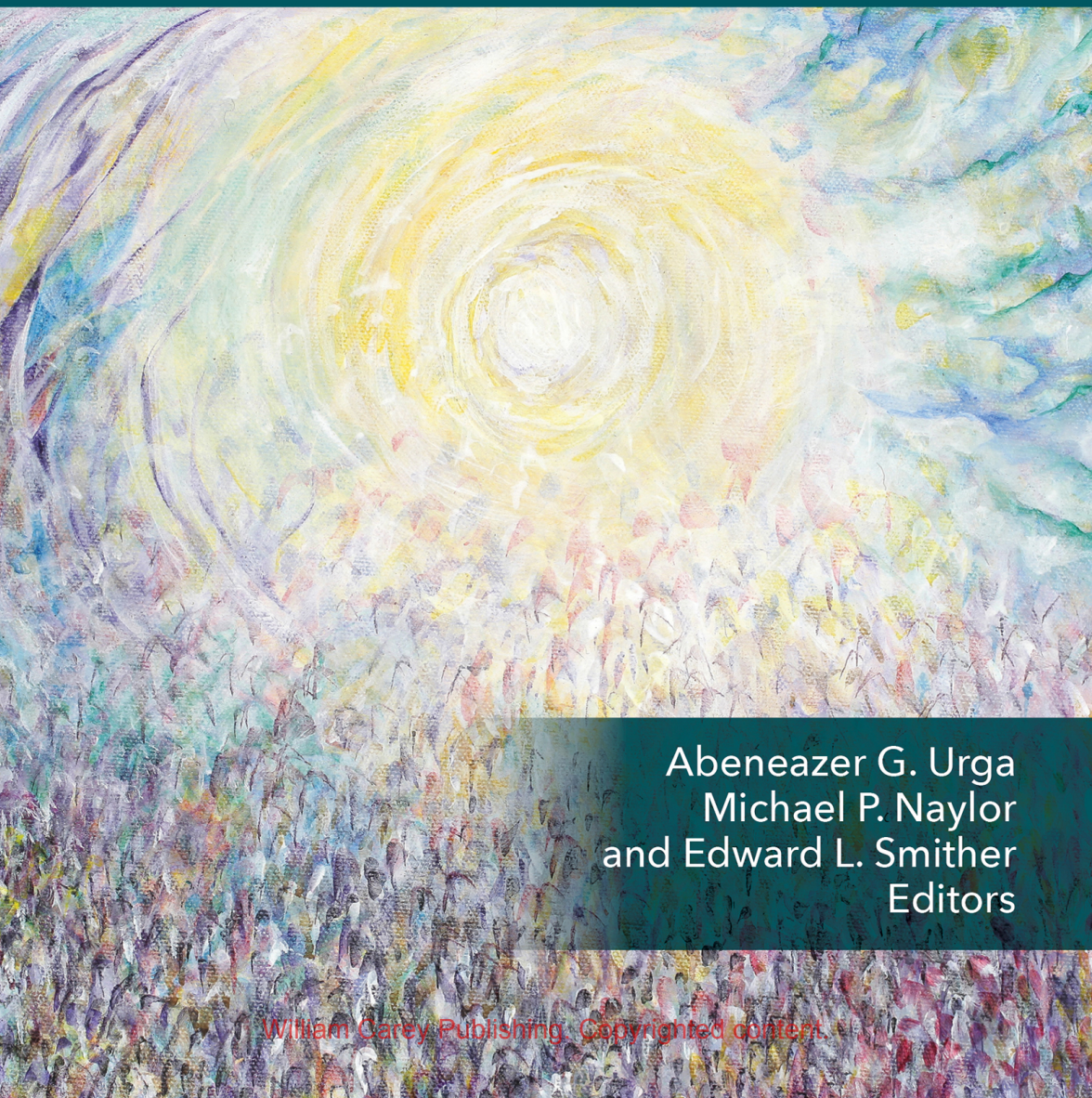
Reading Revelation Missiologically

The Missionary Motive, Message, and Methods of Revelation



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Published by William Carey Publishing
10 W. Dry Creek Cir.
Littleton, CO 80120 | www.missionbooks.org

William Carey Publishing is a ministry of Frontier Ventures
Pasadena, CA | www.frontierventures.org

Cover and Interior Designer: Mike Riester

ISBNs: 978-1-64508-680-2 (paperback)
978-1-64508-682-6 (epub)

Printed Worldwide

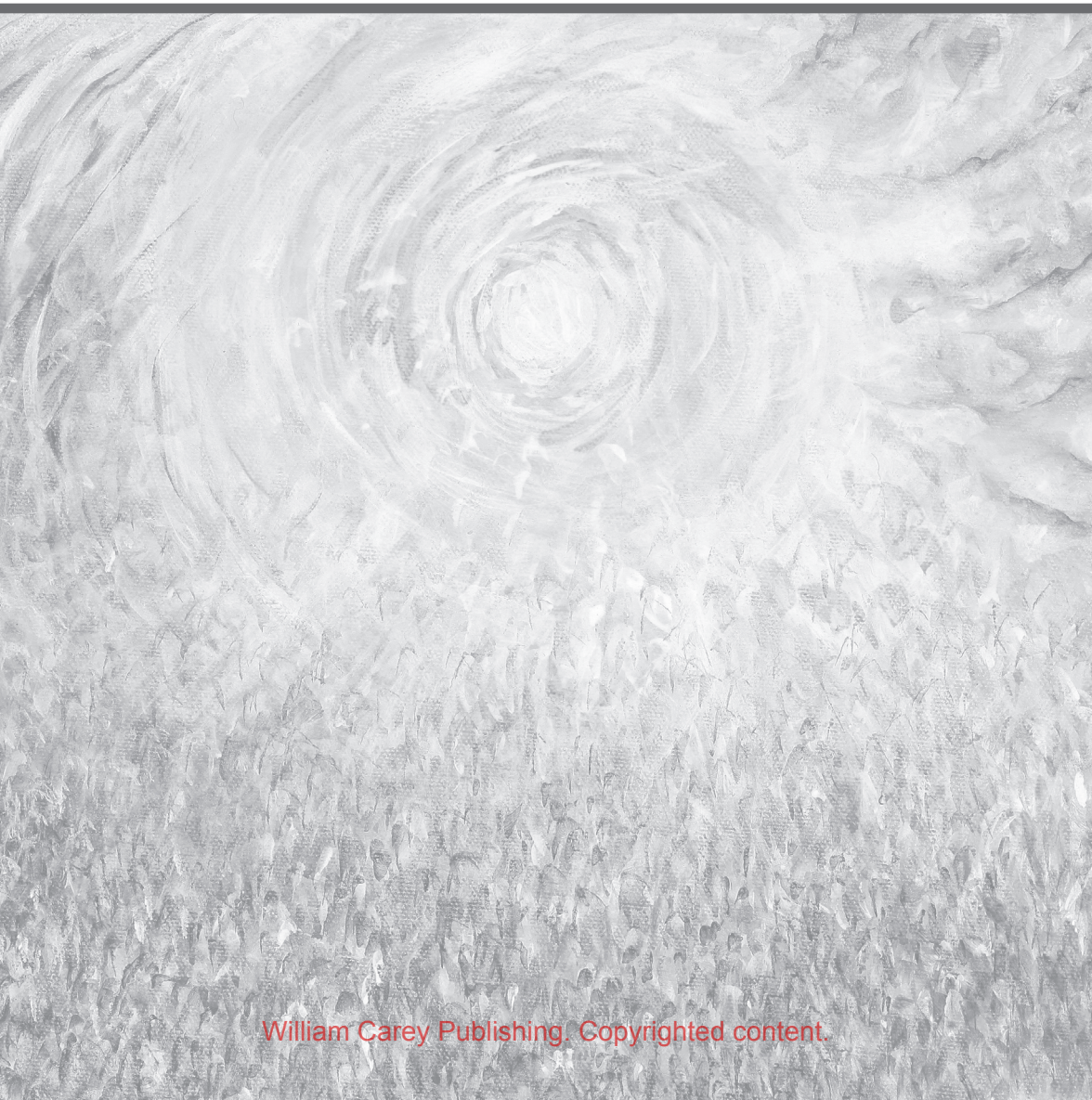
29 28 27 26 25 1 2 3 4 5 IN

Library of Congress Control Number: 2025946510

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Part 1

The Missionary Motive of Revelation



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Chapter 1

Explicit Argumentation and a Foretaste of the Future Hermeneutic

Alexander E. Stewart

Dean Flemming recently produced a missional reading of Revelation that is accessible and often insightful.[1] He argues throughout his study of Revelation in light of God's mission that "Revelation seeks to shape and equip Christian communities to participate in God's saving purpose by living as a foretaste of God's coming new creation now, through their lips and through their lives."[2] Revelation does seek to shape and equip Christian communities, but Flemming's conclusion about the goal of this shaping and equipping ("to participate in God's saving purpose by living as a foretaste of God's coming new creation now") is less explicit in the book itself. I have elsewhere sought to argue something similar using the framework of social identity theory: Revelation's vision of the inclusive nature of new creation restoration (a saved humanity from every tribe, tongue, people, and nation and every economic level) both shaped the early Christians in their thinking about the composition of their communities and motivated them to make that vision of the future at least a partial reality in the present through mission and witness.[3] On this foretaste of the future reading, Revelation's vision of the future motivates its hearers to try to live out of and into that future vision in the present time. The visions in Revelation function as the ideal toward which we work in the less-than-ideal present.

The visions in Revelation can have this effect on motivated hearers, but it should also be acknowledged that such conclusions are not explicitly grounded in the text. To some degree, these conclusions must be inferred from the text using specific theoretical frameworks or reading strategies. That does not mean that such a foretaste of the future hermeneutic is a wrong way of thinking about how the text could function to inform and motivate mission, but rather it suggests that this was not how the first author and hearers were explicitly thinking about the impact of the text. Revelation is a challenging book, and we need to be careful that our missional readings do not domesticate it or make it more compelling to modern readers by

1 Flemming, *Foretaste of the Future*.

2 Flemming, 3.

3 Stewart, "Role of Fear and Hope," 85–97, 92–93.

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emphasizing things that are not emphasized in the text or by failing to emphasize those that are.

This chapter will consider what Revelation explicitly shapes Christian communities to do by considering the explicit argumentation expressed through imperatives in the text. Such a study will keep our missional imagination carefully grounded in the exegetical details while considering the motive, message, and methods of mission in Revelation.

Explicit Argumentation: Imperatives

There are 114 imperatives (both second and third person) in the Greek text of Revelation.[4] Of these, thirty-eight are directed toward the hearers of the book, eight of which stereotypically call upon the one who has ears to hear (Rev 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22; 13:9).[5] That leaves thirty imperatives in fourteen verses to indicate the explicit motivational goals communicated by Revelation to its hearers.[6] Most of these hearers are assumed to belong to the seven addressed communities, and Revelation is primarily addressed to insiders of the Christian movement. However, 14:7 is addressed to any hearer, 22:11 includes hearers who were presumably not overcoming in its first two imperatives, and 22:17 seems to be addressed to any potential hearer.

4 For the purpose of this study, both second- and third-person imperatives are considered together as explicit indications of the author's rhetorical goals. Despite how they may sound in English, third-person imperatives do not communicate permission but instead make a volitional demand upon the hearer. See Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 486.

5 The remaining imperatives fall into three categories. Twenty-eight are directed at John: Revelation 1:11 (two), 17, 19; 2:1, 8, 12, 18; 3:1, 7, 14; 4:1; 5:5; 10:4, 8 (two), 9 (two); 11:1 (two), 2; 14:13; 19:9, 10 (two); 21:5; 22:9 (two). Twenty-six are the rhetorically emphatic use of "behold" (Ἰδού): Revelation 1:7, 18; 2:10, 22; 3:8, 9 (two), 20; 4:1, 2; 5:5; 6:2, 5, 8; 7:9; 9:12; 11:14; 12:3; 14:1, 14; 16:15; 19:11; 21:3, 5; 22:7, 12. Twenty-two are directed at other characters in the visions: the four horsemen (6:1, 3, 5, 7), mountains and rocks (6:16 [two]), an angel (9:14), the two witnesses (11:12), the heavens and those dwelling in them (12:12), the one sitting on the cloud (14:15 [two]), to the angel with a sharp sickle (14:18 [two]), to the seven angels (16:1 [two]), unspecified punishing agents (18:6 [three]), heaven (18:20), birds (19:17), Jesus (22:20).

6 My earlier study of explicit argumentation in Revelation analyzed verbal indicators of logical relations to identify twelve instances of explicit motivational argumentation: Revelation 2:4–5, 10, 16, 25–26; 3:2, 3, 11, 18, 19; 14:7; 18:4, 20. The approach utilized here, of looking at imperatives directed at the hearers, leads to the removal of Revelation 2:4, 26; 3:18; 18:20 and the addition of 13:18; 19:5; 22:11, 17 to the list. See Stewart, *Soteriology as Motivation*, 215–24.

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Imperatives Directed Toward the Hearers of Revelation[7]	
Rev 2:5	**Remember** then from what you have fallen; **repent**, and **do** the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent.
Rev 2:10	**Do not fear** what you are about to suffer. Beware, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison so that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have affliction. **Be faithful** until death, and I will give you the crown of life.
Rev 2:16	**Repent** then. If not, I will come to you soon and make war against them with the sword of my mouth.
Rev 2:25	. . . only **hold fast** to what you have until I come.
Rev 3:2	**Wake up**, and **strengthen** what remains and is on the point of death, for I have not found your works perfect in the sight of my God.
Rev 3:3	**Remember** then what you received and heard; **obey** it, and **repent**. If you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come to you.
Rev 3:11	I am coming soon; **hold fast** to what you have, so that no one may seize your crown.
Rev 3:19	I reprove and discipline those whom I love. **Be earnest**, therefore, and **repent**.
Rev 13:18	This calls for wisdom: let anyone with understanding **calculate** the number of the beast, for it is the number of a person. Its number is six hundred sixty-six.
Rev 14:7	He said in a loud voice, "**Fear** God and **give** him glory, for the hour of his judgment has come; and **worship** him who made heaven and earth, the sea and the springs of water."
Rev 18:4	Then I heard another voice from heaven saying, "**Come out** of her, my people, so that you do not take part in her sins, and so that you do not share in her plagues."
Rev 19:5	And from the throne came a voice saying, "**Praise** our God, all you his servants, and all who fear him, small and great."
Rev 22:11	Let the evildoer still **do evil**, and the filthy still **be filthy**, and the righteous still **do right**, and the holy still **be holy**.
Rev 22:17	The Spirit and the bride say, "**Come**." And let everyone who hears **say**, "**Come**." And let everyone who is thirsty **come**. Let anyone who wishes **take** the water of life as a gift.

7 All English quotations are from the NRSV.

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A survey of this list of imperatives leads to the following observations: All the imperatives directed toward the seven communities in Revelation 2–3 focus either on repentance or perseverance (in the order they occur in the text: remember, repent, do, do not fear, be faithful, repent, hold fast, wake up, strengthen, remember, obey, repent, hold fast, be earnest, repent).[8] All these imperatives are directed toward Jesus-followers with the goal of motivating them to overcome by repenting when necessary and persevering amid certain suffering and opposition. There is no obvious missional focus on outsiders in these imperatives, and the focus is instead on the preservation of the faithful community, which is in significant danger of extinction through religious syncretism and outright persecution. The call to repentance is generally linked to warnings and threats of judgment if the imperatives are not obeyed, while the focus on perseverance includes calls to obedience and faithfulness. These imperatives directed to the seven churches are the clearest indications in Revelation of the impact the book was intended to have on its hearers: Revelation seeks to motivate Christian hearers to repent and persevere in order to overcome.

The remaining imperatives directed at the hearers are more diverse in their scope. Revelation 13:18 invites hearers to engage in gematria to determine the meaning of the number of the beast; the number is likely a reference to Nero, but this is not the place to explore those implications in more detail.[9] Revelation 14:7 contains three imperatives that summarize the eternal gospel that is proclaimed to "those who live on the earth—to every nation and tribe and language and people" (v. 6). The eternal gospel calls upon every human being to fear God, give him glory, and worship him. This seems to summarize the saving human response to God in Revelation. It is a response to the gospel that directs worship and allegiance away from the beast to the creator and ruler of the universe.[10] Revelation does not speak about salvation by grace through faith. When "faith" is mentioned in Revelation it

8 Osborne, *Revelation*, 42–46, argues for "perseverance of the saints" as the overarching theme of Revelation that subsumes other concepts such as "endurance, faithfulness, witness, conquering, and obedience" (p. 42).

9 See Gumerlock, "Nero Antichrist," 347–60; Koester, "Number of the Beast," 1–21; Williams, "P115 and the Number," 151–53.

10 It is possible to read this announcement of the eternal gospel as primarily a message of judgment (Beale, *Revelation*, 748–50), but it seems better in line with the rhetorical nature of the book to see it as containing a genuine offer of salvation (Smalley, *Revelation to John*, 362–63; Osborne, *Revelation*, 534–36; Altink, "I Chronicles 16:8–36," 187–89; Michaels, *Revelation*, 173).

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