always has the function of drawing attention to the content that follows⁵². In Apocalypse, this particle is used to introduce the content of visions⁵³; it is significant then

50 Cf. R. WEBB, *Ekphrasis, Imagination and Persuasion in Ancient Rhetorical Theory and Practice* (London – New York 2009).

51 Cf. R. BARONI, *La tension narrative. Suspense, curiosité et surprise* (Poétique; Paris – Seuil 2007).

52 Cf. W. ARNDT – W. BAUER – F. W. DANKE, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (London – Chicago 1957) 468.

53 Cf. D. E. AUNE, *Revelation 1-5* (WBC 52A; Waco, TX 1997) 280. The author examines the following examples: 4,1; 6,2.5.8; 14,1.14; 7,1.9; 12,3; 15,1; 18,1; 19,11. Then he makes a distinction among the various expressions in which the particle appears, showing, however, how in all cases it precedes the content of a vision.

how it is used in the LXX to introduce the visions in Ez 1,4 and Zac 1,8, as a translation of **וַיֵּרָא**, as well as the visions in Dan 7,2.5, as a translation of **וַיֵּרָא**.

The author then organizes the description of the announced vision through a short sequence of incomplete features, which generates curiosity and raises questions such as: “who is it?” and “how?”. The sequence could be paraphrased as follows: the person sees

1. a throne in the sky (4,2b);
2. then a being seated on the throne (4,2c);
3. then the colors of this being, with an aura all around (4,3).

A refinement of this structure is noted by the fact that the author could very well have given all the information immediately, in a single sentence, of this type: “I saw a colored being seated on a throne and surrounded by an aura that was also colored”. However, to create the effect of progressive unveiling, the author uses two simple, but very effective strategies. First, he describes the elements of the vision in a precise order: from the bottom (4,2b) to the top (4,2c-3a) and then around (4,3b), i.e. from the throne, to the one who is sitting upon it, and finally to the aura that surrounds him. Hence, he offers the information reluctantly and partially; in fact, he presents one element at a time, and then repeats it immediately, making it determinate with an anaphoric article according to this scheme:

1. ἰδοὺ θρόνος...
2. ἐπὶ τὸν θρόνον
3. καθήμενος,
4. καὶ ὁ καθήμενος...

As Philippe Hamon clearly points out, this technique also allows us to organize the narration as an act of memory⁵⁴. In other words, a description can confirm, specify and reveal various significant aspects of a character that will assist with the development of the story in the future; at the same time, it can also introduce traces that help to understand what will come next.

54 Cf. P. HAMON, “What is a Description?”, in: T. TODOROV (ed.), *French Literary Theory Today* (Cambridge 1982) 147-178: 168.

Now, we realize that this principle is also reflected in 4,2b-3 in three specific ways. First of all, it is noted that the sphere of the celestial throne will reappear several times in the course of the book, more precisely in 4,6.17; 7,9-17; 11,15-19; 14,1-5; 15,2-8 and 19,1-8. These scenes, evenly distributed in the text, generate cohesion and unity. Secondly, we will find the expression *ὁ καθήμενος* twelve times, always indicating God⁵⁵. We note that in 4,3a, *ὁ καθήμενος* is presented as a substantivized participle introduced by an “anaphoric article”, which performs the precise function of a progressive yet reticent presentation of God, as just described above. In fact, beginning from 4,9, *ὁ καθήμενος* is used consistently to refer to God, thus becoming an “*antonomasia*”⁵⁶, replacing the proper name of God with a generic term, “the one who is seated”. Third, the gemstones that appear in 4,3 — *ἴασπις* (“jasper”), *σάρδιον* (“carnelian”) and *σμάραγδος* (*σμαράγδινος*, “emerald”) — will be taken up again in 21,18.19-20. The *ἴασπις* is the stone of which the walls of Jerusalem that descend from heaven are built (cf. 21,18). Then, this same *ἴασπις*, with *σάρδιον* and *σμάραγδος*, together with nine other stones, for a total of twelve, will form the foundations of the city (cf. 21,19-20). Therefore, the verbal connection between the constituent materials of Jerusalem that descends from heaven with the same stones with which God is identified in 4,3 represents another way in which the divine character of the city can be understood by listeners/readers.

It should be emphasized that the *ekphrasis* technique is for an end, but it is not an end in itself. Its purpose is to focus the reader to re-imagine reality, to reorient his gaze on God, the only true object of his loyalty. Therefore, *ekphrasis* also has a pedagogical value, given it teaches readers how to see reality. It points to what the readers should notice and where to focus their gaze, since not all visions are positive and not all must be given credit. Whitaker highlights how complex John’s attitude towards sight is, especially in relation to this latter aspect. For this reason, on the one hand, John encourages us to accept the message of the Apocalypse as “an incredibly visual text, full

55 Cf. 4,2.9.10; 5,1.7.13; 6,16; 7,10.15; 19,4; 20,11; 21,15. The designation of God as *ὁ καθήμενος* is certainly unusual, so much so that in the New Testament it appears only in the book of the Apocalypse, while in the LXX, it occurs rarely, precisely in Ps 79,2; 98,1; Sir 1,8; Is 37,16; Bar 3,3 and Dan 3,54. For this reason, it can be understood, for all intents and purposes, as a new name for God that is specific to the Apocalypse, as introduced in 4,2b-3a.

56 Regarding the phenomenon of “*antonomasia*” as a circumlocution or paraphrase, as well as for all other rhetorical devices, see the excellent study by B. MORTARA GARAVELLI, *Manuale di Retorica* (Milano 1997).

of eyes, seeing and being seen”⁵⁷, while, on the other hand, he teaches us to be on our guard against deceptive visions — like those of beasts — which the devil uses to distract someone from true worship and authentic following.

Another rhetorical device typical of the Apocalypse is reflected in the change of register by John, who suddenly suspends the narration (*diegesis*), to give space to dramatization (*mimesis*), through the use of direct speech.

As we can see in classical tragedy, words, gestures and movements create greater drama, producing a vision of life more easily accessible to the reader⁵⁸. Similarly, John uses the same strategy, to give his work the liveliness of a drama, while maintaining a certain climax. In other words, John seems to give life to what he says with his words, using some dramatic characteristics, such as *the messenger speech*⁵⁹, to announce and narrate the destruction of Babylon, and the entrance of the choir to make the reader participate of the celestial liturgy that is in progress⁶⁰. The focus thus shifts from the narrator, who appears to be hidden in the narrative, to voices that John himself listens to, and then to characters who intervene, coming to the fore and becoming true actors and true protagonists.

57 *Ibidem*, 220.

58 For a more in-depth view of the use of this dramatic technique, first refer to B. GOWARD, *Telling Tragedy. Narrative Techniques in Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides* (London 1999) 26, and then to L. GARCÍA UREÑA, “El diálogo dramático en el Apocalipsis. De Ezequiel, el trágico, a Juan, el vidente de Patmos”: *Greg* 92/1 (2011) 23-56: 26-28; for a complete and detailed description of this phenomenon, please refer to the subsequent study by this last author: *El Apocalipsis. Pautas literarias de lectura* (Textos y estudios “Cardenal Cisneros” de la Biblia Políglota Matritense 79, Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas; Madrid 2013), recently published in English as *Narrative and Drama in the Book of Revelation. A Literary Approach* (SNTS 175; Cambridge 2019).

59 Inherited from the Homeric epic, it consists of the monologue of an actor, most of the time anonymous, who, as a messenger, reports events that have occurred outside the scene. He presents himself as an eyewitness to the events that have taken place, thus receiving a dynamic and realistic character, not sparing his personal point of view. In Rev 18, the speech of the messenger is pronounced by three distinct entities that maintain their anonymity: an angel from heaven (ἄγγελον καταβαίνοντα ἐκ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ: 18,1-3), an indistinct entry (ἄλλην φωνὴν ἐκ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ: 18,4-20) and a mighty angel (ἄγγελος ἰσχυρός: 18,21-24).

60 Constituted by a group of people, the choir can intervene directly in the narration or, acting as the external narrator of the story, offer the reader its own reflections, of moral values or its own feelings, such as joy, pain, or hope. In the book of the Apocalypse the four living beings, the twenty-four elders and the angels also perform this function, who, placed at the center of the scene, proclaim their praise to God in the form of direct discourse and singing. Their appearance in the narration takes place above all in moments of high dramatic tension and helps to calm the atmosphere, restoring a climate of hope and optimism. It is interesting how, according to the opinions of various scholars, the choirs present in Apocalypse would be exactly seven (cfr. GARCÍA UREÑA, “El diálogo dramático”, 40).

An emblematic example offered in this sense is found again in 4,1-11, the episode of the vision of the throne of God, which immediately follows the section of letters to the seven churches (chap. 2 and 3). The narrative of the vision begins with the aorist of the verb ἀκούω in the first person singular (ἤκουσα, “I heard”: 4,1), followed by another aorist in the first person (ἐγενόμην, “I became”), in 4,2. But then he passes to the third person, at first singular and then plural. This affords John the possibility to narrate the facts of which he is a witness, but contemplating them from the outside. Progressively, the direct discourse is established, and the “four living beings” and then “the twenty-four elders” become architects, protagonists of the scene, a sign that the narrator has disappeared and that the *diegesis* has given way to the *mimesis*.

It should be noted that communication does not only happen through words, but also through the gestures, movements and actions of the characters that complete what the language expresses thanks to their *deictic* charge. The *deixis* is the demonstrative-revealing charge expressed by some lexemes (personal and demonstrative pronouns, and adverbs such as “here”, “there”, “now”, “then”) that reveal the identity of the speaker and his recipient, or attract the readers’ attention to certain elements of the story. The typical *incipit* of John’s visions — ἐγὼ Ἰωάννης, ὁ ἀδελφὸς ὑμῶν (1,9) — shows this phenomenon: the personal pronouns ἐγὼ and ὑμῶν allow the reader to clearly identify John, as well as the recipient to whom he addresses.

V. CONCLUSION

Thanks to both his rhetorical as well as his outstanding stylistic ability, the reality that John describes turns out not to be a false world, a fictitious world, but the symbolic description of the historical reality in which John’s contemporaries and readers find themselves⁶¹. These artifices used in Apocalypse refute the alleged a-historicity of John’s story which has been sustained

61 It is significant that within the common heritage of the Apocalypse and apocalyptic literature there appears to be emphasis on visions in the sky, with the vision of the hall of the divine throne, the vision of the angelic mediators of revelation and the symbolic visions of political powers, of the future judgment and of the new creation. Cf. COLLINS, *The Encyclopedia*, 129-161.

by many and for a long time⁶². Consider for a moment how John's Apocalypse openly confronts and is in open conflict with the imperial power and the logic of its time:

this supra-historical perspective of apocalyptic literature generally appears to have been mitigated in the Revelation of John through the incorporation of prophetic concerns that have a distinctly historical orientation. The Revelation of John is one of the few apocalypses for which the author, audience, and setting are generally known because they are not concealed in the work itself, though that setting is not reflected in the hardcore, genre-bound apocalyptic sections of the work⁶³.

The historical dimension of this book is also confirmed by the attempt to transcend the original context of Rome, of Jerusalem and of the churches of Asia, to communicate, through eschatological hyperbole, a universal truth valid for all time, thus showing a constant topicality. In fact, every corner of the world is the theater of that struggle between the church and the beast, between the church and the empire, whose stake is the advent of the kingdom of God. But this does not mean that the return of Christ is a question of mythical symbolism, a timeless event, but rather it is an event which John foresees as the culmination of history, but which also is intended to inform and empower Christians followers of the Lamb in their current situation⁶⁴. The apocalyptic writer, through constructions that present themselves as *vaticinia ex eventu*⁶⁵, predicts a universal salvation of the just, which will happen in an

62 Since the end of the 16th century, an interpretative reading explicitly called "eschatological" has developed, according to which the Apocalypse does not have a historical background, but only constitutes a prophecy of the end of the world and the consequent inauguration of the "new Jerusalem". Among modern authors that argue in this vein, Ernst Lohmeyer (*Die Offenbarung des Johannes* [Tübingen 1926]), for whom all the symbolic figures of the Apocalypse are atemporal and not referable to any specific age, but rather closer to mythical and astral images, is particularly worth mentioning. Other authors that argue similarly, albeit with different nuances, are Joseph Bonsirven (*L'Apocalypse de Saint Jean* [Paris 1951]), Alfred Wikenhauser (*Die Offenbarung des Johannes* [RNT 9; Regensburg 1959]), Eduard Lohse (*Die Offenbarung des Johannes* [NTD 11; Göttingen 31988]) and Angelo Lancellotti (*Apocalisse* [Nuovissima Versione della Bibbia 46; Roma 1970]).

63 AUNE, *Revelation 1-5*, 90-91.

64 Cf. L. L. GRABBE – R. D. HAAK, *Knowing the End from the Beginning. The Prophetic, the Apocalyptic and their Relationships* (JSP supplement series/46; London 2003) 11.

65 Cf. J. A. SOGGIN, "Profezia ed Apocalittica nel giudaismo post-esilico": *RivBib* XXX (1982) 166.

eschatological time: “the passage from the state of perdition to that of definitive salvation is seen as a decree that emanates from the throne of God”⁶⁶.

Even the Apocalyptic, like the prophecy, is closely connected with the past history of humanity and the cosmos, but it manifests itself with more emphasis by a spasmodic expectation of a sudden and total change, necessarily reached through a cosmic catastrophe⁶⁷. In some historical moments of great tension and political-social disorder, the word of the prophet has in fact demonstrated his inability to keep alive and sustain hope, especially when the prophet in the first place — but also the people of Israel — had the feeling that everything around him ended up contradicting the plan of God or that evil prevailed undisturbed, triumphing definitively.

This dynamic brought out the need for a further and more effective message of reassurance that, in order to be expressed, needed a new medium, i.e. of *seeing*, and a recourse to a different type of communication, in many ways more incisive and drastic. It required new linguistic codes, a new literary genre: the *apocalyptic genre*. The author of the Apocalypse places himself fully in this direction, and does so in a totally creative, original way. He understands that man needs to see God’s plan at work, the end of time, the very day of the Lord; and so, moved by the Spirit, he lifts the veil (ἀποκάλυψις: 1,1). John is thus taken out of this world, to see it from a different point of view: “his word becomes a gaze and the prophecy becomes Apocalyptic”⁶⁸.

66 P. SACCHI, *L'Apocalittica giudaica e la sua storia* (Biblioteca di cultura religiosa 55; Brescia 1990) 47.

67 Cf. Dan 7,11; 2Bar 70,8 and 4Esd 5,4-6.

68 N. MARCONI, *Le mille immagini dell'Apocalisse. Un'introduzione al linguaggio audiovisivo dell'apocalisse* (Milano 2002) 12.

