

# Support For The Biblical Liturgy of Revelation in the Coptic Tradition

by Benjamin Zakhary

## Introduction

The book of Revelation begins with a brief introduction that includes the statement “Blessed is the one who reads and those who hear the words of this prophecy.”<sup>1</sup> In this statement two ideas emerge: (1) The book identifies itself as prophetic, and (2) The book places itself in a liturgical setting. The fact that the lector is singular (the one who reads) and the hearers are plural (those who hear), suggests that the text is intended for oral recitation within the assembly of believers—in other words, within a liturgical setting.

One of the first scholars to notice this lector-hearers relation was Ugo Vanni. Vanni comments on this verse saying,

By uniting the lector and the hearers in the same macarism, and bearing in mind the respective roles suggested by the meaning

of the two terms, this passage makes one think of the liturgical assemblies of the synagogue and the early Christian church, in which, as we know, there was a kind of dialogue between lector and hearers.<sup>2</sup>

Vanni sees a common dialogue between the lector and hearers throughout the book. For example, in the first chapter Vanni sees the lector saying verses 1.4-5a, then the Hearers responding with verses 1.5b-6, then the lector again from 1.7a, and finally the Hearers end with “*ναί, ἀμήν*.”<sup>3</sup>

Vanni’s initial hypothesis did not go unnoticed in the Biblical scholarship. In 2015, Andrea Spatafora suggested that many scholars have accepted the liturgical aspect of Revelation and agree that the reference to “the one

1 Revelation 1:3

2 Ugo Vanni, “Liturgical Dialogue as a Literary Form in The Book of Revelation,” *New Testament Studies* 37, no. 3 (1991): pp. 348-372, 348.

3 Vanni, “Liturgical Dialogue,” 351.

who reads” and “those who hear” convey an intention for the book to be proclaimed publicly.<sup>4</sup> However, there are disagreements within the scholarly community on the book’s literary intention. Jean-Pierre Ruiz notes that studies call the book an oral enactment, others a liturgical dialogue, and some even going to the extent of calling it a drama script.<sup>5</sup>

One element that narrows down the possibilities is verse 1:10, where the writer connects the book to the Sunday service. With the inclusion of this verse, the overall intention for the book becomes oral recitation in the ritual setting of Christian worship. Gager perhaps articulates this thought clearly as he shares the prevailing view that the book was intended to be read aloud during the liturgy.<sup>6</sup> Ruiz, who acknowledges the disagreements in scholarship, finds one single point of agreement saying, “The evidence of Rev 1:3 and 1:10 makes it clear almost beyond dispute that John’s Apocalypse was destined for oral recitation in a ritual setting, specifically in the setting of late first century Christian worship in the Roman province of Asia.”<sup>7</sup>

Although Ruiz is reluctant to confine this ritual to a geography, he ultimately suggests that the book is intended for a ritual oral

reading in Asia or Asia Minor.<sup>8</sup> The location is not the main focus here, especially since rites commonly spread and migrate. However, upon accepting the intention of the book as an oral reading with dialogical elements within a liturgical setting, more significant questions arise: (1) Is it reasonable to expect a reading of the entire book of Revelation in the liturgy? (2) Is it possible to do so with dialogical elements that would cause the reader to stop and the congregation to respond at certain points? (3) Is there any known evidence from liturgical traditions that support this practice surrounding the book of Revelation?

When initially surveying the known liturgical traditions, the answers to such questions do not appear supportive. In the Western rites, such as the Roman and Ambrosian rites, there is no known liturgical practice where the whole book is read within a liturgical setting.<sup>9</sup> The Byzantine and Syrian rites have liturgical influence from the book of Revelation; however, neither tradition has the book in their lectionaries at all.<sup>10</sup> One might argue that these traditions developed over the centuries and may not necessarily give a clear indication regarding how John expected the book to be read. However, rites that are deemed important by the community of the

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4 Andrea Spatafora, “Heavenly Liturgy and Temple in the Apocalypse,” *Theoforum* 46, no. 1 (2015): pp. 185-204, 186.

5 Ruiz mentions certain thoughts within the scholarship that associate the text of Revelation too closely to classical forms of Drama, but he adequately addresses these points. cf Jean-Pierre Ruiz, “Betwixt and Between on the Lord’s Day. Liturgy and the Apocalypse,” in *The Reality of the Apocalypse: Rhetoric and Politics in the Book of Revelation*, ed. David L. Barr (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2006), pp. 221-241, 227-9.

6 John Gager, *Kingdom and Community: The Social World of Early Christianity* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1975), 50-51.

7 Ruiz, “Betwixt,” 231.

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8 Ruiz, “Betwixt,” 231. cf David L. Barr, “The Apocalypse of John as Oral Enactment,” *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 40, no. 3 (1986): pp. 243-256, 245, 253.

9 In the Roman rite, the book of Revelation is read entirely in the Office of Readings of the Liturgy of the Hours during Easter Season. This connection between Revelation and the Resurrection feast in both the Roman and Alexandrian rites are worth further exploration. However, for the purpose of this paper it is enough to point out that in the Roman rite, Revelation is not read entirely within one service with dialogical elements.

10 Spatafora, “Heavenly Liturgy,” 186. cf Hans-Georg Gradl, “Offener Schluss und visionäre Theologie. Die Stellung der Johannes-apokalypse im Neuen Testament.” *Zur Debatte* 40, no. 5 (2010): pp 5-7, 5.

believers are typically retained, in one form or another, especially on solemn days. If there was ever an early, or even medieval, rite of reading the Book of Revelation in a liturgical setting, one would expect to find some remnant of it that connects to the questions at hand. The answers to the questions seem discouraging at first, until one considers one more tradition—the Alexandrian tradition.

The Alexandrian liturgical tradition, now preserved in the rites of Coptic churches, is an ancient tradition spanning the last two millennia.<sup>11</sup> It is precisely in this tradition that encouraging answers begin to emerge. On the eve of Saturday of Holy Week (after Good Friday service), a rite known as “Apocalypse Night” takes place in Coptic Orthodox Churches. During that vigil, the entire book of Revelation is read. The paper at hand will show that the Coptic rite surrounding the book of Revelation offers much supportive evidence for the biblical hypothesis surrounding the book’s intention, although differences still exist. To provide a useful assessment, first the paper will position the book within the general Coptic liturgical tradition, then the rite of Apocalypse Night will be discussed, and finally, the rite will be compared to the biblical hypothesis.

### **Liturgical Use of the Book of Revelation in the Coptic Tradition**

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11 Scholars and tradition agree that Christianity (along with primitive forms of the liturgy) in Alexandria go back to the first century AD. For reference, see: Stephen J. Davis, *The Early Coptic Papacy: The Egyptian Church and Its Leadership in Late Antiquity* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2017), 3-13. Also see: Athanasius al-Makary, *The Liturgical Life in the Church of Egypt Through the Ages (First Century – Fourth Century)*, ed. Mena Fawzy Abdelsayed and Larry Oats, trans. Youssef Estawro (Sandia, TX: St. Mary and St. Moses Abbey Press, 2022), 9-13.

The book of Revelation plays an important role in liturgical aspects of the Coptic tradition. At the front and center of any Coptic church is the image of the throne room from Rev 4. This image is situated in what Fr. Morkos Fakhry calls “the most important place” in the Apse of the Church<sup>12</sup> (typically called “Bosom of the Father” by Copts). This scene includes the Tetramorphs (the four living creatures) and the twenty-four presbyters carrying censers and wearing, or holding, crowns. These depictions seem to be popularized in Coptic art sometime in the Middle Ages, however, the practice itself may have been much older but localized. The earliest surviving depictions of the twenty-four elders include a wall painting from the ninth or tenth century in the apse of the church in The Monastery of Anba Hedra in Aswan, where each elder is identified with a letter of the Greek alphabet.<sup>13</sup> There is also a depiction of the elders in a tenth-century painting on the eastern wall of the sanctuary of Saint Takla Haymanot in the Church of St. Mary al-Mu‘allaqah in Old Cairo.<sup>14</sup> Earliest surviving icons of the Tetramorphs are a little older and can be found in apse-like niches of cells in the Monastery of Apa Apollo in Bawit, and the Monastery of Apa Jeremiah in Saqqara, dating to about 700 AD.<sup>15</sup> Because the evangelists are often associated with the Tetramorphs, icons of any evangelist will likely include his correlating Tetramorph.

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12 Morkos Fakhry, *The Book of Revelation and the Church of Alexandria: (Coptic Orthodox Church)* (Fairfax, VA: Eastern Christian Publications, 2019), 65.

13 Otto F. A. Meinardus, “Christian Subjects in Coptic Art: Twenty-Four Elders” in *The Coptic Encyclopedia*, ed. Aziz Suryal Atiya (New York, NY: Macmillan, 1991), 526b-544a.

14 Meinardus “Twenty-Four elders,” CE 526b-544a.

15 Paul Van Moorsel, “Christian Subjects in Coptic Art: Tetramorph” in *The Coptic Encyclopedia*, ed. Aziz Suryal Atiya (New York, NY: Macmillan, 1991), 526b-544a.



Besides iconography, language from Revelation overlaps with many of the liturgical prayers and hymns of the Coptic Church. For example, *Παντοκράτωρ* (*Pantokrator*) is a very common title used when addressing God in Coptic liturgical prayers. In the New Testament this word only appears ten times, nine of which are in the book of Revelation.<sup>16</sup> Remarkably, much of the use of the word *Pantokrator* appears within a liturgical context in the book. The title is used five times in hymns and praises,<sup>17</sup> and three times in the description of the last glorious day and heavenly Jerusalem.<sup>18</sup> Going even further, Crenshaw has described this name as a “refrain” and “confession employed by the worshiping exilic community” with

a special connection to the covenant.<sup>19</sup> Smulders sees an agreement between Crenshaw’s understanding of *Pantokrator* as liturgical and the first use of the name in Revelation (Rev 1:8), in which God confirms His consistency and unwavering covenant.<sup>20</sup> Overall, Smulders recognizes the liturgical weight of the name saying, “What is widely recognized concerning the whole book of Revelation, namely, its frequent use of liturgical language, is certainly true of the name *pantokrator*.”<sup>21</sup>

The Coptic tradition agrees with the liturgical

16 In the New Testament, *Pantokrator* is used once by Paul (2 Cor 6:18) and nine times in the Book of Revelation: *Pantokrator* 1:8, 4:8, 11:17, 15:3, 16:7, 19:6, and 21:22; *Pantokratoros* 16:14 and 19:15.

17 Rev 4:8, 11:17, 15:3, 16:7, 19:6.

18 Rev 16:14, 19:15, 21:22.

19 P. Smulders, “‘God Father All-Sovereign’: New Testament Use, The Creeds and The Liturgy: An Acclamation?: Some Riddles in The Apostle’s Creed III,” *Bijdragen: International Journal for Philosophy and Theology* 41, no. 1-2 (1980): pp. 3-15, 6-7. (Quote originally from J. L. Crenshaw, YHWH Sebaot Semo, in: ZAW 81(1969) pp. 156-175, 173).

20 Smulders, “God Father All-Sovereign,” 6.

21 Smulders, “God Father All-Sovereign,” 6.

understanding of *Pantokrator* since the term is used in all its liturgical services. After the Lord's Prayer, the most frequent prayer in the Coptic rite is the Thanksgiving Prayer, which includes the phrase, "O Master Lord God the Pantokrator." Historically, the term has been used in the liturgical prayers of Alexandria since the early centuries. For example, the liturgies of St. Mark<sup>22</sup> and St. Basil<sup>23</sup> both contain the term. Also, the collection of

Sarapion<sup>24</sup> uses this name in prayer.<sup>25</sup>

Besides the striking similarity in the use of *Pantokrator*, other similar language exists between Revelation and the Coptic rite. Perhaps the most obvious one is the word Alleluia. Of course, this word is found in the Hebrew Psalms, but is not found in the New Testament at all except in one chapter—Rev 19.<sup>26</sup>

In another example, Fakhry points out similarities between the Egyptian Anaphora of St. Basil and the hymns in Rev 4:11.<sup>27</sup>

### St. Basil Anaphora

*Worthy* and right, *worthy* and right, truly indeed *worthy* and right.

O You, the Being, Master, Lord, God of truth, being before the ages and *reigning forever*; Who dwells in the highest and looks upon the lowly; *Who has created the heaven, the earth, the sea and all that is therein.*

The Father of our Lord, God and Savior  
Jesus

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22 The Liturgy of St. Mark is an early Egyptian liturgy, originally in Greek, believed to be edited into Coptic sometime after 431 AD and is currently known as the Liturgy of St. Cyril in the Coptic church. cf R.C.D. Jasper and G.J. Cuming, *Prayers of the Eucharist: Early and Reformed*, ed. Paul F. Bradshaw and Maxwell E. Johnson (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press Academic, 2019), 104.

23 The Egyptian Liturgy of St. Basil is an early Christian Liturgy that became the most frequently used liturgy in the Coptic rite over the centuries. Traditionally, this liturgy is attributed to St. Basil of Cappadocia cf. Jasper and Cuming, *Prayers*, 115-117. There is still a debate surrounding authorship in modern scholarship; there has been some support for an early date of authorship and some, like Bernard Capelle, have even attributed authorship to St. Basil; others, such as Gabriele Winckler, do not think the anaphora has anything to do with St. Basil. However, the early presence of this anaphora in Egypt is reasonable as demonstrated by the manuscript record discussed by Doresse and Lanne. Achim Budde. *Die ägyptische Basilios-Anaphora: Text—Kommentar—Geschichte.* (Münster: Aschendorff, 2004). cf. Bryan D. Spinks, "Die Ägyptische Basilios-Anaphora: Text — Kommentar — Geschichte. by Achim Budde. Pp. 679. (Jerusalem Theologisches Forum, 7.) Münster: Aschendorff, 2004. ISBN 3 402 07506 7. Paper €59," *The Journal of Theological Studies* 57, no. 1 (January 2006): pp. 303-304, 303.

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24 The so-called Euchologion of Sarapion is a collection of prayers that is attributed to Sarapion, bishop of Thmuis (a large city in the Nile delta), and friend of both St. Anthony and St. Athanasius. The collection is generally dated to c. 350, although some scholarship has posed challenges to this dating. Overall, this represents an early liturgical tradition within Egypt. Jasper and Cuming, *Prayers*, 90. cf Maxwell E. Johnson, "A Fresh Look at the Prayers of Sarapion of Thmuis," *Studia Liturgica* 22, no. 2 (1992): pp. 163-183, 183. For more in-depth discussion surrounding the prayers of Sarapion refer to Maxwell E. Johnson, *The Prayers of Sarapion of Thmuis: A Literary, Liturgical, and Theological Analysis.* (Rome: Pontificio Istituto Orientale, 1995).  
25 Smulders, "God Father All-Sovereign," 10.  
26 Rev 19:1-6.

27 cf Fakhry, *Revelation*, 72-76.

Christ, by Whom *You have created all things*, seen and unseen. *Who sits upon the Throne of His Glory, and Who is worshipped by all the holy powers.*<sup>28</sup>

### Revelation Hymn

The twenty-four elders fall before the one who is *seated on the throne and worship the one who lives forever and ever*; they cast their crowns before the throne, singing,

“You are *worthy*, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, *for you created all things* and by your will they existed and were created.”

(Rev 4:10-11)

It is worth noting that these similarities are not unique to Coptic liturgies, but they are certainly universal across many early liturgical traditions. Otto Piper explores three possible reasons for such striking similarity between early proto-liturgies in Christian worship and the book of Revelation: (1) Revelation could be the source of the Christian liturgies, (2) both the early liturgies and Revelation could be interpreted as independent offshoots from Jewish worship, or (3) Revelation could be understood as the Seer’s interpretation of the actual worship of the Primitive Church, out of which the early liturgies gradually developed.<sup>29</sup> Piper easily disregards the first possibility, since John did not invent early liturgies. Piper questions the second possibility, before admitting that the most historically possible is the third.<sup>30</sup>

28 Matching phrases between the two texts are italicized.

29 Otto A. Piper, “The Apocalypse of John and the Liturgy of the Ancient Church,” *Church History* 20, no. 1 (1951): pp. 10-22, 17.

30 Piper, “The Apocalypse,” 18-19.

John is likely incorporating certain practices already in existence, and some (but not all) of them certainly have strong Jewish roots. Although the book is definitely not the cause of primitive liturgies,<sup>31</sup> the book undoubtedly influenced liturgical life. Ultimately, the book uses liturgy as a point of connection between heavenly and earthly realities,<sup>32</sup> a connection which traditions recognized and incorporated into later liturgical worship.

Several direct references from the book of Revelation can be found in prayers and hymns of the Coptic church. Any hymn intended to venerate the heavenly angels usually includes the Tetramorphs, the 144 thousand, and the twenty-four presbyters. This list is seen in the “Doxology of the Heavenly” which is chanted in Matins and Vesper services, and it is also seen in the section dedicated to the heavenly hosts within the Morning Praise. The Tetramorphs and the presbyters are even celebrated within the liturgical year.<sup>33</sup> In addition, the fraction prayer for feasts of the Virgin Mary, or any of the heavenly, include the following passage,

The four Incorporeal Beasts sing the hymn of the Trisagion, and the twenty-four Priests sitting on their seats, with

31 Piper, “The Apocalypse,” 19.

32 Gradl makes this clear as he notes, “Die Liturgie ist Verbindungspunkt und Scharnier zwischen himmlischer und irdischer Realität und sowohl Einlass- wie Entlasspforte der Leser. Das Buch, das seinem Selbstverständnis nach aus einer anderen Wirklichkeit stammt, verzahnt sich gerade am Schluss durch die liturgischen Wendungen mit der liturgischen Feier der Gemeinde.” Hans-Georg Gradl, *Buch und Offenbarung: Medien und Medialität der Johannesapokalypse*. (Verlag Herder GmbH, 2016), 448.

33 The Tetramorphs are celebrated on 8 Hathor, while the twenty-four presbyters are celebrated on 24 Hathor. cf. Müller C Detlef G, *Die Engellehre Der Koptischen Kirche* (Stuttgart: Otto Harrassowitz, 1959), 84, 86.

twenty-four crowns of gold on their heads, and twenty-four golden bowls in their hands, full of incense which is the prayers of Saints, and they worship before Him Who is living unto the age of ages. And the hundred and forty-four thousand undefiled celibates praise the Lord saying, “Holy, Holy, Holy. Amen, Alleluia.”... Holy and full of glory is this sacrifice which has been slain for the life of the whole world Amen. Alleluia.<sup>34</sup>

Among the praises, the Thursday Theotokia (a veneration praise for St. Mary) includes an entire section that recounts the event of the woman giving birth in heaven (Rev 12). This same reference is found in the *Adam Doxology* commemorating the church of Koskam.<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, during the month of Kiahk (Koiak)—the advent month leading up to the Nativity feast—many praises and hymns include direct symbols and language from the book of Revelation. Even the final blessing at the end of every liturgy throughout the year includes names of well-known saints mixed with lists of heavenly beings from the book of Revelation when asking for intercessions,

Exalt the horn of Christians through

34 “ΠΙΔ̅ ἠΨΩΩΝ ἠΔ̅ΣΩΜΑΤΟΣ ΣΕΧΩ ἠΠΡΕΨΥΤΕΡΟΣ ἠΤΕ ΠΤΡΙΣΑΓΙΟΣ. ΟΥΟΖ ΠΙ ΚΑΔ̅ ἠΠΡΕΨΥΤΕΡΟΣ ΣΕΖΕΜΙ ΖΙΧΕΝ ΝΟΥΘΡΟΝΟΣ: ἔρε ΚΑΔ̅ ἠΧΛΟΜ ἠΝΟΥΒ ΖΙΧΕΝ ΝΟΥΑΦΗΟΥΓΙ: ἔρε ΚΑΔ̅ ἠΦΥΔΛΗ ἠΝΟΥΒ ΞΕΝ ΝΟΥΧΙΧ ΕΥΜΕΖ ἠΣΘΟΙΝΟΥΓΙ: ἔτε ἠΠΡΟΣΕΥΧΗ ἠΤΕ ΝΙΔ̅ΓΙΟΣ: ΟΥΟΖ ΣΕΟΥΩΟΥΤ ἠΠΕΜΘΟ ἠΦΗΕΤΟΝΨ ΦΑ ἔνεζ ἠΤΕ ΠΙΕΝΕΖ. ΟΥΟΖ ΠΙΡ̅ΜΑ ἠΨΟ ἠΠΑΡΘΕΝΟΣ ἠΑΤΩΔΕΒ ΣΕΖΩΣ ἔΠ̅ΘΟΙΣ ΕΥΧΩ ἠΜΟΣ: ΧΕ ἠΓΙΟΣ ἠΓΙΟΣ ἠΓΙΟΣ: Δ̅ΜΗΝ ἠΛΛΗΛΟΥΔ̅... ΣΟΥΑΒ ΟΥΟΖ ΣΜΕΖ ἠΨΟΥ ἠΝΕΤΑΙΟΥΣΙΑ ΘΗΕΤΑΥΩΑΤΣ ΞΑ ΠΩΝΨ ἠΠΚΟΣΜΟΣ ΤΗΡΨ: Δ̅ΜΗΝ ἠΛΛΗΛΟΥΔ̅.” Text from: ‘Abd al-Masih̅ Salīb. ΠΙΧΩΜ ἠΤΕ ΠΙΕΥΧΟΛΟΓΙΟΝ ΕΘΟΥΑΒ (Cairo: ‘Ayn shams, 1902), 719-21. Translation modified from: Fakhry, *Revelation*, 78-9.

35 Youhanna Nessim Youssef, “Doxology and Eschatology,” in *Coptic Society, Literature and Religion from Late Antiquity to Modern Times*, vol. 2 (Bristol, CT: Peeters, 2016), pp. 1279-1287, 1281.

the power of the life-giving Cross and through the supplications and prayers of our Lady the holy Theotokos Saint Mary; the three great holy luminaries Michael, Gabriel, and Raphael; the four incorporeal creatures; the twenty-four priests; all the heavenly orders; Saint John the Baptist; the hundred and forty-four thousand... May their holy blessing, their grace, their power, their gift, their love, and their help rest upon us all forever. Amen.<sup>36</sup>

Overall, one could see the importance of the book of Revelation within the Coptic liturgical rite. By the iconography, similar use of words, and a plethora of direct references, it becomes clear that the Coptic tradition values the liturgical aspects of the book. Turning to the lectionary, however, there are no readings at all from the book (except on Apocalypse Saturday). This arrangement begs the question: if the book is held at a high esteem liturgically, why is it not read as part of the lectionary throughout the year? The complete absence of reading may seem odd at first, but it starts to make sense when considering the biblical hypothesis. If the book is intended to be read entirely in one liturgy with dialogical elements, it would be logical to avoid sectioning it into multiple smaller readings. Perhaps one could also suggest that an old tradition of continuous scriptural reading, seen elsewhere in Coptic Holy Week and Lent, was preserved because

36 “ΘΙΣΙ ἠΠΤΑΠ ἠΝΙΧΡΙΣΤΙΑΝΟΣ ΖΙΤΕΝ ἠΧΟΜ ἠΠΙΣΤΑΥΡΟΣ ἠΡΕΨΤΑΝΨΟ. ΖΙΤΕΝ ΝΙΨΟ ΝΕΜ ΝΙΤΩΒΖ ΕΤΕΣΙΡΙ ἠΜΩΟΥ ΞΑΡΟΝ ἠΣΗΟΥ ΝΙΒΕΝ: ἠΧΕ ΤΕΝΘΟΙΣ ἠΝΗΒ ΤΗΡΕΝ ΨΘΕΟΤΟΚΟΣ ΕΘΥ ΨΔ̅ΓΙΑ ΜΑΡΙΑ. ΝΕΜ ΠΑΩΜΤ ἠΡΕΨΕΡΟΥΩΙΝΙ ΕΘΥ ΜΙΧΑΗΛ ΝΕΜ ΓΑΒΡΙΗΛ ΝΕΜ ΡΑΦΑΗΛ. ΝΕΜ ΠΙΔ̅ ἠΨΩΩΝ ἠΔ̅ΣΩΜΑΤΟΣ: ΝΕΜ ΠΙΚΑΔ̅ ἠΠΡΕΨΥΤΕΡΟΣ: ΝΕΜ ΝΙΤΑΓΜΑ ΤΗΡΟΥ ἠΝΕΠΟΥΡΑΝΙΟΝ. ΝΕΜ ΠΙΔ̅ΓΙΟΣ ΙΩΑΝΝΗΣ ΠΙΡΕΨΨΩΜΣ: ΝΕΜ ΠΙΡ̅ΜΑ ΝΨΟ... ἔρε ΠΟΥΣΜΟΥ ΕΘΟΥΑΒ ΝΕΜ ΠΟΥΖΜΟΤ ΝΕΜ ΤΟΥΧΟΜ ΝΕΜ ΤΟΥΧΑΡΙΣ ΝΕΜ ΤΟΥΔ̅ΓΑΠΗ ΝΕΜ ΤΟΥΒΟΘΙΑ ΦΩΠΗ ΝΕΜΑΝ ΤΗΡΕΝ ΦΑ ἔνεζ ἠΜΗΝ.” Text from: Salīb. ΠΙΧΩΜ, 140-146.

of solemnity and importance. Coincidentally, the intention of the book according to the biblical hypothesis matches the absence of the book from the rest of year, being left to be read entirely in one special occasion; that occasion is Apocalypse Night.

### The Rite of “Apocalypse Night”

Vigils during Holy Week appear to be a very early practice as noted by Egeria who mentions a vigil from Friday night ending Saturday Morning. Egeria is very brief in describing this vigil simply saying, “And throughout the night hymns and antiphons are recited there until morning.”<sup>37</sup> For Egypt, the earliest manuscript mentioning the rite of this Saturday is the Sahidic Coptic lectionary *New York, MLM M573 (AD 822–913)*, where the day is called “Saturday before the Release” (psabbaton eebol ebol); Fr. Arsenius Mikhail suggests the title to presumably mean the final Saturday before the end of the Holy Week fast.<sup>38</sup> Unfortunately the readings in this lectionary differ considerably from contemporary readings that are based on the Bohairic Tradition.<sup>39</sup>

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37 *Itinerarium* 37.9. cf Anne McGowan and Paul F. Bradshaw, *The Pilgrimage of Egeria: A New Translation of the Itinerarium Egeriae with Introduction and Commentary* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press Academic, 2018), 178.

38 Arsenius Mikhail, “Joyous Saturday,” in *For Us and for Our Salvation: Lectures and Readings on Holy Week in the Coptic Tradition* (Anaheim, CA: ACTS Press, 2023), pp. 61-71, 62.

39 Mikhail Notes, “here, we find appointed a Pauline reading from Romans 5:6–12, mentioning that “God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us.” The Catholic Epistle from 1 John 1:1–7 is about the light and being children of the light, likely echoing the same ideas that gave rise to naming the day the Saturday of Light or Joyous Saturday. The reading from Acts 3:13–20 speaks about the Crucifixion of the Lord, saying, “But you denied the holy and righteous one, and killed the author of life, whom God raised from the dead.” The Gospel from Matthew 27:57–66 focuses on the taking

The earliest manuscripts from the Bohairic Tradition include The Scaligeri Codex (AD 1265), which names the day, “Holy and Great Saturday,” and has the same readings as the contemporary Coptic tradition, give or take one or two verses.<sup>40</sup> These are also the same readings found in the oldest Bohairic lectionary *British Library Add. 5997 (AD 1273)* published by Burmester.<sup>41</sup> The latter lectionary mentions the reading of the Book of Revelation.<sup>42</sup>

The earliest details of the overall rites of the vigil are preserved in literary works such as the descriptions in Ibn Kabar’s *Lamp of Darkness* (albeit mostly from the later Uppsala manuscript copied in AD 1547), and his contemporary Yūhannā ibn Sabbā‘, author of *The Precious Pearl*.<sup>43</sup> The contemporary rite of the Coptic Orthodox church largely matches the rite seen in these Copto-Arabic Bohairic texts. The rite is as follows:

1. Prelude (Finishing the Book of Psalms, which started after Good Friday Service)
  - Psalm 151 (I am the youngest)
  - Lobsh<sup>44</sup> of the Second Canticle

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down of Christ from the Cross, the burial, as well as the conspiracy between the Jews and the authorities. With the exception of the reading from Acts, none of the scriptural readings matches those of the Bohairic tradition. For example, the Gospel in Bohairic lectionaries is the Resurrection Gospel Matthew 28:1–20, while Matthew 27:63–66 is appointed rather for the morning service.” Mikhail, “Joyous Saturday,” 61.

40 This codex has following readings: Matins: Matthew 27:63–66; Liturgy: 1 Corinthians 15:1–22, 1 Peter 1:1–9, Acts 3:12–21, and Matthew 28:1–20. cf Mikhail, “Joyous Saturday,” 3.

41 Mikhail, “Joyous Saturday,” 63.

42 Mikhail, “Joyous Saturday,” 69.

43 Mikhail, “Joyous Saturday,” 63.

44 *Lobsh* is the Coptic word for commentary or explanation, and it is usually a hymn that follows a canticle, hymn, or a biblical passage to provide additional commentary on it.



2. Midnight Vigil
  - First Canticle (Exodus 15:1–20) and Lobsh
  - Old Testament praises.
  - Third Canticle (Daniel 3:52–88).
  - New Testament praises (including those of the Virgin Mary, Zacharias, and Simeon).
  - The story of Susanna (From the deuterocanonical continuation of Daniel)
3. Matins Service
  - Preliminaries and Thanksgiving.
  - Prayer for the Sick.
  - Morning Doxology.
  - Prayer for the Departed
  - Psali and Theotokia.
  - Prayer for the Oblations.
  - Doxologies
  - The Creed.
  - OT reading (Is 55:2–13), a homily of Athanasius, and Pauline reading (1 Cor 5:7–13).
  - Gospel and associated rites (Ps 87:4–5, 43:23, 26, 125:2–3, Mt 27:62–66).
  - Exposition in the Adam melody (They crucified our Savior).
  - Prayers and dismissal.
4. Third Hour prayer (12 standard Psalms, Jer 13:15–22, and Ps 16:10-11, Mt 16:24-28)
5. Sixth Hour prayer (12 standard Psalms, Is 50:10–51:8, and Ps 142:7, 130:1, Mt 5:3-12).
6. The reading of the Book of Revelation (Apocalypse of John)
7. Ninth Hour prayer (12 standard Psalms, Is 45:15–20, Jer 31:31–34, and Ps 41:5,10, Jn 5:21-30).
8. Eucharistic liturgy.

As seen, the book of Revelation is read between the Sixth and Ninth Hour of the Liturgy of the hours, shortly before the start of

the Eucharistic Liturgy.<sup>45</sup> The rite for reading the book is quite simple. A table with oil and seven cotton wicks (organized in the shape of the cross) is brought into the nave, right outside the altar sanctuary. The censer and incense are also brought out. While setting up, a deacon sings the hymn *Ere Pismou*, which has the following text, “The blessing of the theologian evangelist, John the celibate, shall come upon this congregation. All say Amen, so be it.”<sup>46</sup> From this short invocational hymn, the church introduces the author as John the evangelist, describing him as a “theologian,” and positioning his work as a theological text.

Then, continuous reading begins with the first chapter read by the most senior priest and the following chapters read in an orderly fashion. There is no clear rubric on who reads Revelation, and in many churches, it makes sense, pastorally and practically, that the laity conduct most of the reading. Fakhry claims that Revelation is the only reading that is not read from the ambo but is typically read from the nave with the laity performing most of the reading.<sup>47</sup> This practice, however, is not universal. Many churches still read the book

45 There is a rite known as The Reading of the Biography (ṭaqs qirā` at al-sīra) attested in medieval Copto-Arabic sources. This rite occurred before the Eucharistic liturgy during a saint’s feast day (cf. Mikhail, Ramez, “The Rite of the Reading of the Biography” in *The Claremont Coptic Encyclopedia*, 2020.). Mikhail has identified parallels between this rite and the reading the Book of Revelation in Apocalypse Saturday. He notes that the Apocalypse rite seems to regard John the Evangelist as the celebrated saint, with an introductory hymn dedicated to invoking his blessing upon those in attendance. Mikhail, “Joyous Saturday,” 70. cf. Athanasius al-Makary, *Sabt al-farah wa-l-nūr: Altārīkh al-ṭaqsī / ṭuqūs al-ṣalawāt [Joyous and Bright Saturday: Liturgical history / The rituals of the prayers]*, Ṭuqūs aṣwām wa-a’yād al-kanīṣah 4.7 (Cairo: Al-nūbār, 2012), 300-301.

46 Ἐρε πισμοῦ ἡ τε Πθεδλογος νεγαγγελιστης Ἰωαννης πηαρθενος: εφεῖ ἐρρη ἐχεν πηλαος ἀχος τηροῦ: χε ἀμην εσεωπι.

47 Fakhry, *Revelation*, 18-19.



from the ambo or pulpit, with readers each going up to read a section and returning to their place. This is especially common in monasteries or large churches where there are plenty of ordained readers. In smaller parishes, however, much of the book is read by the laity and practically it makes sense for the laity to simply stand up, read their portion, and sit back down rather than having to take their shoes off, walk up to an ambo, read, and then return to their seats. In reality, this practice is simply a practical matter for most churches and is not the product of deep theological insight.

More importantly, however, is standing

to read.<sup>48</sup> Even when not reading from the ambo, the lay member reading will typically stand up to read. This might be more significant than it seems at first. For example, in the Jewish tradition one always stands to read the Torah. When commenting on this practice, Ruth Langer states, “Standing to read the Torah is much more than a logistical necessity or an expression of respect. According to this interpretation, by standing,

48 It is important to note that Fakhry mentions the book “is read instead by all the congregation present in the church, one by one while sitting in their places.” Fakhry, *Revelation*, 19. The standard practice is usually to stand to read and sit back down, but evidently there are parishes which read the entire book while sitting down. This might be a pastoral practice considering the tiresome vigil.

the reader emulates, not Moses who stood to receive the Torah, but God who revealed it.”<sup>49</sup> This understanding can be extrapolated to reading the book of Revelation as well. Seeing that the main text of the book starts with God defining Himself as *alpha* and *omega*, connecting the reader to God Himself is a helpful tool to elevate these words in the minds of the hearers.

As the reading continues, multiple rituals take place. In the second and third chapters when the message to each of the seven churches is read, a cotton wick is lit so that by the end of the messages all seven are shining bright. At the end of each message is the phrase, “He who has an ear to hear let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.” Thus, at the end of each message, the reading stops, and all the people chant this phrase in a distinctive tune. This dialogical aspect repeats again at the naming of the twelve tribes (Rev 7) and at the naming of the foundations of the heavenly Jerusalem (Rev 21). After three tribes are read, the people repeat the three tribes in the same distinctive tune; again, with the foundations, the people repeat the foundations in the same tune adding the phrase “Our Savior is in its midst, crowning with honor those who love Him.” The reading is also interrupted when the heavenly sing Alleluia in the text (Rev 19); imitating the heavenly, the reading stops, and the congregation sing Alleluia in a long tune when the word is read. Whenever incense is mentioned, the presider puts incense in the censer and raises incense in the nave of the church.

After the entire book is read, the clergy anoint all the people with the oil that was lighting the seven wicks. The Ninth Hour is prayed,

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49 Ruth Langer, “From Study of Scripture to a Reenactment of Sinai: The Emergence of the Synagogue Torah Service,” *Worship* 72, no. 1 (1998): pp. 43-67, 52.

and then the Eucharistic liturgy begins. The book of Revelation does not replace any reading of the liturgy, instead a Liturgy of the Word occurs with the usual Pauline Epistle, Catholic Epistle, Acts of the Apostles, Psalm, and Gospel.

### **Between the Rite and the Biblical Hypothesis**

Reading the full book of Revelation in the Bohairic rite for the Saturday vigil of Holy Week is unquestionably noteworthy. It was such a significant part of the rite that the entire vigil eventually earned the title of the “Apocalypse Night” (*laylat abūghalimsīs*).<sup>50</sup> This is remarkable because the book of Revelation takes about an hour and half to read, which is only a small portion of the overnight vigil of six to eight hours. Fakhry even claims that “If anyone of the Coptic congregation is asked about what is the most prominent part of that night, the answer will immediately be: ‘the reading of the Book of Revelation.’”<sup>51</sup>

It is difficult to answer the questions of why the entire book is read during this vigil and when this practice started. In her study on Sahidic sources of Holy Week, Diliانا Atanassova identified a group of fragments from the same codex (*sa 299L*), typically dated by scholars between ninth and eleventh centuries.<sup>52</sup> This codex is a Sahidic lectionary for Holy Week and it contains a large portion of the book of Revelation (Rev 3 – 21) as the reading for what Atanassova calls “*Karsamstag*, 6.

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50 Mikhail, “Joyous Saturday,” 68.

51 Fakhry, *Revelation*, 37.

52 Diliانا Atanassova, “Neue Erkenntnisse Bei Der Erforschung Der Sahidischen Quellen Für Die Paschawoche,” in *Ägypten Und Der Christliche Orient Peter Nagel Zum 80. Geburtstag*, ed. Heike Behlmer, Ute Pietruschka, and Frank Feder (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2018), pp. 1-38, 23.

*Tagesstunde*” (Holy Saturday, Sixth Hour).<sup>53</sup> Mikhail sees this as evidence that the practice existed at least before the eleventh century if not earlier.<sup>54</sup> There are no significant Bohairic sources prior to the twelfth century, but some of the earliest sources available all have this practice of reading Revelation.<sup>55</sup> What we encounter in such sources is a complete and mature rite, which Fakhry rightly suggests to have developed much earlier than the written sources.<sup>56</sup> Overall, it can be concluded that the practice of reading the entire book of Revelation can be traced back to at least the eleventh century, with a strong possibility of the ninth century or earlier.

The reason behind this unique rite is also difficult to unveil. A few different possible answers have been proposed by scholars. Because of some connection with Sahidic monastic communities, evident by *sa 299L* fragments, one proposed explanation was that this practice is the remnant of the alleged tradition of reading the entire Bible during Lent, or even during Holy Week. Thus, the Book of Revelation, read on the last day of Holy Week would be a logical conclusion. Mikhail entertains this possibility, before admitting that it is impossible to prove the alleged tradition solely based on the reading of the Book of Revelation.<sup>57</sup> Another proposed explanation suggests the reading to be simply a lay practice of popular piety

that made its way into the liturgical rite. Mikhail points to two things that could support this explanation: (1) reading the Book of Revelation forms an interlude between the Sixth and Ninth Hour prayers, an interval during which people might have left for a break before returning again later, as mentioned by several medieval sources; (2) a number of apocalyptic literatures<sup>58</sup> became popular around the tenth century, which may have aroused the public’s interest in the Book of Revelation.<sup>59</sup>

Although these explanations are theoretical, this paper is not suggesting an additional explanation that the understanding of Rev 1:3 is the reason behind this practice. The study at hand simply aims to show that the liturgical practice, regardless of its reason, is in alignment with the proposed biblical intention behind the book of Revelation. Additionally, the rite provides enough supporting evidence to show that Vanni’s proposed intention of Revelation is not only a real liturgical possibility, but even a liturgical reality for many Copts today.

### *Supporting Evidence*

There are significant points of agreement between the rite and biblical hypothesis surrounding the intention of Revelation to be read fully, in a dialogical manner, within a liturgical setting. Starting with the latter point, not only is the Apocalypse Night vigil liturgical, but even more, it encompasses the whole liturgical life of the Coptic church. The night includes much of the Midnight Praise (Psalmody), Matins Raising of Incense (Cathedral Office), the Liturgy of the Hours (Monastic Office), mournful chants (Holy

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53 Atanassova, “Neue Erkenntnisse,” 26.

54 Mikhail, “Joyous Saturday,” 68.

55 The reading of the Apocalypse of John is mentioned for example briefly in the Bohairic Lectionary of British Library Add. 5997 (AD 1273), and in the older lectionary Monastery of St. Antony, Liturgy 260 (AD 1184). cf Mikhail, “Joyous Saturday,” 69. The reading is also found in thirteenth and fourteenth century guides such as Ibn Kabar’s *Lamp of Darkness*, and his contemporary Yūḥannā ibn Sabbā’, author of *The Precious Pearl*. cf Fakhry, *Revelation*, 61.

56 Fakhry, *Revelation*, 61.

57 Mikhail, “Joyous Saturday,” 68.

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58 Such as *Letter of Pisentius and the Apocalypse of Samuel* for example. cf Mikhail, “Joyous Saturday,” 68.

59 Mikhail, “Joyous Saturday,” 68-69.

Week rite), annual chants (Annual Liturgical rite), and of course, the Eucharistic Liturgy. One can clearly see that the vigil is not only liturgical, but it is as liturgical as it gets! In this setting the Book of Revelation is read in full. Here, there is clear harmony between the biblical hypothesis and the rite as the book is read in a liturgical setting.

The dialogical elements of the rite and the Biblical hypothesis are also a point of harmony. Although several readers take turns reading chapters or sections of the book, at any given point of time there is only one reader and many hearers. This arrangement follows the text of Rev 1:3 perfectly and aligns with the understanding of the biblical hypothesis that the book was to be read out loud by a reader, heard by a congregation of hearers. For David Barr, this arrangement is essential both to the interpretation of the book and to liturgical experience. He makes this clear as he writes,

The orality of the Apocalypse is an essential element in its interpretation, for its oral presentation within the liturgy mediates the coming of Jesus to his congregation in salvation and judgment enabling them to carry on the divine service, that is, the realization of God's rule in their midst.<sup>60</sup>

What is even more convincing is the dialogue that takes place at several points during the reading process. As noted earlier, the reader stops at certain points in the text and the congregation responds with a chant before the reader resumes again. For example, when reading Rev 21 describing the foundation of the city the dialogue is as follows:

Reader: I looked at the city building armored gold, and the precious stones, and the good

<sup>60</sup> Barr, "The Apocalypse," 256.

pearls (an introductory chant to this section).

Hearers: And our Savior in its midst, crowning with honor those who love Him.

Reader: The foundations of the wall of the city are adorned with every jewel; the first was Jasper, the second Sapphire, the third Chalcedony, (Rev 21:19)

Hearers: The first foundation was Jasper. The second was Sapphire. The third was Chalcedony.

And our Savior in its midst, crowning with honor those who love Him.

Reader: the fourth Emerald, the fifth Sardonyx, the sixth Sardius, (Rev 21:19-20)

Hearers: The fourth was Emerald. The fifth was Sardonyx. The sixth was Sardius.

And our Savior in its midst, crowning with honor those who love Him.

In this dialogue one can see that the reader and hearers exchange chants and hymns within the read biblical text. The tradition intentionally adds participatory elements for the people to keep them engaged during the length of the reading. Perhaps Paul Janowiak puts it best as he comments on the proclamation of reading and remarks that "the participation of the assembly is crucial to its fruitful enactment."<sup>61</sup> This dialogical aspect was the cornerstone in Vanni's argument for the liturgical understanding of the book of Revelation. He makes this clear when he writes, "The presence of so many elements linked to the liturgy in the book of Revelation, and above all the relation between lector and hearers which is typical of the liturgical assembly, permit us to describe

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<sup>61</sup> Paul Janowiak, *The Holy Preaching: The Sacramentality of the Word in Liturgical Assembly* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2000), 166.

the liturgical practice.”<sup>62</sup> For Vanni, this liturgical relation between reader and hearers is materialized in dialogues; he adds that “The hearers react as a united group. Thus we have an interacting exchange, a dialogue taking place between John/the lector and the group of hearers.”<sup>63</sup> In a way, Vanni not only allows for dialogical interruptions of the text, but rather anticipates them, saying, “This interpretation would lead us to say that the narrative exposition tends towards dialogue — and so much so as to render even unexpected interventions acceptable and almost natural.”<sup>64</sup> Thus a reading with a dialogical aspect would conform to the biblical hypothesis proposed by Vanni. This observation is especially important since the Book of Revelation is the only scripture with dialogical interruptions in its liturgical reading; there is no other scriptural reading in the Coptic rite that possesses a dialogical form. Overall, the liturgical dialogue within the reading of Revelation in the Coptic rite supports Vanni’s idea to a great extent.

The final, and perhaps most obvious, point of agreement is that the whole book is read loudly. Barr lightly comments, “When we read it aloud in class, it takes a little more than an hour. Listening to it may take more concentration than the generation of the thirty-second commercial can muster, but the ancients were both more patient and had better trained memories than we [have].”<sup>65</sup> Although Barr is making a comparison between the ancients and us, in a lightly joking manner, reading the full book is not a theoretical premise, even within “the generation of the thirty-second commercial.” Reading the entire book within the liturgical setting is not a hypothetical situation of the

past, but it is a living reality within our time. Each year during holy week many Copts go to their parish churches, attend the vigil, and listen to the entire book of Revelation. Clearly, the rite shows the biblical hypothesis to be possible, reasonable, and fruitful.

Aside from the mentioned significant points of harmony between the rite and the biblical hypothesis, there are also a few subtle supporting details. For example, after each of the seven messages to the churches, the congregation of hearers react dialogically, chanting, “He who has an ear to hear let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.” This matches Vanni’s thought that the messages to the churches are intended to be internalized by the hearers. Vanni remarks on this saying, “The ‘lector’ of 1.3 will be then the mediator between John and the churches. The hearers of 1.3 thus correspond somewhat to the seven churches.”<sup>66</sup> Since the rite interrupts the reading after every message to proclaim that one should listen, it is clear the congregation is asked to internalize each message to the churches, so that each individual accepts the message as personal advice.

Another subtle point is the association with the Eucharist. Spatafora points out that in the book, “God’s final victory is already inaugurated in the paschal mystery of Christ. This signifies reward for God’s servants, the prophets and the saints...”<sup>67</sup> The idea of seeing the paschal mystery, materialized in the Eucharist, as a victory can be subtly visualized in the Coptic rite surrounding the Apocalypse of John. For example, the book is read before the Ninth Hour prayer, which is associated with death, and especially the death of Christ.<sup>68</sup> Right after the Ninth Hour prayer,

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62 Vanni, “Liturgical Dialogue,” 354-355.

63 Vanni, “Liturgical Dialogue,” 350.

64 Vanni, “Liturgical Dialogue,” 368.

65 Barr, “The Apocalypse,” 244.

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66 Vanni, “Liturgical Dialogue,” 349.

67 Spatafora, “Heavenly Liturgy,” 195-196.

68 The description in the *Agpeya*—the Coptic book of Hours—aligns the prayer for this hour with the

the Eucharistic Liturgy begins. In a way, the death of Christ is the temporal bridge between the victory seen at the end of revelation and the heavenly feast experienced in the Eucharistic Liturgy. Flowing from the victory seen at the end of Revelation into the Ninth Hour prayer and then into the Eucharistic Liturgy subtly supports Spatafora's view of paschal mystery as a reward of victory.

Another subtle point is the link between the Old Testament events and the redemptive work of Christ as seen by the book of Revelation. Spatafora comments on this thought saying, "The Old Testament events like the Exodus are a type of the salvation brought by Christ... the Seer—as early Christian exegete—is reinterpreting symbols that embody the primary religious experiences of the Jewish people in light of the Christ-event."<sup>69</sup> When examining the rite of Apocalypse Night, one sees that the vigil truly begins with the song of the sea (Ex 15) and remembering the Exodus event. Following this, multiple Old Testament praises are proclaimed from the scriptures, ending with the story of Susanna. The common thread that ties all of them is the idea of moving from death to life. The children of Israel were in a situation of impending death when they were trapped between the sea and Pharaoh's army. When the waters split, it granted them life again. Similarly, Susanna was condemned to death and when Daniel spoke she was allowed to live again. Reading such texts during the last day of Holy Week, between the death and the Resurrection Feast, leaves no room for doubt that the church placed these passages

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death of Christ. The litanies and Absolution of this hour also show the connection to Christ's death. This temporal connection of the ninth hour prayer with the death of Christ is universal in East and West; this practice of course, based on Biblical accounts that Christ died in the ninth hour (Mark 15:34-37 and Matthew 27:46-50).

69 Spatafora, "Heavenly Liturgy," 198.

here in connection to the salvific work of Christ.<sup>70</sup> This matches what Fr. Marco Benini calls *Zugang durch das Kirchenjahr* ("The approach via the Church year").<sup>71</sup> Benini explains that when a passage is chosen deliberately on a day commemorating an event, the church is approaching the text with a certain hermeneutical understanding that makes it fitting for that day.<sup>72</sup> When applying this to the passages of the Old Testament chosen on Apocalypse Night, it is clear that the church is interpreting those events in the light of Christ's redemption which moved us from death to life. Integrating the Book of Revelation within this reading framework agrees with the thought highlighted by Spatafora.

### *Points of Tension*

Although the Coptic rite provides much supportive evidence in favor of the biblical hypothesis at hand, there are still some obvious disagreements. The first is the day on which the book is read. In the introductory chapter,

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70 It is worth noting that nine of the scriptural praises (eight Old Testament odes and one New Testament) in the Coptic rite of Apocalypse Saturday are identical to the Nine Scriptural Odes in the daily Matins Service of the Byzantine tradition (al-Makary, *Sabt al-farah*, 134-135). These odes were originally sung every day in their entirety, with a brief refrain included in between each verse. Short verses (troparia) eventually replaced these refrains, and Saint Andrew of Crete is credited with starting this process. The original Biblical Odes are still read in Matins throughout Great Lent. cf. Kallistos Ware, *The Festal Menaion* (London: Faber and Faber, 1969), 546. However, such a strong connection between the scriptural praises and the Paschal themes of Christ's salvific work is much more apparent in Coptic practice as we know it, even if it may be the case that such praises were not assigned to Bright Saturday for this exact reason per se.

71 Marco Benini, *Liturgische Bibelhermeneutik: Die Heilige Schrift Im Horizont des Gottesdienstes* (Münster: Aschendorff Verlag, 2020), 247.

72 Benini, *Liturgische Bibelhermeneutik*, 247-250.

John mentions that he was in the Spirit “on the Lord’s Day” (Rev 1:10). Scholars and exegetes have typically interpreted this as a reference to Sunday. The time of the “Lord’s Day” is significant in that it connects the text to a clear liturgical time.<sup>73</sup> Because the Coptic rite reads the book of Revelation during the early hours of Saturday, and not on Sunday, this arrangement presents a point of tension. However, this tension could be resolved. The main use of Rev 1:10 is to connect the book to a liturgical setting, but all elements of Sunday worship are seen in the vigil; the entire liturgical life is incorporated in the night. Thus, Apocalypse Night fulfills the connection to a liturgical setting, resolving most of the tension.

In another concern, Hans-Georg Gradl highlights the connection between the Lord’s Day and the resurrection of Christ.<sup>74</sup> However, this connection is still preserved by the rite, even if the reading is not on Sunday. Since the book is read on the night of transition from death to life,<sup>75</sup> serving as the liturgical bridge to the Resurrection Feast, the connection to resurrection is very strong. The Saturday is even called “Joyful Saturday” in some sources due to the festal link.<sup>76</sup>

Another point of divergence is the location. Ruiz notes that scholars believe that Revelation was intended to be read liturgically in the churches of Asia and Asia Minor.<sup>77</sup> Since the practice detailed in this rite is Egyptian, this differs from Ruiz’s initial supposition regarding location. However, as previously mentioned, there is

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73 See for example Ruiz, “Betwixt,” 231-232.

74 Gradl, *Buch und Offenbarung*, 447.

75 Even the hymns during Apocalypse night are sung in half mournful tune (representing passion and death of Christ) and half joyful or annual tune (representing the resurrection).

76 cf Mikhail, “Joyful Saturday,” 61.

77 See note 8.

enough historical precedence to show that rites generally migrate and transfer over time. Moreover, the existence of the Egyptian rite does not negate the possibility of rites in the churches of Asia surrounding the Apocalypse of John. Furthermore, the intention of the book itself seems to have a more universal focus. As Gradl points out, the final greeting is addressed to all Christians beyond any local limitation.<sup>78</sup>

Perhaps the greatest point of divergence is in the details of the dialogue—which sections are for the reader, and which are for the hearers. To illustrate, Vanni outlines Rev 1:4-7 as such,

Lector: (Rev 1.4-5a) Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.

Hearers: (1.5b – 6) To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood and made us a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

Lector: (1.7a) Look! He is coming with the clouds; every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all the tribes of the earth will wail on account of him.

Hearers: (1.7b) So be it, Amen<sup>79</sup>

This dialogue outlined by Vanni differs from the dialogues in the Coptic rite. In the Coptic rite the reader typically reads every word of the text, but the people interrupt to repeat the biblical words using a beautiful chant. In the rite, the text itself is not sectioned

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78 Gradl, *Buch und Offenbarung*, 448.

79 Vanni, “Liturgical Dialogue,” 351.



into antiphonal stanzas for the reader or the congregation. The biblical hypothesis and the rite agree on the dialogical use of the book, but they ultimately differ in the method by which they present the dialogue.

As part of the dialogue, the biblical scholarship assigns the hymns within the text to be sung by the hearers. There are eight hymns typically identified by scholars, and these hymns are typically connected to dialogue on the part of the hearers.<sup>80</sup> There are common points of convergence between this idea and the liturgical rite; for example, when the heavenly hosts sing Alleluia, this is repeated and sung by the entire congregation. However, there is a difference between the hymns chanted by the people and those identified by the scholarship. Except for the invocation hymn at the beginning, the hymns chanted by the people are usually just chanted repetitions of the verses read. The dialogical chants at the “foundations” sequence (Rev 21) add the phrase “And our Savior in its midst, crowning with honor those who love Him,” otherwise the chant simply repeats the read text. The hymns identified in revelation are not chanted by the people, but rather read by the reader. Once more, the rite and biblical scholarship agree on the general hymnal aspect of the book of Revelation, but again they present this aspect differently.

### *Overall Resolution*

When considering the overall evidence, one can see that the rite and the biblical hypothesis agree on the general understanding and “the big picture” behind the liturgical use of Revelation, but differences are present when examining the fine details. In both the rite and liturgical hypothesis the book of Revelation is

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<sup>80</sup> Rev 4:8,11; 5:9-14; 7:9-12; 11:15-18; 12:10-12; 15:3-4; 16:5-7; and 19:1-8. cf Spatafora, “Heavenly Liturgy,” 186.

read fully, with dialogical elements, within a liturgical setting. However, the two differ on the day (Sunday vs. Saturday), location (Asia vs. Egypt), and the sectioning of dialogical units. The biblical scholarship tends to divide the text into sections and derive the dialogical aspect from the portions of text for the reader and for the hearers. The rite has the reader read the whole text but stopping the process periodically to musically repeat the read verses. These differences in details, however, do not negate the overall evidence in support of the biblical hypothesis. Ultimately, the rite allows one to answer the questions proposed at the beginning of the paper.

### **Conclusion**

Biblical scholars have proposed the hypothesis that the book of Revelation is intended for a complete oral reading, with dialogical elements, within a liturgical setting. However, from a liturgical perspective three questions arise with this proposal: (1) Is it reasonable to read the entire book of Revelation in a liturgy? (2) Is it possible to do so with dialogical elements that would cause the reader to stop and the congregation to respond at certain points? (3) Is there any known evidence from liturgical traditions that show such rite surrounding the book of Revelation?

After examining the rite of the Apocalypse Night within the Coptic Tradition, such questions can now be answered. For Copts, reading the entire book of Revelation within a liturgical setting is not merely a biblical hypothesis, but rather a liturgical reality. Every year, multitudes of Copts sit and listen to the book being read, and many members of the laity even participate in reading it. This shows that it is reasonable to read the entire book, thus answering the first question.

The Coptic rite has responses that are scattered throughout the text of the book of Revelation, during which the reading stops and the people chant, mostly repeating the biblical text. These dialogical elements are clear and participatory; since the chants are simple and repetitive, they allow the public to sing along easily. These dialogical elements intensify the understanding of the liturgical aspect of the book seen in both the biblical scholarship and the liturgical rite. Although details of the dialogue itself are differently executed than the proposed hypothesis, the overall liturgical aspect of the book is still a common point between the rite and the biblical scholarship. Since a dialogue is possible, this answers the second question.

Finally, the history of reading the book of Revelation during Apocalypse Night answers the third question. Yes, there is a liturgical tradition which has read and still reads the entire book with dialogical elements within a liturgical setting. Based on available manuscript sources, this tradition

can be traced to at least the eleventh or ninth century but likely was practiced much earlier. This tradition is found in early Sahidic manuscripts, but ultimately the full current rite is preserved in the earliest Bohairic manuscripts, which unfortunately only go as far back as the twelfth century.

With all things considered, one can conclude that the Coptic rite generally aligns with the biblical hypothesis surrounding the liturgical intention of the book of Revelation. Even with some notable differences in the details, there is still overwhelming support for the overall hypothesis that the book is intended to be read fully with dialogical elements within a liturgical setting. Again, the aim here is not to say that the reason behind the liturgical use is based on a certain understanding of Rev 1:3 or 1:10, but rather this paper shows the liturgical possibility and reality of the overall hypothesis, as shown by the Coptic rite. In short, the liturgical rite helps us to understand these biblical verses on a deeper, yet realistic, level.

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