This is a finely crafted and nuanced study of the attitude toward the world in John’s Apocalypse. It grew out of postgraduate work at Durham University (U.K.), under the direction of Loren Stuckenbruck, and if it still reads a little too much like a dissertation, with too much review and repetition, it presents a cogent argument and a collection of data well worth our attention.

The problem addressed is the tension in John’s vision between language that suggests the ultimate destruction of the nations who fail to repent (e.g., 19:17–21; 20:11–15) and language that suggests their final participation in God’s kingdom (e.g., 3:3, 19; 22:14). In other words, do the nations in John’s vision continue to serve Satan, or do they finally turn to God (1–2)? While the majority of commentators have held to the first view, Richard Bauckham has argued forcefully for universal conversion, a view Herms consciously sets as his dialogue partner (3).

To pursue this dialogue, Herms has chosen two strategies. First, he explores a range of Jewish apocalypses to discover how they deal with this issue of Gentile inclusion, seeking a viable historical context within which to understand John’s traditions. Second, he examines both these Jewish apocalypses and John’s Apocalypse using what he calls a
literary-narrative strategy (drawing especially on the work of Eugene Boring, Leonard Thompson, and David Barr), seeking to discover not just what John says but how what he says relates to the structure of the Apocalypse (4). Behind all this is a certain rhetorical interest in how John may have “expected his inclusion of these traditions to motivate his readers” (5).

The book comprises five chapters. Chapter 1 is a history of interpretation, treating source-critical solutions, a range of historical critics, recent literary-narrative critics, and a detailed review of Bauckham’s proposal (forty-nine pages). Chapter 2 examines some other apocalyptic writings from the Second Temple period that evidence a similar tension between the inclusion/exclusion of the nations (eighty-seven pages). Chapter 3 begins with a critical evaluation of Bauckham’s thesis of universal inclusion and proceeds to a structural analysis of the Apocalypse as a prophetic apocalypse (thirty pages). The fourth chapter (eighty-six pages) is the central argument; it begins with a detailed examination of certain stock phrases such as “the nations,” “the inhabitants of the earth,” “the kings of the earth,” and related phrases. There follows a literary-narrative reading that attempts to place these phrases within the overall narrative logic of the story and then an examination of the use of traditional sources, focusing especially on the use of biblical traditions in both John and in other apocalypses. Chapter 5 is a short synthesis and conclusion (five pages).

The book makes two major contributions to the consideration of the place of the nations in John’s Apocalypse. First, there is the very helpful tracing of similar traditions in other apocalypses, where Herms finds significant diversity. After a lengthy excursus on Qumran literature (which envisions the “utter annihilation of all opponents” [60]), he examines four apocalyptic writings (Tobit, the Similitudes of Enoch, 4 Ezra, and the Animal Apocalypse), considering first the function of biblical traditions in the work and then the narrative development of the writing. All four exhibit a tension between a strict “insider” hope that requires faithfulness and a consideration of the fate of the “outsider.”

Tobit is the most inclusive, featuring a “denouement with heavy universalistic overtones” (66), but even here “the text does not support an unqualified view of Gentile participation in the restoration of Israel” (77). The Similitudes likewise contains scenes of universal worship, but “ultimately the final statement of the vision is decidedly negative” (94). Fourth Ezra moves emphatically away from a universalistic view as the narrator shifts from an inclusive to a nationalistic outlook (107, 114). While the Animal Apocalypse is likely set in the oppressive context of the second century B.C.E. and thus exhibits strongly negative portrayals of the nations, the reader is surprised with an “image of virtually
unqualified acceptance of Gentiles in the idealized future” (131). Thus it is both the “most negative” and the “most broadly inclusive” (135).

These apocalypses all exhibit a profound tension between the judgment of the nations and their salvation. Two portray a dramatic change in the nations and envision their ultimate inclusion (Tobit, Animal Apocalypse); two ultimately move in the opposite direction (4 Ezra, Similitudes). Herms makes the valuable suggestion that both these outcomes achieve a similar narrative function: the vindication of Israel and Israel’s God; in the one case the vindication is through God’s power; in the other the vindication is through God’s attractiveness manifested in the submission of the nations (136). These conclusions are built on a careful analysis of the use of biblical tradition, stock images, and narrative development, the same techniques Herms will use to investigate John’s Apocalypse.

This analysis is the second major contribution of the book. But first there is a short chapter with a brief critique of Bauckham’s argument (which I did not find all that convincing), a short discussion of genre (prophetic function in an apocalyptic shape), and the structure of the Apocalypse (note: not plot). The discussion of structure is rather abstract (based on key words, sevens, interludes, repetitions) and somewhat dated—more concerned with John’s discourse than his narrative. I had expected a more narrative-critical reading.

Chapter 4 is the heart of the book and much more substantive. It consists of an exhaustive analysis of John’s use of key terms (τὰ ἔθνη, οἱ κατοικούντες ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς, ὁ λαός, οἱ ἀνθρώποι, οἱ λοιποί, and οἱ βασιλεῖς τῆς γῆς), analyzing them in terms of their use in biblical traditions that are likely sources for John, in other apocalypses, and in Revelation—considering especially their literary-narrative function. In each case these stock phrases are shown to have a negative, often primarily negative, force; in some cases there is also a countervailing positive connotation.

For example, *ethnos* is used overwhelmingly in a negative sense, often indicating “humanity as set against God” (172–81), yet it also occurs in scenes of eschatological vindication, even being introduced where it is lacking in John’s source text (Rev 22:2; see p. 183). Herms asks the additional question of whether the placement of the positive evaluation in this climactic scene signals the author’s own view of the ultimate destiny of the nations (184) and notes a similar narrative strategy in the Animal Apocalypse. The ultimate answer to this question seems to be no. John does not envision a universal redemption. At least, the “inhabitants of the earth” appear in a literary context that is “decidedly negative” (189); related terms (“humanity,” “the rest”) belong to a narrative context that “does not allow for a positively universal reading” (197); the kings of the
earth may bring their glory into the New Jerusalem (21:24–26), but an extensive analysis of the biblical sources, the apocalyptic parallels, and the narrative development of Revelation (197–253) leads to the conclusion that “an outright reversal of referents (or genuine conversion of such) for this final instance of the idiom seems improbable” (253).

Ultimately Herms dissolves the tension between exclusion and inclusion of the outsiders; such tension is “less real than apparent” (257). This, I think, is unfortunate, because, of course, it is the central purpose of narrative studies to deal with the apparent, not the real. The narrative critic is not concerned with whether the witches in Macbeth are real; it is their appearance in the story that must be accounted for.

I want to stress how much I think the general approach of this study is a valuable contribution employing an innovative strategy, even though it sometimes fails in the execution of that strategy. There are perhaps two reasons for this failure. First, the analysis often seems “idea driven” rather than narrative driven; we seem more interested in John’s supposed theology than his story (e.g., 47, 51, 99, 164–65). Herms begins with a careful examination of Eugene Boring’s approach but does not pay sufficient attention to Boring’s plea to stop treating Revelation as propositional language. Second, he seems more concerned with structure and narrative sequence than with plot, more concerned with discourse analysis than narrative analysis, to use a common distinction (e.g., 122, 147–68, 169). He wants to know what is going on in the mind of the author (117) more often than in the mind of the reader (130).

He does not take seriously enough his own question about the narrative rhetoric of the Apocalypse; he asks how the inclusion of these traditions motivates the reader to greater faithfulness (5). This is a question about the reading of the story; it is what narrative critics do. But Herms seems primarily concerned with the writing of the story: what the author was trying to say, what his intention was (267). Perhaps Herms is led down this path by responding to Bauckham, but it would have been a more compelling book had he kept to his own purposes. In spite of these shortcomings, this is a stimulating book that makes a valuable contribution to the study of John’s Apocalypse, especially by identifying themes and parallels in other apocalypses of John’s era.