



# Re-reading Revelation 20:1-15 from a stylistic approach

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## Abstract

The reading and interpretation (exegesis) of Revelation 20 conjures controversy and ongoing scholarly debates due to the fact that there is generally no consensus about its semantic signification. It is imperative to also consider the fact that there is a pervasive utilisation of complex polysemic figurative stylisations in the textual composition of Revelation 20 which further complicates its reading and interpretive process. Most significantly, there are numerous intricate and disputed stylistic, thematic and semantic issues in the selected text that invite further re-reading and re-interpretation from diverse interpretive approaches available. Thus, this article takes heed to contemporary scholarly conversations about reading and interpretive practices which encourage increased sensibility to the stylistic features of the text. The present article is informed by insights from stylistics. The central argument in the modern hermeneutic debate adopted in this article is that style or textual construction facilitates the conveyance of meanings therefore both linguistic signification and contextual factors are useful semantic dimensions which need to be critically studied. Such insightful ideas deserve a serious consideration since they call for academic re-thinking of previously held interpretive epistemologies that have relegated and trivialised the significant interface of linguistics and New Testament studies. These ideas have profound implications for the stylistic analysis and interpretation of the New Testament in this article. The continuous search for new hermeneutic pathways and novel insights from academic debates make this research relevant, timely and necessary.

**Keywords:** Stylistics, style, New Testament, book of Revelations, epistemology.

## Introduction

Grabiner (2013) submits that the book of Revelation is like no other in the New Testament (NT, thereafter), because it impacts all the senses of the reader in a forceful and distinctive way that the Epistles and the Gospels do not. Imagery, symbolism and metaphor are brought together in a profound contrast of images and intertextual references to generate constant provocations on the reader's mind. According to Grabiner (2013), the book of Revelations has



captured the imaginings of artists, poets and songwriters as well as having baffled numerous scholars with its symbols, flashes of colors, and complex literary imagery. Apparently, the selected New Testament discourse in this article is uniquely constructed and its textual/ verbal composition continues to provoke scholarly discussions. Cognisant of these observations, it is then reasonable to say such a rich text requires a multi-disciplinary approach for further engagement that might bring out novel insights. Couch's (2000:73) posits that "the interpreter must give attention to grammar, to the times, circumstances and conditions of the writer of the biblical book, and to the context of the passage." Pohlmann (2019) also notes that the Book of Revelation falls under apocalyptic genre which claims to reveal the hidden things of the future. It must be admitted that as an example of apocalyptic writing, Revelation 20 is unique and challenging. This implies that its meanings are not easily discerned from the text. It is this background that informs this article where the crucial questions which prime this study are the following;

1. What aspects of culture, history and the social world of Revelation 20 need to be examined and understood in meaning production process?
2. Which stylistic devices are profoundly employed to project shades of meanings?
3. What interpretive insights can be gained by examining stylistic elements of Revelation 20?

In addressing these research questions, we purposively identify stylistic devices and discuss the suggested semantic possibilities vis-a-vis the contextual aspects of Revelation 20:1-15.

### **Stylistics Conceptual Framework and method**

The aim of this article is to analyse Revelation 20:1-15 from a stylistic conceptual framework. According to Leech and Short (2007:13), stylistics is the linguistic study of style which is "rarely undertaken for its sake, simply as an exercise in describing what use is made of language." Stylistic approach places emphasis on how language is employed to construct and project meanings. Prominence in stylistic framework is accorded to language aspects. This underlines the idea of style as central to stylistic exploration of texts and/ or discourse. Mavengano (2020) posits that contemporary stylistics is a full-fledged multidisciplinary and an eclectic approach to the study of language and discourse.

Most importantly, the contemporary conceptualisation of stylistic analysis embraces the pertinent roles of both the verbal configuration of the text studied and also brings into discussion contextualisation principle since languaging is informed by specific socio-cultural and historical contexts (Mavengano, 2020). Stylistics sits comfortably between disciplines since it is used to examine language and languaging and not only in poetics but also in other disciplines where language scrutiny is necessary for reading and meaning-making. In other words, the context brings novel shades of meanings (Simpson, 2004, Leech and Short, 2007/1981, Mavengano, 2020). The stylistic analysis adopted in this study regards the selected New Testament discourse as a linguistic construct hence understanding of the language employed is helpful and relevant in gleaning the semantic possibilities of the text.

According to Denzin and Lincoln (2000:3), "discourse research (including NT) is mainly qualitative because it is inherently interpretive since it seeks to make sense of phenomena in terms of meanings people bring to them." In addition, Silverman (2000) also observes that qualitative research explores a wide array of dimensions of the socio-cultural world. This makes qualitative method relevant to this research since it is also mindful of the contextual and historical setting of Revelation 20.

### **The concept of style**

Mavengano (2020) writes that the term style derives from a Latin word "*stilus*" which means a writing instrument. Style and stylistics share the Latin morphological origin. The classical school of rhetoric considered style as a critical part of the techniques of persuasion. The Greek



rhetoricians had keen interest in the tropes and other rhetorical devices (linguistic and non-linguistic-) that were used by orators for effective argument and persuasion. Thus, the greatest contribution of rhetoric to contemporary stylistics is the idea of style as a deliberate choice in communication for well-defined purposes. Furthermore, style was an integral part of meaning-making process (effect of style was either powerful and convincing argument or persuasion), ability to attain intended effect was central to rhetoric studies of style. Similarly, in modern times, style is studied in relation to its function in the meaning production process.

Mavengano and Hove (2019) contend that the term style carries a variety of meanings and its polysemic nature presents definitional problems because there is no consensus among scholars on what it means. A proliferation of definitions in the field is evidence of the inability to reach a consensus about the term's definition. More recently, literature offers a host of definitions from different theoretical orientations, not surprising because style is studied in quite a number of disciplines such as literary criticism, linguistics, philosophy, New Testament among other disciplines. The term style is defined by Leech and Short (2007), linguists who have contributed immensely towards style and stylistics. They define style as linguistic habits of a particular writer utilised for the projection of meaning. This therefore implies that style is interwoven with meaning in the construction of a New Testament text.

### **The context of Revelation 20**

This segment focuses on discussing the context of Revelations 20. By context, one will be referring to what Couch (2000:73) considers as: "...differentiates between the overall biblical context (Old Testament and New Testament); the contextual framework (Old Testament and New Testament); the direct framework of study (a specific book of the Bible); the more immediate context (the specific chapter or chapters); and the most immediate context (the verses before and after those being studied). In order to comprehend a specific text, interpretation has to bridge the time which is there between the ancient world of the text and the contemporary times. Consideration should be accorded to culture, language, history, genre among other things. In Revelations 20, the literary genre is apocalyptic. Moller (2019:2) argues that: "...'apocalyptic literature' was invented by a German New Testament scholar Friedrich Lucke in 1832 in the context of an introduction to the Book of Revelation... They are revelations concerning heavenly mysteries or the end of history" The term apocalypse is derived from a Greek word *apokalypsis* (ἀποκαλυψις) which means 'revelation' or 'discovery'.

A definition of apocalyptic literature is not an easy one, Collins (2008:32) posits that it is: 'a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial insofar as it involves another, supernatural world.'

In addition to the definitions given above, it is imperative to consider the style of communication which is found in Revelations 20 which is characterised by mediation of the conflict and crisis involving forces of light and darkness, the promise of hope and supporting the faithful in dealing with the predicament. This can be communicated in symbolic, figurative, visionary and descriptive ways. Therefore, apocalyptic discourse is characterised by metaphorical and symbolic language which "... not only discloses an expanded universe but also orients humans in that larger world (Thompson, 1990:31-32).

The genre in Revelations is also presented in a prophetic-apocalyptic manner (Moller, 2019:3). It is prophetic in the sense that God is revealing himself and does not only refer to future events but may include the past and present. It is against this background that the concept of apocalyptic eschatology in the book of John is avoided. John seems to look at the present in light of the future as well as the past. If it is rejected that the future is not known, therefore, Moller's (2019) method may not be correct, it could be argued that this is against the Christian view of history which focuses on an onward movement to a final satisfactory consummation.



It is imperative at this juncture to discuss the probable author of the revelations to John. The apostle John is ascribed as the probable author of the Book of Revelation. The Book is usually dated in A.D. 81-96 during the persecutions of the emperor Domitian. Scholars such as Moller (2019); Thompson (1990) suggests a probability of an earlier date, which could be most likely during the reign of Nero (CE 37-68). Yet, John in Revelation 1:9 talks about his exile on Patmos which may imply that Nero was already dead then. The evidence from Revelations 1:9 would imply that the Book of Revelation was written after the death of Nero probably during the rampant persecution which could be the reign of Domitian (Elwell and Yarbrough, 2005:376-377). It is likely that some of the information in the Book of Revelation could have been accessible to John at an earlier stage and possibly added to the revelations he had received at Patmos. However, all this remains speculative.

A characteristic of the Book of Revelation is that it comprises of a lengthy and complicated chain of 60 or more visions. Elwell and Yarbrough (2005:376) posits that, “[t]hey blend into one another, overlap at times, go back and start all over again.” Thus, the book is not a series of actions and events which continually follow each other in a chronological way, but it frequently deals with similar events from various points of views and angles. It is also the same situation in Revelation 19 which does not follow logically to chapter 20, but “... rather being an in-between scene after the end confrontation of Revelation 19:19-21.”

In Revelation 20:1, it starts with the definite article and (καί) which does not show any indication of a historical progression between chapters 19 and 20. Repeatedly, in Revelation discourses the definite article ‘and’ functions as a transitional word which shows a new vision. In fact out of 35, only three incidents of ‘and,’ in 19: 11-21 visibly show progression in historical time, for example, the first ‘and’ in verses 20a, 21a, 21b, and probably verse 14a. Whereas the rest of the verses work as visionary linking devices: “and i saw’ occurs in Revelation, followed by reference to ‘an angel coming/out of heaven’ (10:1; 18:2), it always introduces a vision either reverting to a time before the preceding section (as in 7:2 and 18:1) or occurring at the same time as the preceding section (as in 10:1)” (Moller, 2019:4). Revelation 20:1 fits well in this prototype because there is also an ‘and i saw formula’ followed by ‘an angel coming down from heaven’ and ‘having’ power (a ‘key’). “[t]he three phrases ‘and i saw’ in 19:11, 17, and 19 introduced sections temporally with each other. We should not be surprised, then that, contrary to the premillennial view, ‘and i saw’ in 20:1 does not introduce events occurring after those of 19:1-21 (Beale, 2015:556).

Reddish (2001:394) also agreed with the above scholars such as Moller (2019); Beale (2015) that Revelation 20 does not follow sequentially on chapter 19 and asks that in this regard: Whom the martyrs will judge (20:4) if according to 19:21 all enemies have been killed already? Do the martyrs sit around judging themselves? Furthermore, Fowler (2013:7) aptly says: ‘John “runs it by again” to view the new covenant reality of Jesus Christ from different perspectives. He turns the gem around to look at different facets of its brilliance.’

Considering the context of the text itself, there is no evidence that the vision John may point to millennialism which is significant the interpretation of eschatology. As has been discussed above, there are generally more than 60 visions in the Book of Revelation. There is also no evidence that suggests that the revelation of John concerning the 1000 year bondage of Satan is so significant that it should establish or typify eschatology as being pre-, post- or a-millennial (Moller, 2019:4). There are many New Testament scholars such as Bauckham (1993); Barr (1984) who do not think that millennium can be regarded to qualify as their eschatology. In the contemporary times, most Roman Catholics, Orthodox, and Protestants do not consider the future in terms of millennialism. “...millennialism remains strong in certain circles. Many, but not all, evangelicals are still arguing about such issues. Dispensationalists make up one third of American evangelists but have extended their influence through their mastery of the media and ability to ‘read the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other” (Weber, 2008:379-380). John considers his visions as the revelation of Jesus Christ (Revelation, 1:1). Therefore,





this should be viewed as an indication of the foundation and content of the book (Kuykendall, 2015:72).

### **Re-reading Revelation 20: A Stylistics Analysis**

In this section, we focus on identifying and analysing the semantic effect of the stylistic features deployed in Revelation 20. Revelation 20 begins in medias res where John opens this chapter without placing it in an explicit sequence of time such as 'then' or 'after.' He just begins by saying: 'And I saw,' which is a monumental verbal phrase that provokes readers' gaze and demonstrate visions which were characterised by symbols such as numbers, keys, names among others (Beale, 2015:554; Elwell & Yarbrough, 2005:376). No matter which exegetical method one uses,- revelation has a pervasive utilisation of pictorial images and symbols. In verse 1, the angel is coming down from heaven with the key of Abyss in King James Version and "bottomless pit" in Gideons. The key is a symbol showing extraordinary power of the angel meant to destroy the habitat of the evil powers and spirits. The angel has a key and 'the great chain' which again acquires a symbolic reading (Fowler, 2013:21), in that the angel cannot lock up Satan because he is spiritual but rather able to 'chain' with great divine powers. Our interpretation has a basis in revelation 1:7-18 when John says: "... I am the First and the Last. I am the living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive forever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades." With this Christ is the one with keys of death and Hades- Christ could be an angel (αγγελος) John saw in his vision. However, there is no evidence to support this claim.

In verse 2, a serpent symbolises and metaphoricises the devil and is described as ancient which may mean that it is the same serpent which deceived Adam and Eve (Gen.3). The devil means slanderer (διαβολος), or Satan that means 'adversary' (σατανας). The devil is described in negative terms using four adjectives which are: dangerous, blood-thirsty, cunning and a powerful deceiver. Similarly, in Revelation 12:9 the evil is described in the same way. The emotive language conveys negative sentimentality towards Satan which is embedded in lexical choice of terms such as devil and serpent.

In verse 3 a verbal chain is employed 'seized' (εκρατησεν), 'bound' (εδησεν) and 'threw' (εβαλεν) showing majestic power of the angel in defeating Satan without any resistance. The three verbs are written in the aorist indicative form demonstrating completed past action. The syntactic construction is lexically dense with action words amplifying negativity towards the devil. It is also imperative and useful to note that the string of verbs generates a series of visual imagery meant to invite the readers to gaze (visualisation). In addition, Satan is thrown in the Abyss locked and sealed for 1000 years no longer deceiving people. Satan is temporarily disempowered yet, this does not refer to the future (pre-millennialism), and this could be contrary to the aorist indicative tense. According to Moller (2015:4), Satan described in four names two animal names or common nouns (dragon and serpent) and two proper names (Devil and Satan). The dragon mentioned in the above discussion is symbolically depicted in Revelation 12:3-4 as fiery red (πυρρος) with 7 heads, 10 horns and 7 crowns on the head, his tail destroys the stars, earth and deceives people (John 8:44). The symbolic name of 'dragon' and its anatomic descriptive imagery foreground Satan's mighty destructive and deceptive power.

In verses 4 and 5, Christ came as a ruler judging humankind sitting on his throne. John is repeating the phrase several times 'and I saw' emphasising seeing visions of the persecuted and condemned people (martyrs who were 'beheaded' for spreading the Gospel of Jesus. In his vision, John sees the thrones (used in the Book of Revelation 47 times) the throne is not on earth but in heaven. The throne metaphorically suggests the majestic presence of God during the judgement of mankind. The first resurrection is for the beheaded martyrs. These are Jesus; followers who sacrificed their lives and subsequently persecuted for their faith. They are referred as martyrs because they were not deterred by persecution. The symbolic and metaphoric language remains quintessential source of stylistic creativity in Revelation 20



and this is sustained up to the end of the chapter. In the same verses, the 'souls' those who were 'beheaded' were accorded authority to judge (κριμα εδοθη) can also be translated 'To these souls were given justice' (εδοθη [aorist passive]). God gave them justice which they did not get while on earth. The second resurrection is futuristic in nature since it coincides with the second coming of Jesus which frames the new world and heaven. Revelation 20:6 and 1 Corinthians 15:16 are intertextuality linked in the second resurrection discourse. The interweaving of Revelation with previous biblical books is effectively achieved through intertextual stylisations showing co-construction from Luke, Philippians and Revelation 4, 9 and 20. The semantic significance of the second resurrection discourse is to emphatically convey the spiritual rather than the physical one.

Revelation 20:7 invites a metaphoric understanding of the adverbial time phrase of "1000 years" of which the devil will be released from 'Abyss' to deceive humankind. The Abyss in this verse is a polysemous term that also suggests prison where the devil was restrained. It is only after the 1000 years when the angel will unlock the keys to release Satan. The recurrence of additive conjunction 'and' at the beginning of each verse from Revelation 20: 1, 2, 3, 4, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14 and 15, is a striking stylistic feature. It emphasises interconnectedness and unceasing progressive unfolding of John's visions. In verse 8 the devil is 'unchained' and ready to "deceive the nations in four corners of the earth-Gog and Magog- to gather them for battle." Gog and Magog are metonymically representing the nations which receive Satan's wrath after his release from Abyss. Beale (2015:558) and Fowler (2013:278) posit that Gog and Magog symbolically mean enemies of Israel which is God's chosen nation. Yet, it should be mentioned that the symbolic use or meaning of Gog and Magog is contested by scholars such as Tuell (2012:271), Beale (2015:597) and Fowler (2013:278).

In verse 9, symbolism is deployed through 'the camp of God's people' which is reminiscent of the Israelites' twelve tribes which travelled in the desert around God's tabernacle (Beale, 2015: 598). In the book of Revelation, Jerusalem is understood as a city of God while Babylon is the sphere of anti-Christ. In verse 10, a hyperbolic and metaphoric phrase "the lake of fire and sulphur" refers to judgment and doom awaiting Satan and false prophets. The three devil, anti-Christ and false prophet (tri- unity of Satan) are punished and destroyed forever. The solid and evocative visual imagery in verse 11 "And I saw a great white throne" draws the readers' active participation, who should witness the purity and greatness of the throne where God the judge was seated. The personification in the phrase "the sky fled" further amplifies and underscores the holiness and majestic presence of God who scares even the non-human geographical feature.

The reduplication of connective lexical device "and" in the following citation "And I saw the dead, great and small standing before the throne, and books were opened" (Revelation 20:12a), again reveals the continuous unfolding of John's visions. The symbolic "book of life" shows indiscriminatory nature of the universal judgment where different social groups or classes are judged by the universal law. The judgment is based on one's deeds. Verse 13 begins by the personification "the sea gave up" that means the sea obeys the majestic command of God. Parallelism is employed in verse 13 to convey the simultaneous action of 'giving up' the deed who were kept in the 'sea' and 'Hades.' In verses 14 and 15, the oxymoronic stylistic device "the second death of the dead" serves to emphasis complete destruction of the devil, dragon and false prophet (tri-unity of Satan) that are "thrown into the lake of fire".

### **Reflections from readings of Revelation 20: 1-20**

From the foregoing reading of Revelation 20, it is clear that stylistic analysis brings insightful and productive dimensions of meaning-making. This justifies the cross- disciplinary approach utilised in this article where linguistics and New Statement Studies are brought together to show possible interpretive trajectories that can be further explored. Furthermore, human



linguaging as depicted in New Testament discourse is open numerous interpretations and controversy over meanings.

The New Testament discourse as captured in Revelation 20 is a complex and polysemous site that evolves and invites an ongoing re-reading from diverse interpretive approaches such as narrative and stylistics that has been adopted in this article. The stylistic approach to New Testament interpretation was previously not preferred by traditional scholars citing the need to observe disciplinary boundaries. The argument presented against stylistics was based on the idea that stylistics was regarded as a suitable conceptual framework for studying poetic discourse rather than sacred discourse. This study refutes such rigid disciplinary binarisms that ignore the productive application of diverse theories and methods to the reading of the New Testament which are brought by cross-disciplinary studies. Stylistic analysis in this article shows the importance of studying textual features or languaging for deriving a more convincing meaning production process. It is therefore, imperative to borrow conceptual frameworks from other disciplines like linguistics and poetics in order to glean and appreciate diverse meanings from New Testament discourse.

### **Concluding remarks and recommendations**

We observed that the utilisation of stylistic approach to the New Testament discourse in Revelation 20, has revealed that human language and discourse are nuanced sites which depict the complex and problematic nature of sense-making. The sacred texts need to be analysed from the other post-modern conceptual tools and yield more insightful results. The disciplinary boundaries should not be blindly erected and maintained. It has been established in this article that there are numerous stylistic devices that were identified from Revelations 20:1-15 thereby exposing the falsity in the claim about distinctive textual features between New Testament and fictional texts. Similarly, style in NT, is utilised for semantic purposes just like in other discourses including literary texts. We therefore appeal for further scholarly conversations about traditional adherence to disciplinary boarding practices.

Our recommendations are framed in cognisance of the following:

- Biblical discourse as captured in New Testament is polysemous in nature hence it attracts multiple and contested meanings. This means that the hermeneutic problem still remains.
- In addition, it is essential to be mindful of the fact that readers of the New Testament texts come from diverse backgrounds hence the meanings are determined by this diversity.
- The apocalyptic nature and complexity of textual composition of Revelation 20 further complicate its reading. This means it requires cross-disciplinary approaches in order to gain new and more insightful readings.

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