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# Apocalyptic Beauty

Brian T. Scalise  
*Liberty University*, [btscalise@liberty.edu](mailto:btscalise@liberty.edu)

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# Apocalyptic Beauty

## **Abstract**

A potent and formative text for a theological aesthetics faithful to the God revealed in the Scriptures is the Apocalypse of John (Revelation). An apocalyptic viewpoint is beautiful inasmuch as it observes the whole from within the part of time/space and inasmuch as the apocalyptic vision provides considerable unity of diverse theological themes with various expansions and enhancements, hence mimicking the very function of theological beauty to communicate the whole (God) in the part (here, in space-time). This essay traces major themes throughout Scripture, utilizing inter-textual interpretation en route, and seeks to clarify the Book of Revelation's role in recapitulation, consummation, and consolation (i.e. beauty). Commenting on how the Apocalypse meets the criteria for being theologically beautiful, this essay then seeks to show how this role of beauty--and in particular, consolation--attracted the early Christian devotees visiting/dwelling-in the catacombs (A.D. 150-500) to make the Apocalypse of John one of the major contributors to their artwork.

## **Keywords**

Aesthetics, beauty, the whole in the part, apocalyptic themes, revelation, catacombs, theological beauty

## **Cover Page Footnote**

MDiv. 2009. Currently pursuing PhD. in Theology and Apologetics

## INTRODUCTION

The viewpoint of the Apocalypse (Book of Revelation) during the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> century represents a theology which envisages the recapitulation of all creation with Christ as the center. Contrary to the claim that such a view relishes carnage or fails to see the more important elements of faith and theology, the Apocalypse (i.e. The Book of Revelation) is fertile ground for describing a beauty<sup>1</sup> proper to theological aesthetics.<sup>2</sup> Stephen Finamore comments, “. . . Revelation has a central role in the life of the church” influencing the “church’s hymnody” more than any other book (except Psalms), “inspiring hymn writers and poets” and all this due to “Revelation[’s] creative imagination and . . . symbols [which] lie at the heart of the church’s experience of the God it encounters in worship.”<sup>3</sup> As suggested by this quote, the symbols, icons, images, imagination, and inspiring, each of these, point to the reality and function of beauty. This essay seeks to explain why the Apocalypse is beautiful and to explain the function of the Apocalypse in the artwork of the saints who lived in the catacombs in the early centuries of the church. The claim is that the Apocalypse can indeed expound upon what theological beauty is and, moreover, it emphasizes participation in that beauty. This claim can be expanded: the saints of the catacombs participated in the narrative of the Apocalypse, through their own persecution, and its beauty as evidenced by the artwork they produced.<sup>4</sup>

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1. This essay intends to focus on the aspect of beauty of *the whole in/communicated through the part*. Much more can be included in this definition: i.e. The manner or way of God’s revealing (Barth), the form of God (Balthasar), distance (Hart), or when infinite distance is transcended (Bruno). Be this as it may, only *the whole in the part* is the emphasis here for the sake of clarity. More explanation is to follow.

2. A theological aesthetic is an aesthetic which is theologically informed first (Balthasar) or which is an aesthetic which is biblically (Barth) informed first. In this way, the worldly or the kataphatic approach to beauty is not the founding of what beauty is but only a analogy, and this analogizing must be done carefully.

3. Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Two reasons—listed in what follows—commending the Apocalypse as rich soil for informing theological aesthetics provided the impetus for this investigation. The first reason is that singing (music) is associated with creating which J.R.R. Tolkien’s cosmogony narrated and which association provided grounds for David Hart to look to Bach’s music for an analogy of God’s creative work. It is severely noteworthy that such exult, singing, and mirth is to mimic God which is demonstrable in the aesthetically packed verse of Zephaniah 3:17 (MT): God is said to give a ringing cry (*rinnāh*), to rejoice (*gīl*) in mirth (pleasure, gaiety, joy, gladness: *simchah*) and again to exult (*śś*) over and for His people. So the continuity of worship in song/poetry found in the Apocalypse is aligned smoothly with what Yahweh does Himself and the creaturely response as mimic (whether saints in the Psalms/Apocalypse or the stars of the morning in Job 38 = angels). Second, there is a creation-recreation theme found in Scripture which finds its apex in the Apocalypse: briefly, creation is narrated in Genesis in sets of three (Gen 1-2); then comes the (re)creation of Israel marked with a song of deliverance from oppression at the Red Sea (Exod. 1-28); next is the uniting of the creation of all things with the creation of Israel (Ps. 95) followed closely in the Psalter with 106:12 hymning the deliverance (and creating of Israel) again which first was heard at the Red Sea; in the Prophets is found the cryptic set of three again in poetry/song with the reference to God’s rulership (Isa. 6:3) and the new exodus (Isa. 40 ff.); Likewise, the prophets mention the new creation (Isa. 65), (re)new

## THEOLOGICAL BEAUTY

A defining characteristic of beauty is its ability to communicate something more full than what it is in mere appearance. Why is the sunset mesmerizing? What is witnessed on a mountaintop? Some art captures more than just the image it contains. Why? On the mountaintop, what is viewed is more—intuitively this is known—than merely the sum of what is seen. Theological beauty is no different. Indeed, how could it be when God is the foundation of beauty? God calls humans into relationship with Him. God is “all in all” (Eph. 1:23) and the saints are “filled with all the fullness of God” (Eph. 3:19). Saints are therefore more than the sum of their appearance: the Spirit is in them and they are more than human in this sense. In the worship done by the saints, this God of “all in all” arrives in some small, little building. Again, the fullness of that worship service is more than the mere sum of what is “materially” or “visibly” occurring. Is this not what art does as well? Surely, art is often called beautiful. Art beckons the viewer not just to be a spectator but also to be pulled into its vision. Art is always more than the ink, paint, and paper. Something more is contained or communicated in art beyond its material elements. The same can be said of the Apocalypse and other works of art. Its importance is not found in the ink and paper or paint and canvas by which it is created. The link between God’s special revelation, the Apocalypse, and other art is the beauty contained or expressed in each. The Apocalypse is a work of literary art, pulling together a majority of biblical themes into one place. What the Apocalypse is points to its beauty. That it is art means that it is beautiful. What is contained in the Apocalypse likewise justifies its beauty. It contains a fullness of biblical themes pulled from the rest of Scripture. In this way, one part of Scripture (Apocalypse)

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covenant (Jer. 31, 33), the new temple (Ezek. 40), and the renewed choosing of Zion as the place of the King (Zech. 1:14 ff.; 9); Luke records the reoccurrence of the theological theme of the new exodus being a new creation (new people) as found in the transfiguration event (Lk. 9:31, Gr. ἐξοδον, *exodon*); then comes the Pauline “new creation” versus the “old creation” and the “new man” versus the “old man”; finally, in the Apocalypse, the same cryptic set of three appears (4:8) but here directly related to God as the Creator (4:11) and to God fashioning (recreating) a people for Himself (5:9-10) and all this in poetry and hymn: starkly to the point here, Moses’ song is also found and explicitly titled as such with the expansion that it is also the “song of the Lamb” in Apocalypse 15:1ff emphasizing God’s right to rule just as in the first Exodus. (The great hymnic nature of Hebrew Scripture with its melodious accentuation (frequently 3:2:3) has also bore influence on this study). It was evident that the recreating theme is associated with deliverance and persecution, and more, that it is also connected intimately with worship, specifically in worship in poetry and song—thus appealing to the aesthetic faculty of man. When “aesthetically” is used here, it specifically means those modes of existing/expression characterized by joy, gladness, pleasure, and delight; this definition follows closely Barth (Church Dogmatics, Vol I/II pgs. 652-54); David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), under “282-285”; J.R.R. Tolkien, “Ainulindale,” in *The Silmarillion*, 2nd ed. (New York: Del Rey, 1999), 3-12; Brown, Francis, Samuel Driver, Augustus Briggs, *Enhanced Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, org published 1906).

communicates the rest of scriptural themes in their fullness. And so this literary art projects a vision of the world from the various parts of biblical revelation. And this vision was reproduced in the catacombs because of the similarity between the persecution those saints underwent and the persecution described in the Apocalypse.

*Beauty is the Whole Given in the Part*

Beauty or the beautiful in theological-aesthetics is well known to be that event by which the whole is communicated in a part. Although it should also be noted that beauty can be nuanced one way or another, the whole communicated through the part (or fragment) is fundamental to most definitions of theological-aesthetic beauty. Bruno Forte's introduction to a theological aesthetics begins by saying that "Beauty is an event; beauty happens when the whole offers itself in the fragment, and when this self-giving transcends infinite distance."<sup>5</sup> Similarly but more lengthy, David Hart says that "Beauty seems to promise a reconciliation beyond the contradictions of the moment, one that perhaps places time's tragedies within a broader perspective of harmony and meaning, a balance between light and darkness; beauty appears to absolve being of its violences."<sup>6</sup> This appears to be just the function—one function, at least—of the Apocalypse: the consolation and ultimate "righting" of all things and in this the dissolution of violence.

The narrative picture which the Apocalypse projects is beautiful inasmuch as it observes<sup>7</sup> the whole from within the part of time *and* inasmuch as the apocalyptic vision provides considerable unity of diverse theological themes. The theological beauty of the Apocalypse is identified by the great God who is communicated through a book, ink, and pen. The God of "all in all" (whole) is communicated in a book (part). Following the italicized "*and*" above, there is a second type of a whole communicated in a part. A vast majority of the theological themes found in Scripture (whole) is communicated in one book, the Apocalypse (part). John not only creates a compendium of these themes but also expands on them and enhances them. The various expansions and enhancements are necessary because God is infinite and, as such, the human vision of God must always lead onward towards grasping a fuller "knowing" Him.<sup>8</sup> The apocalyptic viewpoint directly addresses the persecution of saints since those viewing their predicament through this apocalyptic

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5. Bruno Forte, *The Portal of Beauty: Towards a Theology of Aesthetics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), vii. God is always, in some sense, infinitely distant from humans because He is holy (that is, utterly different: not belonging to the creaturely realm) but this is precisely the wonder of communion with God because He can condescend and traverse the distance (what Bruno says is "transcending" that distance) to meet humans, to meet His creation.

6. David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite*, 16.

7. "Observes" was chosen over "views" in order to distance from a merely spectator conception of grasping beauty. Instead, "observes" is meant to emphasize the participatory nature of beauty, for beauty beacons humans to desire (Hart), to be morally persuaded (Balthasar), and to make a decision (and hopefully distinction) about the ontological (Rom 1:20) from the ontic "here-ness" (Rom. 1:20, Acts 17:28).

8. David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth*.

prism are consoled because justice is executed and because their hope of life is envisaged and so expressed in worship (Apoc. 12:11; 14:14-15:5). On the one hand, the objective content of theology is maintained, collected, and to some degree systematized (in some ways conflated, enhanced: a creative compendium). And, on the other hand, the needs of the faith community are addressed (and who can escape this-worldly death?): consolation, escape, and hope. If this essay is right, the same type of conflation and elaboration demonstrated in the Book of the Apocalypse will likewise be found in the artwork of the catacombs. The clause in the above thesis introduced by the italicized “*and*” is what will be focused upon in this essay. This is so because all reflection on God—from a devoted heart—accomplishes the first part of the clause: namely, observes the whole from within a puncticular moment and place in the spatio-temporal cosmos.<sup>9</sup> Christians can and do commune with God, the infinite and eternal One: they can have *šālôm*, being made complete and whole (Heb. verb: *šālēm*) as they commune with the whole (God of “all in all”). The contention that the early communities of the catacombs were influenced and mimicked—in some ways—the composition of the Apocalypse/Revelation will be evidenced in their artwork. Moreover, the importance of the *unique* Judaeo-Christian, apocalyptic vision (that is, Revelation *contra* other extra-biblical works) protects from any tendency to look beyond Yeshua because the final book of the Christian Scriptures is exactly “ἡ Ἀποκάλυψις Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ” (*Apokalypsis Iēsou Chistou*; Rev. 1:1). What is found is not a going beyond or a desire to go beyond the incarnation of Christ but rather a re-centering upon the incarnation of Christ; He is not devoid of a body albeit glorified. Why is this important in terms of beauty? Because Christ is the unique person in whom the “whole fullness of the Godhead [dwells] bodily” (Col 2:9). As such, of all creation, Christ is the locus for beauty in its highest. Hans Urs von Balthasar saw this error of trying to go beyond Christ saying that it is “the impulsive search for an ‘immediate’ vision of God that would no longer be mediated by the Son of Man ... [which] is the conscious or subconscious basis for many eschatological speculations.”<sup>10</sup> For Balthasar, “The Incarnation *is* the eschaton and, as such, is unsurpassable.”<sup>11</sup> This resonates with many commentators who have noted that the resurrection is the inauguration of the end

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9. It must be noted here that, although God may be discussed as the whole, He is infinite and so goes beyond all conceptions of wholeness. It is only because of human weakness that speaking apophatically is needed: He is neither conveyed in a whole nor a totality but (cataphatically now) He is beyond them. Those which seek to limit God’s wholeness in terms of human conceptions of wholeness fail to understand the analogous nature of creation with all its imperfections towards conveying infinity. Humanly and what is important for the human experience is that God’s provides and promises *shalom*, that is, completeness or wholeness and that believers will receive this *shalom*. It might be wondered if the healing of humanity and the life in *shalom* is not a movement perpetually (Heb: *Tāmîd*) with and unto God. After all, if humanity ever achieved unto a complete likeness of God, would not then satan’s words in the garden of Eden be true (“you will be like God”)?

10. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, vol. 1. *Seeing the Form* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press & Crossroad Publications, 1982), 302.

11. *Ibid.*

times and that the resurrection of Christ is the end-times reality situated in the (center?) midst of history.<sup>12</sup>

This apocalyptic perspective is but one of many types of genre in Scripture. But it is uniquely fruitful because it sums up so much theology and because, in this summing up, it organizes it so as to accentuate the harmony available at the moment, though pointing finally to the true harmony for which the saints are destined. It may be inferred, then, that the apocalyptic viewpoint is indeed only a part of special revelation (the Scriptures), yet unique because of how the Apocalypse collects so much of the special revelatory parts. And so the apocalyptic vision is specially equipped to be able to communicate the whole.<sup>13</sup> So again, that an apocalyptic perspective “extends out” to grasp on to eschatological peace located specifically in the Lord Jesus commends the apocalyptic perspective as beautiful because consolation is one of beauty’s primary functions.<sup>14</sup> Judaeo-Christianity’s apocalyptic perspective grasps the events of the end-times concomitant with the future of peace and even a re-viewing of creation (recapitulation).

Before moving on, Forte’s last two clauses deserve comment: he says, “beauty happens...when this self-giving [the whole in a fragment] transcends infinite distance.” This means that the whole (God) actually arrives in history; it arrives at that fragment, that moment in history. One mode which accomplishes this particularly well is the apocalyptic perspective held in the faith community for it has both the consoling ability and acts to gather many points of special revelation into one book. So the traveling of the infinite distance (by God) to self-give is beauty. But beauty is not only this as Hart clarifies: “Thus the infinite toward which beauty leads reflection, and which lays open the space in which every instance of beauty shines forth, is still itself beauty.”<sup>15</sup> The first instance of beauty in Hart’s quote above is that beauty formerly described: namely, the communication of the whole in a part or the distance traversed to impart the whole in the part. The last clause’s beauty, “is still itself beauty,” is a reference to the infinite God for it is precisely the infinite nature of God which “lays open space” for beauty. And when beauty has happened again and again, it will still happen again for God is always able—being infinite—to provide a place for yet another occurrence, yet more space, more distance for distinction. Why does Hart have two nuances for beauty? Consulting Balthasar further clarifies: the self-giving or the actual communication is *splendor* whereas both the Initiator of the giving and the arriving of the gift at an

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12. Alister McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, 3rd ed. (Malden: Blackwell, 2001), under “409 ff.”

<sup>13</sup> A brief excursus of caution is needed: when it is said that the Apocalypse is especially equipped to communicate the whole, that is, God, what is meant is that it is especially capable in view of human frailty, finitude, and need. It is the subjective need of humanity which makes the Apocalypse’s gathering of theological parts special not because God cannot communicate all that He is in any means He deems, for indeed He is free to do so.

<sup>14</sup> *šālôm*: a personal shalom for God’s peace is embodied in the Messiah.

15. David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth*, 19.

appointed destination is beauty.<sup>16</sup> Said another way, God fashions a body of expression for Himself through which He Himself is communicated (splendor) and the arrival of this self-giving transforms form (*forma*) into beauty (*formosus*).<sup>17</sup> Although it will not be explored here, the basis of this communication, self-giving, participation, and reciprocation is the divine life of the Trinity (circumincession). Thus in creating God has, analogically, designed creation after Himself which then allows for the creation to inform humans about who God is (ontic informs ontology, or perhaps better, following Bauckham,<sup>18</sup> informs identity; Rom. 1:19-20).<sup>19</sup>

### *Apocalyptic Themes*

In the ground-breaking *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* Edited by G.K. Beale and D.A. Carson, Beale and Sean McDonough begin their discussion affirming that “No other book of the NT is as permeated by the OT as is Revelation. Although its author seldom quotes the OT directly, allusions and echoes are found in almost every verse of the book.”<sup>20</sup> Attempting to tally the allusions and echoes is difficult but they list a number of different bible societies’ and individual commentators’ conclusions: the range is between 195 and 1000 with the mean floating between 500 and 600.<sup>21</sup> They say that

The range of OT usage includes the Pentateuch, Judges, 1-2 Samuel, 1-2 Kings, Psalms, Proverbs, Song of Solomon, Job, major prophets, and the minor prophets. Roughly more than half the references are from Psalms, Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel, and in proportion to its length, Daniel yields the most ... The evaluation of Daniel as most influential is supported by recent study.<sup>22</sup>

By way of foreshowing, when this study turns to reviewing the artwork of the catacombs the fact that *Daniel* is most influential will become demonstrably

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16. Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, 20. This could be nuanced further if Barth were allowed a voice and note that the content of what is communicated is God Himself (= glory), the communicating (traversing the distance to reach humans) is splendor, and the arrival is beauty; Glory communicated is beauty, in sum. It is doubtful that Balthasar would agree with this, at least according to Stephen Nichols interpretation of Balthasar: he says that for Balthasar glory is beauty. Nichols, Stephen, *The Glory of God*, ed. Morgan, Christopher, and Robert Peterson (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010) pgs. 23-25.

17. Ibid.

18. Richard Bauckham, “God Crucified,” in *Jesus and the God of Israel: God Crucified and Other Studies on the New Testament's Christology of Divine Identity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 3.

19. David Bentley Hart, “*Analogia Entis*” in *The Beauty of the Infinite*.

20. G.K. Beale, and Sean McDonough, “Revelation,” in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, ed. G.K. Beale, and D.A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic and Apollos, 2007), 1081.

21. Ibid., 1082.

22. Ibid.



evident. Further, they note that six books provide the major conceptual influence in Revelation: the creation/fall accounts in Genesis, Exodus with its plagues and deliverance from oppressors, Daniel (ch. 7 particularly) with its emphasis on being faithful in the midst of persecution, and the other three being Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Psalms. A supplement but not to be missed is that Guthrie sees one of the major purposes of the book to be the giving of immediate encouragement—presumably gleaned from the address to the churches in Rev. 1-3.<sup>23</sup>

To these reported facts, themes can be added. Beale, McDonough, and Guthrie all agree that the dissolution of the existing world order (the evil and politically governed one) cannot be overlooked (especially because of the typological application of “Babylon the Great” to all corrupt political powers [namely, all of them]).<sup>24</sup> There is no surprise for Guthrie or Beale & McDonough regarding the reliance on Daniel in the Apocalypse because, for Guthrie, the vast material in the book occurs between the *inclusio* of Apoc. 1:7 and 19:11—the former being a hint to the “coming one” and the latter describing the actual event of the “coming one” who is the “son of man coming on the clouds” of Daniel: “Son of Man” being Jesus’ favorite title for Himself.<sup>25</sup> For Beale and McDonough, the etymological association between Revelation 1:1 and Daniel 2:28-47 provide grounds (more grounds exist also: e.g. the beasts) for Revelation’s dependence on Daniel along with the evident “coming of the son of man” already mentioned: *apokalypsis* begins Revelation 1:1 and Daniel 2 has the derived verb *apokalyptō* (LXX) used five times.<sup>26</sup> Finally, a practice intimately connected with the Apocalypse is not only the explanation of former prophecy but its eschatological enhancement,<sup>27</sup> a practice Guthrie explains as following the Lord Yeshua: He “invested the apocalyptic usage with deeper meaning” especially in regards to the “coming one.”<sup>28</sup>

Summarizing, there are five points from and about the Apocalypse to note. First, the Apocalypse is unique in its gathering of so much special revelation into one place, one book. Second, the Apocalypse relies heavily upon the book, visions, and, implicitly, the man, Daniel. Third, the theological themes of creation, exodus, and persecution are highly influential on the Apocalypse. Fourth, the dissolution of the world order occurs and is to be replaced with God’s peaceful God-order. Fifth, prophecy and theological themes undergo (in many cases) eschatological enhancement. The next section will consider an additional source for the assertion that early, Judaeo-Christianity’s apocalyptic perspective provides a theological-aesthetic beauty in the fullness of its theological themes and also provides consolation for the saints’ persecution. For this endeavor, an investigation follows to see what elements of Judaeo-Christian-apocalyptic-imagery can be found.

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23. Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Theology* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity, 1981), 814.

24. *Ibid.*, 1081.

25. *Ibid.*, 813.

26. Beale and McDonough, *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, 1088.

27. *Ibid.*, 1085.

28. Guthrie, *New Testament Theology*, 792.

*The Art of the Catacombs*

Lee Jefferson’s article, “Picturing Theology,” reviews the art of the catacombs surrounding Rome (roughly A.D. 150-250) and elsewhere (A.D. 200-500). Catacomb art is uniquely valuable for this study because that faith community practicing in this locale would have certainly been aware of their mortality since the doom of persecution (and potential death) loomed always near—much like the churches of the Apocalypse (Apoc. 2-3).

Two issues deserving immediate attention is the term “early Christian art” and the use of images found in the catacombs. Jefferson limits “early Christian art” to A.D. 150-500. Although earlier is better for the purposes of this study, the lingering influence of Judaeo-Christian, apocalyptic viewpoint would serve to strengthen the centrality and importance of this for a faith community. Second, it was supposed as ironclad until the 20<sup>th</sup> century “that Jews of the first centuries were aniconic.”<sup>29</sup> Archaeological discoverers have changed this. In Syria, in “the synagogue of Dura Europos discovered in 1932 (buried in the desert after Dura was conquered by the Sasanians in 256 CE) [found] magnificent frescoes that depict characters and familiar scenes from scripture on its walls (411).” Later art in synagogues likewise confirms that Jews in the early centuries were not adverse to imagery: mosaics of Beth Alpha, Hammath Tiberias and Sepphoris (411-412). Jefferson concedes that there are obvious thematic overlaps and attributes this to their shared corpus of Scripture but does not think it is because Christians were directly observing what Jewish synagogues were portraying (411-412). The earlier the artwork can be dated the more believable it would be that Christian art mimicked Jewish art because the early church was initially Jewish composed and even near the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> century still remained largely Jewish led.<sup>30</sup>

“If early Christian art has a traceable ‘birthday’, opines Jefferson, “it is likely around 200 CE and its ‘birthplace’ would be the catacombs of Rome. The catacomb of Callistus is likely the earliest repository of Christian imagery (412).”<sup>31</sup> The majority of early Christian art is funeral art yet mixed with symbols of expectation and hope [e.g. anchor: Hebrews 6:19, (413)]. Jefferson creates two categories to describe Christian art: narrative and non-narrative. The latter refers to “isolated portraits and symbols while [the former] reflects scriptural themes and stories” (413). What might seem initially strange, that there are few images of the Passion and none of Christ crucified (413), is not nearly as startling if Christ is conceived from an apocalyptic viewpoint. The cross did not appear as a symbol until the time

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29. Lee M. Jefferson, “Picturing Theology: A Primer on Early Christian Art,” *Religion Compass* (2010), 411. The following in text parenthetical page numbers are references to this text.

<sup>30</sup> It was Jewish led up until sometime between A.D. 120-150. But because of the changing demographics of the church and especially because of the Bar Kochbar rebellion, the Jewish influence quickly diminished.

<sup>31</sup> Named after “a presbyter (later pope) ... in the early third century” (Jefferson, 412) but if the site had become renowned enough to be named, then it is probable that much artwork occurred prior to this point: this view follows Jefferson.

of Constantine and even then it was without the corpus of Christ hanging on it: rather, a symbol of triumph. The cross is not found with Christ hanging on it as a symbol until the late 5<sup>th</sup> century and early 6<sup>th</sup>.<sup>32</sup>

Jefferson continues with a dense section:

In the catacombs of Callistus, paintings of fish and fishing are adjacent to the image of Christ's baptism [sic] is a painting of a man fishing. These images of fish and fishing may be described as non-narrative; however, they still reflect the possible scriptural motifs and point towards Christ. One of the most non-narrative images that reflect Christ is the Good Shepherd. An image of a young man depicted in some context with a lamb or sheep appears in the catacombs at least 120 times ... [it could be that the] protective shepherd of Psalm 23 may be evoked...For a Christian audience, Christ as a Shepherd of lost sheep (Lk. 15:3-7) or as the Good Shepherd from John 10:11 could be witnessed, recalling paternal consolation. Moreover, in a funerary atmosphere like the catacombs, art needed to inspire comfort and provide solace whether or not the subject is Christ (413).

The shepherd proves telling for the purposes of this essay. Although the explicit word for “shepherd” (Gr. *poimhn*, *poimēn*) does not appear in the Apocalypse, the verbal form does appear in 7:17: ὅτι τὸ ἀρνίον τὸ ἀνά μέσον τοῦ θρόνου ποιμανεῖ αὐτοὺς. ποιμανεῖ (*poimaneî*) is from *poimainw* ([*poimainō*]: ‘to shepherd’), which is rendered “because the lamb which (is) in the very midst of the throne *will shepherd* them” (translation mine).<sup>33</sup> From the former section on the Apocalypse, it was shown that two of the most influential books on the composition of it were Psalms and Ezekiel. Jefferson suggests the good shepherd might be from Psalm 23 and this does not seem to be amiss especially in light of Ezekiel 34:15: “I myself *will shepherd* the sheep of me, and I myself will cause them to lie down (says) the oracle of the Adonai Yahweh” (Translation mine from MT). In this verse, the agent doing the action (Yahweh in OT, Lamb in Apoc.) is emphasized (myself, indicated by the pronoun <sup>a</sup>nî, Heb: אֲנִי) and the action is the same found in Revelation. And this Shepherd makes them to lie down just as in Psalm 23:2. More can be added on this point, for Ezekiel 34:12 is easily an allusion as well—especially because of the proximity to verse 15—and Jeremiah 22:4 can be counted an echo. Given John’s collecting, enhancing, and multitudinous alluding activity, it would not seem strange if multiple passages were in view in Apoc. 17:7. The high Christology of Hebrew’s closing benediction also titles Christ’s shepherd as does 1 Peter and obviously each of the Gospels (esp. John 10). The great frequency of this term in Scriptures makes it a prime candidate for Christians in catacombs, especially during persecution because Christ as Shepherd is the Overseer of Christian’s souls

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32. Richard Viladesau, *The Beauty of the Cross* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 44-46.

33 Aland, B., Aland, K., Black, M., Martini, C. M., Metzger, B. M., & Wikgren, A. (1993). *The Greek New Testament* (4th ed.) (646). Federal Republic of Germany: United Bible Societies.

(1 Peter) and because of His blood He is able to be an eternal Shepherd (Hebrews 13). The term's wide usage allows the imagery from the Gospels to the Apocalypse (and OT) to be called to mind without having to refer to one particular context. Indeed, the artwork thus discussed by Jefferson mixes many theological themes, following the Apocalypse's conflating and elaborating example.

The narrative paintings in the catacombs functioned much like pages in a book. A naked Daniel surrounded by lions can be found near Jonah and the frequency of nude Jonah and Daniel must be vast as intimated by Jefferson: "The omnipresent nudity of Jonah and Daniel is vexing as along with Adam, they are the few figures in the early Christian art that are uniformly depicted nude" (414). To this and important for this essay, Jefferson adds, "separate characters and themes like Daniel, Jonah, Adam and Christ converge and coalesce in the catacomb paintings" (Ibid). The importance of Daniel has been mentioned earlier. He (and the book bearing his name) is the primary influencer for the Apocalypse. What is more, Daniel is also a paradigmatic figure for standing stout in persecution: a figure persecuted Christians could quickly identify with, especially since in his visions their hope could be found in the "son of man coming on the clouds." Adam certainly brings to mind the creation narrative and the subsequent fall—plainly seen in the naked Adam. So now two of the Apocalypse's themes (persecution and creation) and one of the major influencers (Daniel) is engraved in this art—and this is to say nothing of the image of Jonah: a symbol for salvation through the descent into the grave by Christ and later to rise. Last to mention before moving on, the naked images likely reflect shame (cf. Genesis 3) at least to one degree or another. No doubt much of the persecution was a shameful experience (like the crucifixion for the Lord Jesus, Hebrews 12:1-2). This artwork allows for identification with those who went before; in this solidarity, then, the Christian could find some measure of consolation. Richard Viladesau, in support, also interprets the art of the catacombs as scenes of deliverance (e.g. Daniel in lion's den, Noah and ark, 3 men and the furnace of Daniel) noting the import of the *orans*.<sup>34</sup>

John enhances, conflates, and organizes theological themes in the Apocalypse. As noted earlier, this is an analogy for how theological beauty works (whole in part). Jefferson resonates with this as well, using musical terms to describe the catacomb art: "Not only do the images share an implied message of baptism, the images are integrated and intentionally placed within the surrounding examples creating a symphonic tableau instead of singular 'staccato' notes ... early Christian art was a wonderful vehicle to convey theological convictions to its audience" (Ibid). The hymnody of the Apocalypse hints at its composition, at its compendium creatively mixed, conflated, and enhancingly expounded. In the same way, according to Jefferson, the art of catacombs equally hints at this festive gathering of theological accord.

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<sup>34</sup> Viladesau, *The Beauty of the Cross*, 43. The *orans* is, in Viladesau's words, "a praying figure, usually female, representing the soul and church." Both soul (*yuch*) and church (*evklhsia*) are feminine nouns in Greek.

Both Viladesau and Jefferson understand Christ in the imagery of the catacombs to be a powerful and majestic figure.<sup>35</sup> The earthly life tends to be the context of the art portraying Christ in the catacombs but the emphasis in these images is his divine capacities especially in His miracles. Christ is both raising the dead and healing yet He looks like “a youthful, beautiful, and majestic figure.”<sup>36</sup>

In sum, 1) the Shepherd of the catacombs is both a figure of comfort and apocalyptic significance. 2) Daniel in the catacombs is relevant for this study because the work dubbed with his name is the main influencer of the Apocalypse. Furthermore, he represents a figure of resolve in persecution and thereby served the needs of the faith community under persecution. 3) The appearance of naked Adam in this art harkens to the creation and fall narrative which is a potent theme of the Apocalypse. 4) The nakedness of the various figures may serve to console the faith community because of the humiliation and shame they underwent. 5) The “symphonic tableau” of art in these catacombs is similar to the intermixed, complemented, and creatively enhanced, theological themes of the Apocalypse. It might be wondered if this ‘composing style’ of John did not serve to embolden these artists. 6) The Christ of the catacombs is more a Christ of all the whole New Testament than the later suffering Christ of the 6<sup>th</sup> century and after. He is seen in His earthly life (alluding to the Gospels) but the emphasis is on His divinity as expressed in His power to work miracles.

#### CONCLUSION

To conclude the article, several key themes which have arisen from the study will be reviewed. Of key importance here are the analogy of beauty from the Apocalypse, the contributions of Daniel, the importance of the Shepherd imagery, and the intertwining theological themes which have been examined.

#### *The Analogy of Beauty from the Apocalypse*

Beauty is in the vision of the Apocalypse because in it is gathered much special revelation evidenced by allusions and echoes. Recalled theological themes appear: creation, Exodus, seed of woman, judgment, centrality of Jerusalem, etc. In short, much of special revelation’s theological material (themes, symbols) is densely packed in one book; much of the whole of special revelation is communicated in this one part. The analogy with beauty is in this “much of the whole in a part.” At first, the analogy appears weak because, with theological-aesthetic beauty, it is *the whole* given in a fragment whereas, in the Apocalypse, it is *much of the whole* given in a fragment (book). But recognizing that saying that the whole (God) is given in the fragment must be humbled by its apophatic axis: God cannot be described in terms

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35. Jefferson, “Picturing Theology: A Primer on Early Christian Art, 415-16.

36. Viladesau, *The Beauty of the Cross*, 43.

of totality (wholes). He is beyond all totalistic formulae.<sup>37</sup> God goes on and on, He is contained by no end, no boundary is for Him who breaks all boundaries, even that seemingly invincible boundary of death (i.e. resurrection). So then, even though it is a maxim to say that beauty is the whole given in a fragment, this cannot mean that all that God is or Who He is is given because He is infinite. So the analogy is made more sure: beauty is *much of the whole* (God) being given in a fragment (yet not totally, draining God of His mystery) just like *much of the whole of special revelation* is given in Revelation. Barth's comment about beauty offers insight: beauty is the manner or form or way God reveals himself which then is to say that God's communication of himself is revelation,<sup>38</sup> first in the fragments of revelation (John, Jonah, Job, etc.) then in the more holistic compendium which is the Apocalypse. Therefore, the Apocalyptic vision is beautiful.

### *Daniel*

Daniel's influence is paramount in the Apocalypse. To a lesser degree, Daniel was important for the faith community of the early catacombs. Persecution and resolve are themes for Daniel and Revelation and would have been a reality for those saints living from the time of Nero to Diocletian, even if persecution was intermittent. In this way, Daniel can be understood as a summary word/image for standing strong in persecution and hope for it is in Daniel that an example of resolve is narrated and the vision of the coming one. The Apocalypse explains 'the coming' further and the role of the beasts. There can be little doubt that the faith communities of early Christianity—being known as heavily influenced by eschatological expectation—did not understand the Apocalypse as the explication of the coming one described in Daniel. This becomes increasingly evident when the images of Daniel are conflated, coalesced, and intermixed with other themes belonging to the Apocalypse in catacomb art.

### *Shepherd*

The Shepherd of the catacomb art, for Christians, is Christ because in the Apocalypse it is He who shepherds them. He will make them lie down and be refreshed. Scripture is saturated with this term from beginning to end and as progressive revelation moves forward into the times and writing of the NT, so does the term become more technical and indicative of the good Shepherd. He is ongoing and able to salvage, quicken, and awaken souls. He seeks what was lost and guides His sheep, being near in persecution and promising a life of communal peace to come. This title is both implicitly pointing to the Apocalypse and consoling. The

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37. David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth*, 148-56.

38. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 1, bk. 2. *Doctrine of God* (Peabody: Hedrickson, 2010), 650-55.

coming of the Shepherd, the Lamb, to shepherd His sheep is a marvel indeed yet it grows all the more enrapturing when one accepts, and thereby participates, in the hope of the soul and the deliverance from tribulation. The vast representation of the Shepherd in the catacombs envisages a practical Christianity, one which was in need of hope, council, and the kind hand of a good Shepherd. They did not merely investigate but rather participated; and this is the worship of the Shepherd even in the mire and darkness of persecution (Apoc. 2-3) or in the midst of the dead (catacombs).

### *Theological Themes*

The thematic gathering and enhancement of theology bears on both the contention that the catacomb community (-ies) was influenced by the Apocalypse and that the Apocalypse functions as an analogy for theological beauty. This second contention will continue to build on what has already been said in the opening of the conclusion. But first, the early catacomb community (-ies) was/were influenced by the Apocalypse and made a contribution to “enhancing” by visually presenting theology. This was argued above by the evidence of the images of the Shepherd, Daniel, Adam (naked: recalling creation and fall in one), and the complexity of the representation of these imagery in what Jefferson calls a “tableau.” Daniel’s significance has already been commented on. Adam and hence creation (and fall) is one of the major themes of the Apocalypse. The nakedness of the images of Jonah, Adam, and Daniel may indeed be indicators of shame (and fall) and act as a form of consolation by solidarity. Jefferson does note that this nakedness might also be attributed to the early practice of naked baptism in the early church. This does not detract from the “shame” noted formerly because baptism itself is a symbol of death and resurrection and this, in the life of Yeshua, occurred by unjust persecution: it is the entering into Christ’s sufferings (including shame as well) so that Christians can also be consoled through Him (1 Cor 1:5). In the manner that the Apocalypse gathers, organizes, conflates, and intermixes, so the community (-ies) of the catacombs likewise did.

Next, the analogy of the Apocalypse for theological beauty can be emboldened by the supplementation and enhancement found in the composition of the Apocalypse. The theme of creation/recreation is starkly evident in the Apocalypse (e.g. creation-new creation, Exodus-new Exodus, new life versus old life). The disintegration of the violences of the current world order is also a mammoth theme. Hart was cited in the origination of this study to demonstrate that one of beauty’s functions is to dissolve the violences of being: beauty interrupts the cycle of worldly powers, those governed and founded by violence. As beauty interrupts this “violence” so does the Apocalypse, for it narrates both violence’s interruption by the incarnation and violences’ final interruption in the eschaton. The eschatological enhancements teach about God’s revealing work of supplementation and repetition. God fulfills what He said but also adds to it. God repeats (e.g. typologies, prophecies, divine economies) and supplements what was said with greater demonstration. This is not

all though, for then it would be only a matter of re-explaining in diverse ways but, instead, God shows more. He goes beyond what was said: e.g. Beale and McDonough note that in one vision in the Apocalypse, John is taken to behold a great garden-city which is the fulfilling (and recalling) of Ezekiel's vision of the renewed temple which He saw after being led to a mountain.<sup>39</sup> Ezekiel's vision is adorned with vegetation and the temple is now a place of human life (city). Inasmuch as theological beauty imparts more of the whole in a fragment, likewise do these enhancements found in the Apocalypse. The impartation of beauty leads ever onward to the infinite God. So also does progressive revelation (as mirror and partaker in beauty) yet in greater profundity due to special revelation's delivering of specific knowledge of God. In the Apocalypse, what was once scattered is now renewed yet the reunion is more profound, more magnificent: on the one hand, the initial scattering produces avenues of expression for divine rhetoric, like many flowers in diverse places, yet, on the other hand, the reunion of these avenues of divine rhetoric are now conjoined, compounding expression upon expression, like the awe in the midst of a botanical garden. To close, just as the expressions are conjoined, so can it be said that theological beauty is conjoined, compounding beauty upon beauty brightening the path onward to Christ, that divine Light of men.

### *Trajectories for Further Study*

This study acts both as an incentive for looking to other topics to enhance it and also as a source to build-upon. Typological studies would complement this study. In many ways, one of the motivating factors for this study was indeed reflecting on the spirals (not cycles) of God (God's economies). That first exodus is paradigmatic but is expanded later. More work needs done on the quality of special revelation's contribution towards understanding theological beauty. Most theologies discuss theological beauty in terms of a natural theology (or at least primarily in those terms). Is the infinite God nearer, so to speak, in the *analogia scriptura* than in the *analogia entis*? Romans 1 seems to suggest this, but in what way can it be said that He is nearer if the distance between humans and God is infinite? Difficult is the fact that being enraptured by the potency of beauty often comes for many on a cliff edge and not in a pew or in front of a Bible. Significantly, if the Hebrew canon is followed, the type of enhancement and compounding just discussed also occurs in the OT so that the closer to the end of the OT canon is traveled the greater the enhancement, similar to the NT (Heb. canon: Law·Prophets·Writings). Moreover, the aesthetic faculty (that faculty which perceives and expresses joy, delight, gladness, and pleasure) in man comes more explicitly into view. Notably, Song of Songs, Psalms, and Daniel all appear near the end of the OT canon. *Contra* the Gnostic or Platonizing tendency, Revelation envisions a concrete and, although renewed and glorified, earth and Jerusalem. There can be no doubt that the form of

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39. Beale and McDonough, *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, 1085.



Hebrew poetry should be a source for further studies, both in its melodic accentuation and in its parallelisms. What, after all, does complementary parallelism show but the repetition of one saying in another way. What does synthetic parallelism show but the enhancement and repetition of a saying. And does not the great contrastive parallelism, especially when concerning God, teach our rhetoric about God how to be both apophatically and cataphatically informed? Complementariness, syntheticity, and contrast cannot but seem soundly promising for theological aesthetics.

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