

Strategy and Revelation:

How the Apostle John's Revelation Conforms to Contemporary Models of Foresight

David Burkus

Oral Roberts University

Abstract

This article explores the foresight model of the Apostle John by analyzing Revelation 3:14-22 using an ideological texture analysis, one of five texture analysis in Robbins' Socio-Rhetorical Interpretation model. Similarities and differences between John's model and Hines' contemporary foresight model are discussed. The article presents a foundation for building a Christian model of foresight using insights from John's Revelation and Hines' model.

The early Christian church began initially as a messianic sect of Second Temple Judaism.¹ As the church grew and expanded, it experienced tension between its own beliefs and the established cultures of its world – the Roman Empire and traditional Judaism. As these tensions grew into persecution, many were tempted to compromise the Christian faith in order to re-assimilate and avoid persecution. In the midst of this temptation, the Apostle John circulated a letter to seven churches that foretold of future events and provided encouragement and instruction to those suffering for their faith.

This article uses ideological texture analysis to explore Revelation 3:14-22, commonly called the letter to the church in Laodicea, in order to gain insight into the Apostle John's model of foresight as he lead the seven churches featured in Revelation. This first century apostolic model is compared and contrasted with contemporary models of foresight in an effort to construct a foundation for building a Christian model of foresight for leaders to help navigate the future of their organization.

Ideological Texture

Ideological texture is the fourth of five textures of a text according to Robbins Social-Rhetorical Interpretation model.² It is concerned with the conflicts and alliances created by the language of the text and the language of its interpreters. Ideological texture considers the way the text and its interpreters position themselves compared to other groups at that time. Within ideological texture, there are various sub-textures including individual locations of writers and readers and relation to groups.

¹ David A. DeSilva. *An Introduction to the New Testament: Contexts, Methods, and Ministry Formation*. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004).

² Vernon K. Robbins. *Exploring the Texture of the Texts: A Guide to Socio-Rhetorical Interpretation*. (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1996).

The first sub-texture, individual location, is concerned with the text's response to the world as well as individuals' cultural location.³ John is writing from a reformist response, which considers the world corrupt because its social structures (Roman Empire and Second Temple Judaism) are corrupt. In addition, John and his audience would largely be considered a subculture of Judaism, imitating the dominant attitudes, values and norms of the dominant culture but claiming to enact them better. These two elements inform the ideological stance from which the text can be seen.⁴

Relation to groups examines the groups that connect the writer and reader.⁵ The seven churches could be seen as a corporate group – a body of individuals with permanent existence who are joined under common principles and interests. This group stood in contrast to two dominant groups of the era, the Roman Empire and Second Temple Judaism. Both of these groups demanded allegiance to their methods, customs and beliefs but the early Christians were not compromising in their demand that Christ was the one true Lord to give allegiance to. As a result, many in the early church were suffering with some even being put to death for their faith.⁶ John's Revelation, written between either 68-69 C.E. or 95-96 C.E. from his exile in Patmos is an attempt to encourage Christians to continue to resist compromising to either of these two dominant cultures. He does this with the encouragement that Christ's return is imminent, the desired future that will become present.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ David A. DeSilva. *An Introduction to the New Testament: Contexts, Methods, and Ministry Formation*. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004).

The selected text is a letter to the church in Laodicea. Geographically, Laodicea sat between Colossae, known for its cold spring, and Hierapolis, known for its hot spring.⁷ Both cold and hot water were seen as quite valuable, cold water was refreshing and hot water was healing. Lukewarm water, which was often what Laodicea received because of its location where the two springs met, was often used as an emetic. In the letter to the Laodiceans, the analogy of this tepid, lukewarm water is used to describe Christ's opinion of the church there (Revelation 3:15-16). The church had compromised greatly, wavering in their faith in order to continue to pursue material gain and acceptance. The letter counsels them against investing in material possessions and in favor of investing in spiritual wealth (Revelations 3:17-18). The church is warned that discipline is coming to them, for the purpose of evoking repentance (Revelation 3:19). The letter concludes with an invitation to return to their steady faith in Jesus and a promise that those who do will receive the coming great Kingdom as a reward (Revelation 3:20-21).

Revelatory Foresight

This letter provides a glimpse into the foresight of the Apostle John. He is greatly influenced by the apocalyptic perspective on the future and foresees increased persecution in the near future, with Jesus' eventual return as the overcoming of that persecution. He instructs the church to abstain from evil and persevere through their suffering in order to receive this eventual message of hope. In doing so, John encourages believers to keep their focus on Christ and his kingdom, instead of the present "kingdom" of the Roman Empire or Second Temple Judaism.

Andy Hines presents a contemporary model of foresight that can be seen in John's model. Hines' model involves six phases of strategic foresight: framing, scanning, forecasting,

⁷ David A. DeSilva. *Seeing Things John's Way: A Rhetoric of the Book of Revelation*. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009).

visioning, planning and acting.⁸ Framing identifies the problems and objectives of the organization. Scanning looks at the environment (internal and external) for trends and information that would solve problems or provide insight into the future. Forecasting considers change drivers and creates alternative futures, three to four plausible scenarios for the future. Visioning analyzes these plausible scenarios and constructs an ideal, preferred future. Planning constructs a strategy to move from the present (where we are now) to the preferred future (where we want to go). Acting puts this plan into action, executing the steps laid out in the planning phase.

Hines' six phases of strategic foresight bear a resemblance to warnings, encouragement and instruction found in the letter to the Laodiceans. John first frames the problem as persecution from both the Roman Empire and Second Temple Judaism, which has led to a compromise in spiritual integrity. John scans the internal environment, Judaism and the Christian sect of Judaism, and the external environment, the Roman Empire, and sees the trends toward persecution and compromise. John forecasts two plausible scenarios or alternative futures – disobedience that results in expulsion from Christ or faithfulness that yields the coming kingdom. John's obvious preferred future is faithfulness, and he visions that great reward. He constructs and promotes a strategy which includes multiple steps: repentance, faithfulness, courage and perseverance. If the church can repentance from its current backsliding and remain faithful, even when facing persecution and death, it can still inherit the preferred future and be a part of the coming kingdom.

There are a few differences between Hines' foresight model and the one used by the Apostle John. The largest of these is that Hines' model calls for examining the possible futures

⁸ Andy Hines, "Strategic Foresight: The State of the Art." *Futurist*, 40, no. 5 (2006): 18-21.

and constructing a hoped for future.⁹ John's model is more apocalyptic. John sees the future persecution and eventual reign of Christ as the only possible future. The Laodiceans involvement in or expulsion from that eventual reign are the alternatives – not the future itself.

A Christian Model of Foresight

Another contemporary model of foresight might help build a Christian model by merging it with Hines'. Marsh, McAllum and Purcell contend that strategic foresight begins first with the future and then plans backward to the present.¹⁰ This “backcasting” envisions the preferred future first and then plans backwards to connect the present with that future. To do this, two mental models are constructed. Mental Model One is the present and questions such as “What are our goals?” and “Who are our competitors?” are answered. Mental Model Two asks these same questions, but within the preferred future. Reexamining John's Revelations reveals that he is operating from the belief that he has already seen Mental Model Two – the reign of Christ – and is working backwards to instruct the seven churches, Laodicea in particular, on how to move from the present toward that future.

The Christian faith holds a unified picture of the eventual future, given to us at the end of John's Revelation – the return of Christ and the unification of Heaven with Earth.¹¹ Therefore, one cannot follow Hines' model – framing, scanning, forecasting, visioning, planning and acting - entirely when building a Christian model of foresight. Instead, it serves as a good starting point, but must be slightly modified. Christians must frame their current situation, taking a solid inventory of where they are as a church. They must also scan their environments for trends and

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Nick Marsh, Mike McAllum and Dominique Purcell. *Strategic Foresight: The Power of Standing in the Future*. (Melbourne: Crown, 2002).

¹¹ N.T. Wright. *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection and the Mission of the Church*. (New York: HarperOne, 2008).

events that will shape the path toward the eventual future. The forecasting of the final futures has largely been done (Revelation – John’s Mental Model Two). However, one can still construct the possible pathways that will lead to that future, a modified form of backcasting. Christians must envision the ideal pathway toward that future with a focus on God’s will and the discernment that comes from the Holy Spirit, building an ideal pathway to get from the assured second coming back to today. From the ideal pathway, Christians can begin planning a method to bring the world toward that future. Finally, with the preferred pathway laid out and an ideal strategy formed, Christians must act, exerting their influence in the world to help bring it toward the fully establishing kingdom of Heaven on earth.

Conclusion

The Apostle John’s Revelation provides insight into John’s model of foresight. It is perhaps a model shared by the entire leadership of the early church. While this article only analyzes a small section of the entire text, it still sheds light into the ways that John’s foresight is similar to, and different from, Hines’ contemporary model of foresight.¹² Further research into Revelation, both by examining the complete text and doing so through all five methods of Robbins’ texture analysis,¹³ would likely provide even more insight into the mindset and foresight model of the Apostle. Regardless, the insights discussed above provide a foundation for building a contemporary model of foresight, one that combines Hines’ model with backcasting¹⁴ that uses the future second coming foretold at the end of John’s Revelation. Christian leaders can engage the future with hope, as John has given insight into the future that all will partake in, but

¹² Andy Hines, “Strategic Foresight: The State of the Art.” *Futurist*, 40, no. 5 (2006): 18-21.

¹³ Vernon K. Robbins. *Exploring the Texture of the Texts: A Guide to Socio-Rhetorical Interpretation*. (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1996).

¹⁴ Nick Marsh, Mike McAllum and Dominique Purcell. *Strategic Foresight: The Power of Standing in the Future*. (Melbourne: Crown, 2002).

they must also engage with discernment, understanding the various pathways that have yet to be travelled before then and building an effective strategy to create the ideal pathway toward that future hope.