

Colour Adjectives in the New Testament*

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Colour is used throughout the NT, although sparingly, with different functions and in conjunction with specific situations. The gospels and the letters do not contain many references to colour, but when they do it is typically to indicate more than a physical quality. On the other hand, the author of the Apocalypse uses the colour in its literal sense to describe a particular object or character. In view of the fact that the book was meant to be read aloud, his repetition of colour adjectives stresses the effectiveness and importance of aural effect as a conveyor of meaning.

Keywords: Bible, New Testament, Apocalypse, colour, adjective, aural

1. Introduction

Colours form part of life itself. The real world is immersed in an infinite chromatic scale, which not only conveys beauty but also communicates the changing seasons, the health or absence of health of living things, etc. Since humans first experienced the need to express their feelings or emotions in clay, stone or papyrus, colour has also formed part of their art and literature, as it enabled them to describe reality in a more vivid, effective and even emotional way. The latter is also due to the symbolic meaning that colours acquired over time.

The Bible constitutes an example of the presence of colour in literature. Since previous studies have tended to focus more on colours in the OT,¹ in this paper I choose to analyse the NT in this respect. The use of colours in the NT tends to be limited, as only nine of them appear: λευκός, 'white' (25x); μέλας, 'black' (6x); κόκκινος, 'scarlet' (6x); πορφυροῦς, 'purple' (4x); πύρινος, 'fiery red' (1x); πυρρός, 'bright red' (2x); χλωρός, 'green' (4x); ὑακίνθινος, 'sapphire blue'

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¹ H. H. Gowen, 'The Color Terms of the Old Testament', *Anglican Theological Review* 3 (1920) 141–51; A. Brenner, *Colour Terms in the Old Testament* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1982).

(1x); θειώδης, 'sulphurous yellow' (1x).² These terms are used relatively infrequently, and mainly in the gospels, the Acts and in some of the letters (2 Cor 3.3; 2 John 1.12; 3 John 1.13). However, colour adjectives are much more prevalent in the Apocalypse. What, therefore, is the role of colour adjectives in the NT? Are they used to make a narrative more realistic? To enrich a description? Do they have connotations beyond the simple meaning of the colour itself?

To answer these and other questions, I approach the study of colours in the NT by addressing it, separately, in two parts: first, the use of colour adjectives in the gospels, Acts and letters, and, second, the use of colour words in the Apocalypse, where they assume an additional relevance not only because of their prolific use (all the colours mentioned in NT writings are present) but also because of their function in the text.

2. Colour in the Gospels and Letters

The writers of the gospels and the letters chose a total of five colours: λευκός, 'white' (9x); μέλας, 'black' (4x); κόκκινος, 'scarlet' (2x); πορφυροῦς, 'purple' (2x); and χλωρός, 'green' (1x).

2.1 Λευκός (9x)

Λευκός is the adjectival lexeme of the colour most frequently used in the NT. It appears in the Synoptic Gospels (Matt 5.36; 17.2; 28.3; Mark 9.3; 16.5; Luke 9.29), in John (4.35; 20.12) and in the Acts (1.10). It has two different but related meanings: shining (Hom. *Il.* 23.268; 14.185) and white. In fact, in Hebrew one word has both these meanings.³

In relation to the colour λευκός, 'white', this is the natural colour of snow, milk (giving rise to frequent comparisons), flowers, fruit, the hair of elderly people, of animals, but not of cloth since, at least in Israel, weavers had to bleach the natural fabric to make it white. It even includes the broad chromatic scale of different shades of grey (λευκοὶ ἐγένοντο κονισάλω, Hom. *Il.* 5.503).

The adjective λευκός was used in worship. It was known to be the dominant colour of priestly vestments and was also used to cover the body of the deceased in burials. This colour is associated with luxury (Esther 1.6), joy (Eccles 9.8) or purity (Isa 1.18). In Greco-Roman culture, perhaps owing to its rarity, white denotes worship and the divinity. It also represents happiness, good fortune

2 D. Romero González, 'El adjetivo en el Nuevo Testamento: clasificación semántica' (Córdoba: Universidad de Córdoba, edición tesis.pdf, 2007), 117 mentions a total of ten adjectives, as she includes the adjective ὑγρός. However, this does not denote the colour itself (attribute), but alludes to a state (to be fresh, lush) and can therefore be translated as 'wet', 'fresh', 'green', as opposed to 'dry' (Luke 23.31). For this reason it has not been included in this study.

3 Brenner, *Colour Terms*, 83-4.

and victory in war.⁴ In the gospels, λευκός appears in descriptions of clothing, fields and hair.

2.1.1 Λευκός as an attribute of clothing

When the adjective λευκός complements a person's clothing, it appears in an eschatological or apocalyptic context,⁵ for example at certain moments in Jesus' life when his divine nature is emphasised: his transfiguration, resurrection and ascension into heaven.

The Synoptic Gospels use the term λευκός to describe the colour of Jesus' clothing when the transfiguration takes place:

Matt 17.2: μετεμορφώθη ἔμπροσθεν αὐτῶν, καὶ ἔλαμψεν τὸ πρόσωπον αὐτοῦ ὡς ὁ ἥλιος, τὰ δὲ ἱμάτια αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο λευκὰ ὡς τὸ φῶς.
He was transfigured before them and his face shone like the sun and his garments became white like the light.

Mark 9.3: τὰ ἱμάτια αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο στίλβοντα λευκὰ λίαν, οἷα γναφεὺς ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς οὐ δύναται οὕτως λευκᾶναι.
His clothes became glistening, exceedingly white, as a launderer on earth cannot whiten.

Luke 9.29: ἐγένετο ἐν τῷ προσεύχεσθαι αὐτὸν τὸ εἶδος τοῦ προσώπου αὐτοῦ ἕτερον καὶ ὁ ἱματισμὸς αὐτοῦ λευκὸς ἐξαστράπτων.
While he was praying, the appearance of his face was transformed and his clothes became a dazzling white.

In contrast to other NT references to colour, there is the express desire in these three gospel episodes to specify the shade of λευκός that Jesus' clothing takes. For this purpose, Matthew uses a simple and concise simile, ὡς τὸ φῶς, 'as the light', and hence manages to communicate that λευκός refers to the shining white colour of light. Mark makes his description even more precise by adding the participle of στίλβω, 'to cast rays of light, shine, glisten',⁶ and the adverb λίαν, 'very (much), exceedingly',⁷ to the term λευκός. The literal translation of στίλβοντα λευκὰ λίαν would be 'glistening exceedingly white'.⁸ In this way,

4 LSJ s.v. λευκός; W. Michaelis, 'λευκός, λευκοῖνω', *TDNT* IV.241–3; R. W. Byargeon, 'colors', *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible* (ed. D. N. Freedman *et al.*; © 2000 Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.; Electronic text hypertexted and prepared by OakTree Software, Inc v. 1.4); F. Montanari, *Vocabolario della lingua greca (greco-italiano)* (Torino: Loescher, 1995) 1181, s.v. λευκός; *BDAG* 4555, s.v. λευκός; J. H. Thayer, *The New Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1981) 3201, s.v. λευκός.

5 LSJ s.v. λευκός; Michaelis, 'λευκός', 246.

6 LSJ s.v. στίλβω; *BDAG* s.v. στίλβω; Thayer, *Greek-English Lexicon*, 4744, s.v. στίλβω.

7 LSJ s.v. λίαν; *BDAG* s.v. λίαν; Thayer, *Greek-English Lexicon*, 3029, s.v. λίαν.

8 C. A. Evans, *Mark 8:27–16:20* (WBC 34B; Nashville, TN: T. Nelson, 2001) 35.

the evangelist manages to convey that the shade of colour that the clothing acquired is a dazzling white that goes beyond normal shades of λευκός. And in case it is still unclear, he completes his description with an expressive comparison: οἶα γναφεὺς ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς οὐ δύναται οὕτως λευκᾶναι, ‘as a launderer on earth cannot whiten’. In other words, the white that Mark refers to is beyond human power to reproduce. So the λευκός of Mark is not only an unusual colour in Palestinian clothing but also seems to refer to something divine or supernatural, as in Daniel or in the Book of Enoch.⁹ Finally, Luke reinforces the presence of λευκός with the participle of the verb ἐξαστράπτω, ‘flash like lightning’,¹⁰ so the listeners/readers fully understand that Jesus’ garments have changed colour to become a shining white.

The desire of the evangelists to describe the whiteness of Jesus’ clothing as a result of the transfiguration was probably because Jesus did not usually wear the colour λευκός like the scribes or priests, but other colours, dressing like other common citizens.¹¹ One can, therefore, conclude that the reason why the evangelists use λευκός with different intensifiers in the semantic domain of shining is not so much to describe the white colour of Jesus’ clothing as to refer to an extraordinary and supernatural occurrence that is taking place. In other words, λευκός becomes a way of expressing the supernatural effects of the mystic experience of the transfiguration.

The next contexts in which λευκός appears are the resurrection and the ascension. The colour white is used to describe the angels’ clothing (Matt 28.2–3; John 20.12) and the garments of some men, unknown to the holy women (Mark 16.5) and also to the apostles (Acts 1.10), who appear next to the tomb or on the mount where the ascension of Jesus takes place:

Matt 28.3: ἦν δὲ ἡ εἰδέα αὐτοῦ ὡς ἀστραπή καὶ τὸ ἔνδυμα αὐτοῦ λευκὸν ὡς χιῶν.

His appearance was like lightning and his clothing white as snow.

Mark 16.5: εἰσελθοῦσαι εἰς τὸ μνημεῖον εἶδον νεανίσκον καθήμενον ἐν τοῖς δεξιοῖς περιβεβλημένον στολὴν λευκὴν, καὶ ἐξεθαμβήθησαν.

Entering the tomb they saw a young man sitting on the right, wearing a white tunic; and they were alarmed.

John 20.12: θεωρεῖ δύο ἀγγέλους ἐν λευκοῖς καθεζομένους, ἓνα πρὸς τῇ κεφαλῇ καὶ ἓνα πρὸς τοῖς ποσίν, ὅπου ἔκειτο τὸ σῶμα τοῦ Ἰησοῦ.

She saw two angels in white, one sitting at the head and one at the feet where Jesus’ body had lain.

⁹ Dan Th 7.9; 1 En 14.20.

¹⁰ BDAG s.v. ἐξαστράπτω; LSJ s.v. ἐξαστράπτω.

¹¹ Michaelis, ‘λευκός’, 246.

Acts 1.10: καὶ ὡς ἀτενίζοντες ἦσαν εἰς τὸν οὐρανὸν πορευομένου αὐτοῦ, καὶ ἰδοὺ ἄνδρες δύο παρειστήκεισαν αὐτοῖς ἐν ἐσθήσεσι λευκαῖς.
As they were gazing up towards heaven while he was going, behold, two men stood by them in white clothing.

Matthew is the only one who attempts to specify the type of λευκός referred to, by adding the comparison ὡς χιῶν, ‘as the snow’, revealing not only the shade of white of the clothing, but also its brilliance. Matthew was not the first to use this simile, which forms part of an earlier tradition. It is also used to describe the garments worn by the old man, both in Daniel (Dan Th 7.9) and in the Book of Enoch (1 En 14.20), or those of individuals with a close association with the supernatural (1 En 106.2.10; *TLevi* 8.2). This is why the presence of λευκός has a double connotation: that of the colour and also the angelic nature of the individuals described, or, according to G. Kittel, the transcendent nature of their δόξα.¹² Therefore, although Mark and Luke do not say that the character who suddenly appears is an angel, the listeners/readers know that he is because of the way he is dressed.

2.1.2 Λευκός as an Adjective of the Fields

Λευκός is also used to describe fields. This appears in the Fourth Gospel, at the end of the Samaritan episode, when Jesus addresses the apostles to tell them that the Samaritans will soon be converted:

John 4.35: οὐχ ὑμεῖς λέγετε ὅτι ἔτι τετράμηνός ἐστιν καὶ ὁ θερισμὸς ἔρχεται; ἰδοὺ λέγω ὑμῖν, ἐπάρατε τοὺς ὀφθαλμοὺς ὑμῶν καὶ θεάσασθε τὰς χώρας ὅτι λευκαὶ εἰσιν πρὸς θερισμόν.

Do you not say ‘there are still four months to go until the harvest?’ Behold, I tell you, lift up your eyes and look on the fields: they are white for the harvest.

Jesus uses here a common saying: there are four months from sowing to harvest. This interval is also recorded in the Gezer calendar (tenth century BCE).¹³ However, Jesus corrects it: the crops are ready! He calls his apostles and makes them look at αἱ χῶραι, ‘the fields’, because they have changed colour, indicating that the time has come to harvest the crops: λευκαὶ πρὸς θερισμόν. This can be translated as either ‘white for the harvest’¹⁴ or ‘golden for the harvest’,¹⁵ since

12 G. Kittel, ‘ἄγγελος, ἀρχάγγελος, ἰσόγγελος’, *TDNT* 1.84 n. 67.

13 B. Vawter, ‘Evangelio de Juan’, *Comentario Bíblico San Jerónimo* (ed. R. E. Brown, J. A. Fitzmyer, R. E. Murphy, trans. A. de la Fuente Adanez, J. Valiente Malla, J. J. del Moral; 4 vol.; Madrid: Ediciones Cristiandad, 1971) IV.444.

14 Vulgate; ASV; NASB; NET; *Nouvelle édition de Genève; Segond 21; Nuova Diodati; Nuova Riveduta* 2006; and the *Biblia de Jerusalén*.

15 *Bible du Semeur*; CEI; CEE; *Sagrada Biblia: versión crítica sobre los textos hebreo, arameo y griego* (ed. F. Cantera Burgos and M. Iglesias González; Madrid: EDICA, 1979²). However, *Sagrada Biblia* explains in a note that the literal meaning is ‘white’.

both shades of colour form part of the chromatic range represented by λευκός and refer to the message that Jesus wanted to convey: the fruit is ripe and soon ready to be harvested. So Jesus' expression, which is based on a visible fact, acquires a symbolic meaning (John 4.36) as Jesus is referring to the reaping of the harvest by God (John 4.36–8), giving it an eschatological meaning. In this case, the white crops would not refer to real crops but instead to the Samaritans, who dressed in white and, after hearing what the Samaritan woman had to say, went out to seek Jesus (John 4.39–40).¹⁶

Once again, whether in the figurative or literal sense, λευκός is not used so much to describe the colour itself as to convey other information: the time has come to gather in the harvest, either real or spiritual (i.e. the conversion of the Samaritans).¹⁷

2.1.3 Λευκός as an Adjective Used to Describe Hair

Λευκός is used to describe hair in Matthew's Gospel, together with the term μέλας. The pericope forms part of the Sermon on the Mount. In this case he pays special attention to the part referring to the oath:

Matt 5.36: μήτε ἐν τῇ κεφαλῇ σου ὁμόσης, ὅτι οὐ δύνασαι μίαν τρίχα λευκὴν ποιῆσαι ἢ μέλαιναν.

And you do not swear by your head, because you cannot make a single hair white or black.

In this part of the Gospel of Matthew, the colouring of λευκός is evident as it is used to contrast with μέλας: white versus black, two natural hair colours. This type of contrast has already been observed in authors such as Philo (*Legum* 2.7, 39; *Plant.* 172; *Her.* 209).¹⁸ During the NT period, the custom of dyeing one's hair black was relatively new. For example, Herod the Great was known to dye his hair so as to appear younger (*Jos. Ant.* 16.233). However, at the time this fashion was probably not widespread and would have been considered unusual by ordinary people such as the followers of Jesus. It seems that Jesus used the contrast of white and black as a metonym to refer to age: black hair representing youth and white hair referring to old age. Therefore, here Jesus would not be referring to hair colour as such, but to human inability to change one's age, emphasising human weakness compared with the omnipotence of God.¹⁹ As occurs in other NT texts, the gospels do not use colours with a merely descriptive

16 G. R. Beasley-Murray, *John* (WBC 36; Waco, TX: Word Books, 1987) 63; M. Marcheselli, *'Avete qualcosa da mangiare?' Un pasto, il risorto, la comunità* (Bologna: EDB, 2006) 101.

17 NRSV and NIV.

18 B. Brent and P. Kay, *Basic Color Terms: Their Universality and Evolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969) 4.27, cited by Brenner, *Colour Terms*, 94, show that this opposition is found in almost all cultures.

19 Michaelis, 'Λευκός', 247 n. 37.

purpose, to describe the shade of colour of an object, but rather as a literary resource to refer to another reality, in this case age.

2.2 *Μέλας* (4x)

Since Homer the term μέλας has been used to refer to the colour black, although it is also used to allude to different darker shades of colour, such as the dark red colour of wine or blood (*Od.* 5.265; *Il.* 4.149), the dark blue of waves in the sea (*Il.* 23.693), dark grey, etc. It is the natural colour of hair in youth, of tanned skin, and of animal skins,²⁰ and is described as such in LXX and in MT (Cant 1.5; 5.11; Lev 13.37; Zech 6.2, 6). It is also often used in a figurative sense with other connotations: dismal, sad or evil (Hom. *Il.* 2.834; 4.117; Plut. *Mor.* 1.12d).²¹ Consequently, in ancient times μέλας is the colour associated with mourning, magic, superstition and sadness.²²

It only appears once in the gospels, to describe hair colour (Matt 5.36) as mentioned above, although it is used three times in the letters (2 Cor 3.3; 2 John 1.12; 3 John 1.13):

2 Cor 3.3: φανερούμενοι ὅτι ἐστὲ ἐπιστολὴ Χριστοῦ διακονηθεῖσα ὑφ' ἡμῶν, ἐγγεγραμμένη οὐ μέλανι ἀλλὰ πνεύματι θεοῦ ζῶντος ...
Being made manifest that you are a letter from Christ, delivered by us, written not with ink but with the spirit of the living God ...

2 John 1.12: Πολλὰ ἔχων ὑμῖν γράφειν οὐκ ἐβουλήθην διὰ χάρτου καὶ μέλανος ...
Though I have many other things to write to you, I have not wanted to do it with paper and ink ...

3 John 1.13: Πολλὰ εἶχον γράψαι σοι ἀλλ' οὐ θέλω διὰ μέλανος καὶ καλάμου σοι γράφειν.
I have many things to write to you, but I do not want to write this with ink and pen.

Here, the substantivised neuter form is used, τὸ μέλαν, which since Plato (*Phdr.* 276c; cf. Demosth. 18, 258; Plut., *Mor.* 841E) has a specific meaning: 'ink'.²³ According to Pliny the Elder (*Nat.* 35), the ink most commonly used was black and was made with soot, resin, wine lees or cuttlefish ink, mixed with gum. This would explain how, through its metonymic use, μέλαν would lexicalise over time.²⁴ One can, therefore, conclude that the substantive form of the

20 W. Michaelis, 'μέλας', *TDNT* iv.549; LSJ s.v. μέλας.

21 Montanari, *Vocabolario*, 1248, s.v. μέλας.

22 Michaelis, 'μέλας', 549–50.

23 LSJ s.v. μέλας; *BDAG* s.v. μέλας.

24 In the biblical context, black ink and other colours (red, yellow, purple, etc.) could be used: K. A. Mackay, 'ink', *Eerdmans Dictionary*.

adjective μέλαν in the letters no longer refers to the colour black but instead to a new reality: ink, composed of soot, vegetable gum and water.

2.3 Κόκκινος (2x) and πορφυρούς (2x)

There are two shades of red that appear in the gospels: κόκκινος, 'scarlet', and πορφυρούς, 'purple'.

Κόκκινος, 'scarlet', refers to a deep red, or scarlet, obtained either from the insect *Kermococcus vermilio* or from its eggs. The process followed to produce this dye was complex: the insects were first dried, then dissolved in water to obtain the pigment. It was an expensive product, although cheaper than the purple dye, as 70,000 insects were required to make one pound of dye.²⁵ In general the scarlet dye was associated with wealth and the upper classes, as shown by David's lament that the daughters of Israel will dress in scarlet no longer after the death of Saul (1 Sam 1.24),²⁶ or in Pliny's story in which he describes how the colour of the *paludamentum* was κόκκινος (*Nat.* 22.2).²⁷ Moreover, in the OT it was associated with worship, as it was one of the colours of the tapestries covering the tabernacle (Exod 26.31) and of the ephod (Exod 39.2). Its symbolic meaning is related to blood and also sin (Isa 1.18).²⁸

Πορφυρούς, 'purple', in the Hebrew and Hellenistic worlds denotes a broad chromatic scale, ranging from red to dark purple, including bluish purple and violet. The reason for this wide spectrum of colours lies in the fact that the pigment was obtained from different carnivorous mollusks from the Mediterranean: bluish-violet from *Murex brandaris*, scarlet from *Murex trunculus* and violet from *Helix ianthina* and *Purpura lapillis*.²⁹ Also, the intensity of the colour could vary depending on the amount of sunlight that the pigment was exposed to, as the pigment first obtained from the mollusk was initially colourless. As mentioned above, the process was very costly, as 12,000 mollusks were needed to obtain 2 grams of pigment.³⁰

25 M. P. Boyd, 'scarlet, crimson', *Eerdmans Dictionary*; F. Kogler, R. Egger-Wenzel, M. Ernst, *Diccionario de la Biblia* (Bilbao/Santander: Mensajero/Sal Terrae, 2012) 250, s.v. *escarlata*.

26 O. Michel, 'κόκκος, κόκκινος', *TDNT* III.812.

27 W. Smith, *A Dictionary of Greek and Roman Antiquities* (London: John Murray, 1875) s.v. *paludamentum*; http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/secondary/SMIGRA*/Paludamentum.html (last accessed 4 June 2014): 'the cloak worn by a Roman general commanding an army, his principal officers and personal attendants, in contradistinction to the sagum'.

28 L. Ryken, J. C. Wilhoit, T. Longman III (eds.), *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery: An Encyclopaedic Exploration of the Images, Symbols, Motifs, Metaphors, Figures of Speech and Literary Patterns of the Bible* (© 1998 by InterVarsity Christian Fellowship/USA; Electronic text hypertexted and prepared by OakTree Software, Inc. version 1.2) s.v. 'colors'.

29 F. W. Danker, 'purple', *ABD* v.557; *Diccionario de la Biblia*, 650, s.v. *púrpura*.

30 M. P. Boyd, 'purple', *Eerdmans Dictionary*.

The significance of purple and its use was similar to the colour scarlet. In Israel it was one of the liturgical colours par excellence. The curtain of the holy tent of the tabernacle was purple (Exod 26.31, 36); so were the vestments of the high priest (Exod 28.5, 6, 8, 15, 33) and other objects of worship (Num 4.14). Purple was also a symbol of wealth and royalty, not only in Israel but also in the ancient Near East. For example, the drapes that decorated the banquet of Ahasuerus were purple (Esther 1.6); Mordecai, after being made royal courtier, was given purple garments to wear (Esther 8.15); the kings of Midian also wore purple (Judg 8.26). The Hellenistic monarchs were known to follow the custom inherited from Persia and Macedonia to honour their advisors by dressing them in purple.³¹ In Rome, too, purple was a clear indication of a person's high rank (Plin. *Nat.* 9.66). In fact, victorious generals wore a purple toga in the triumphal procession, *toga picta*, and the border around the *toga praetexta* of priests and important magistrates in public ceremonies was also purple.³²

In the gospels, κόκκινος and πορφυροῦς appear in the passion episodes of Matthew and John, respectively. These terms were used to describe the colour of the tunic in which the soldiers dressed Jesus to mock his royal status:

Matt 27.28: ἐκδύσαντες αὐτὸν χλαμύδα κοκκίνην περιέθηκαν αὐτῷ
They stripped him and put a scarlet cloak on him.

John 19.2: οἱ στρατιῶται πλέξαντες στέφανον ἐξ ἀκανθῶν ἐπέθηκαν αὐτοῦ τῇ κεφαλῇ καὶ ἱμάτιον πορφυροῦν περιέβαλον αὐτὸν
The soldiers platted a crown of thorns, put it on his head and clothed him in a purple robe.

John 19.5: ἐξῆλθεν οὖν ὁ Ἰησοῦς ἔξω, φορῶν τὸν ἀκάνθινον στέφανον καὶ τὸ πορφυροῦν ἱμάτιον
So Jesus came out, wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe.

Since κόκκινος applies to the colour scarlet, or maroon, and πορφυροῦς can also refer to the colour red, κόκκινος and πορφυροῦς appear to function as synonyms in these pericopes, as there are no more elements within the context of the Johannine story to establish the shade of purple that John was alluding to. The expressivity of the adjectives does not seem to reside in specifying the precise colour of the cloak, κόκκινος or πορφυροῦς, but rather appears to determine the type of clothing with which the soldiers covered Jesus.³³ By referring to

31 Danker, 'purple', 557.

32 H. Granger-Taylor, 'toga', *The Oxford Classical Dictionary* (ed. S. Hornblower and A. Spawforth, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996³) 1533.

33 Hence, when R. H. Mounce, *Matthew* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985) 266 compares the texts of Matthew and Mark 15.17 where the noun πορφύρα appears, he points out the little difference among the colours.

the ἱμάτιον πορφυροῦν, the author of the Fourth Gospel clearly explains to his listeners/readers that they dress Jesus as if he were an ancient Near Eastern king. However, the cloak with which Jesus was covered was not a royal mantle but probably a red robe belonging to one of the soldiers (as part of his uniform), or the faded one of a *lictor*.³⁴ In this case, Matthew's description of the cloak as χλαμύς κόκκινη would reflect the scorn with which Jesus was treated, as Ulrich Luz also maintains.³⁵ Instead of royal insignias, he is given fake ones: instead of a golden sceptre, he receives a reed; instead of a golden laurel wreath as a crown, a crown of thorns; instead of the purple cloak, the scarlet soldier's robe.³⁶ Undoubtedly, the terms κόκκινος and πορφυροῦς are both used because the shade of red they depict alludes to the type of clothing that was placed on Jesus: representing the royal cloak worn by the kings and Greek governors of the ancient Near East.

Once again, it can be seen that the colours in the gospels tend not to refer to the shade of colour in itself, but to provide other information of a different kind – in this case, to allude to the type of cloak in which they dressed Jesus, and the significance of this.

In relation to the use of κόκκινος in the Letter to the Hebrews, the adjectival lexeme is used again as an attribute of the clothing, in this case ἔριον, 'wool'. However, in this case the context is completely different as it has connotations of worship and the celebration of a sacrifice:

Heb 9.19: λαληθείσης γὰρ πάσης ἐντολῆς κατὰ τὸν νόμον ὑπὸ Μωϋσέως παντὶ τῷ λαῷ, λαβὼν τὸ αἷμα τῶν μόσχων [καὶ τῶν τράγων] μετὰ ὕδατος καὶ ἐρίου κοκκίνου καὶ ὑσσώπου αὐτὸ τε τὸ βιβλίον καὶ πάντα τὸν λαὸν ἐρράντισεν.

After Moses read all the commandments to the people according to the law, he took the blood from the calves [and the goats], with water, scarlet wool and hyssop and sprinkled both the book itself and all the people.

The author of the Letter to the Hebrews recalls the sacrifice made when the covenant was established between God and Moses, between God and his people. He explains in detail how this took place: μετὰ ὕδατος καὶ ἐρίου κοκκίνου καὶ ὑσσώπου, 'with water, scarlet wool and hyssop'. Although this list cannot be found in Exod 24.3–8, it is present in Leviticus in the description of the purification of the leper (Lev 14.4, 6), or the house where he lives (Lev 14.49–52), and in

34 C. S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Accordance electronic; ed. Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1993); D. A. Hagner, *Matthew 14–28* (WBC 33B; Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1995) 831; Beasley-Murray, *John*, 336.

35 U. Luz, *Matthew: A Commentary* (trans. J. E. Crouch; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001) 515.

36 However, W. D. Davies and D. C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to Saint Matthew* (3 vols.; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997) III.602 n. 28, citing Plutarch and Josephus, affirm that the χλαμύς was also used by kings.

Numbers in the description of how to purify someone who has been in contact with a corpse (Num 19.6, 9, 18).³⁷ Both Numbers and Leviticus also include the cedar. It is not known why these three elements were used, but this was possibly influenced by the purification rites of the ancient Near East³⁸ and their symbolism: the cedar symbolised completeness, hyssop was considered to be a purifying plant and the scarlet thread symbolised blood.³⁹ One could, therefore, deduce that the author of Hebrews mentioned these three elements also for their symbolic value. Hence, the adjective κόκκινος in Heb 9.19 is not used to denote the colour, but instead to what this refers to: the sacrifice and the spilling of blood.

2.4 Χλωρός (ix)

Χλωρός is the colour of vegetation par excellence and would normally be translated as 'green'. However, the term encompasses a broad spectrum of shades of colour ranging from blue to yellow. It usually denotes a yellowish green, a light green colour characteristic of plants or vegetation in general (Hom. *Od.* 16.47; Thuc. 4.6.1), and sometimes alludes more to the freshness of a plant rather than its colour (Hom. *Od.* 9.320; Hes. *Op.* 743), and even to the plant itself (Num 22.4). At other times, it denotes a predominantly yellow colour, such as when it is used to describe honey (Hom. *Od.* 10.234) or egg (Orib. 14.61.1).⁴⁰ The context, therefore, determines the shade of colour alluded to, hence its meaning and translation.⁴¹ Its symbolism is related to life, beauty and safety; it is the sign of God's blessing, and an absence of this colour signifies death.⁴²

In the gospels, the adjective χλωρός appears only in Mark 6.39, just before the multiplication of the loaves:

37 In LXX, Leviticus and Numbers the word 'wool' is left out, emphasising the colour, which is substantivised. However, when Flavius Josephus tells the story about the red cow, he mentions wool, although he uses another colour: φοινικτὸν ἔριον (Jos. *Ant.* 4.4.6).

38 M. Jacob, *Numbers (Ba-midbar): The Traditional Hebrew Text With The New IPS Translation/ Commentary* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1990) 159.

39 P. J. Budd, *Leviticus: Based on the New Revised Standard Version* (London/Grand Rapids: M. Pickering/Eerdmans, 1996) 204; T. R. Ashley, *The Book of Numbers* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) 366; G. B. Gray, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Numbers* (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1906) 250–1.

40 *BDAG* 7938.2, s.v. χλωρός; Montanari, *vocabolario*, 2235, s.v. χλωρός; LSJ s.v. χλωρός.

41 J. Peláez, 'El factor contextual como elemento determinante del significado de los lexemas: el caso de ἀπολείπω', *V Simposio Bíblico Español: Fundación Bíblica Española - Universidad de Navarra, Pamplona 14-17 de Septiembre de 1997* (www.uco.es/dptos/c-antiguedad/griego/menu1.htm; last accessed 26 June 2014; Universidad de Córdoba): 'El contexto tiene un valor determinante para la formación de las nuevas acepciones del lexema, pues introduce cambios en su fórmula y en su desarrollo sémico, originando nuevos significados y, consiguientemente, nuevas traducciones'.

42 *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, s.v. 'green'.

Mark 6.39: ἐπέταξεν αὐτοῖς ἀνακλῖναι πάντας συμπόσια συμπόσια ἐπὶ τῷ χλωρῷ χόρτῳ.

He directed them all to sit down in groups on the green grass.

Firstly, it is important to establish the shade of χλωρός to which Mark refers. The subject of the adjective χλωρός is the nominal lexeme, 'grass'. This appears forty-eight times in LXX and thirteen in the NT. Χόρτος, 'grass', belongs to the Poaceae or Gramineae family and refers to the grass in the countryside, or to wild flowers in contrast to cultivated plants.⁴³ It is difficult to know exactly which plants the biblical authors referred to when using the term χόρτος, since in the Holy Land up to 460 different species of Poaceae have been identified. However, χόρτος includes plants that dried up and died within a short time because of the intensity of the sun, as Luke indicates (Luke 12.28). Therefore, χόρτος is often used to refer to the shortness of life (1 Pet 1.24).⁴⁴ In Mark 6.39, however, χόρτος refers literally to the grass in the fields. Hence, given the context in which χλωρός is used to describe the vegetation, its meaning is simply 'green', describing the colour of the plants. This is how it is translated in the Vulgate (*viride*) and also in modern Spanish, English, French or Italian versions of the Bible.⁴⁵

Now that the meaning of χλωρός, 'green', has been clarified, it is necessary to go one step further as its use in the Gospel of Mark is surprising. Mark only uses two colour adjectives in his narrative: χλωρός and λευκός in Mark 9.3; 16.5. In these pericopes, it is almost mandatory to use λευκός to describe the transformation undergone by Jesus in the transfiguration and to show the presence of the angels in the Lord's tomb. On the other hand, neither Matthew nor Luke describes either the place or the time of year when the multiplication of the loaves and fish takes place, although John specifies that this happens during Passover (John 6.4). In any case, the colour green is completely absent from the Fourth Gospel. The presence of χλωρός, 'green', therefore, in the Gospel of Mark seems to be intentional, and not merely for ornamental or picturesque purposes, as Henry Barclay Swete has already suggested.⁴⁶ However, the problem is that Mark left us no clue as to how to interpret it.⁴⁷

One possible explanation is that, given the early withering of the grass in Palestine in the scorching sun, use of the adjectival lexeme χλωρός would indicate

43 *Fauna and Flora of the Bible: Prepared in Cooperation with the Committee on Translations of the United Bible Societies* (London; New York: United Bible Societies, 1980²) 125, s.vv. 'grass, herb, hay'.

44 H. N. Moldenke and A. L. Moldenke, *Plants of the Bible* (New York: Ronald, 1952) 28–9; L. J. Musselman, *A Dictionary of Bible Plants* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012) 71.

45 ASV; NRSV; NET; *La Bible du Semeur* (BDS); *Nouvelle édition de Genève – NEG 1979*; *Segond 21*; *Nuova Diodati*; CEI; *Sagrada Biblia*; CEE.

46 H. B. Swete, *Commentary on Mark: The Greek Text with Introduction, Notes, and Indexes* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1977) 133.

47 R. H. Stein, *Mark* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008) 315.

the colour and also the freshness of the grass.⁴⁸ Here, Mark provides the listeners/readers of his Gospel with valuable information about the time of year in which the multiplication of the loaves and fish takes place: during the spring,⁴⁹ in agreement with John – in other words, before the summer. At any other time of year the grass would have withered in the intense heat of the sun, losing its green colour. Accordingly, one could deduce that Mark uses the adjective *χλωρός* to describe the time of year during which one of Jesus' most important miracles takes place – springtime⁵⁰ – rather than merely to describe the colour of the grass. Its expressive function refers to the temporality of Jesus' action.

Objections have been raised to this interpretation, since areas around the lake could have also been green, even if it was not springtime.⁵¹ However, this would not explain why the adjective is used or why Mark gives the reader an unimportant piece of information.

Another objection comes from the current consensus that Mark's narrative technique does not follow chronological criteria, in which case the adjective *χλωρός* would have a completely different expressive function. The authors who maintain this view claim that the pericope should be read in the context of the episode, where shortly before the miracle Jesus expresses his compassion for the masses, comparing them to sheep without a shepherd (Mark 6.34); thus Jesus starts to preach to the people, until his apostles tell him that the people have not eaten and should go back to their homes. In this context, the expression *χλωρὸς χόρτος* would have a symbolic significance, as it would connote the green pastures of Ps 23.22, since the narrated scene has other elements in common, such as 'the shepherd, the flock, resting time, the laid table, satisfying hunger, abundance'.⁵² In this way, the Psalm would be relived in the person of Jesus: He is the good shepherd who leads his flock to green pastures.⁵³

Some go one step further with this messianic image of the shepherd, completing it with an eschatological banquet (Isa 25.6–9) in which the desert has been

48 Romero, *El adjetivo*, 118 n. 5 proposes that *χλωρός* represents light green, almost yellow, the colour of newly grown grass.

49 Keener, *The IVP Bible*.

50 Swete, *Commentary on Mark*, 133; E. P. Gould, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to St. Mark* (reprinted, Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1975) 118; S. Légasse, *L'Évangile de Marc* (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1997) 401; Keener, *The IVP Bible*.

51 V. Taylor, *The Gospel according to St. Mark: The Greek Text With Introduction, Notes, and Indexes* (London/New York/Melbourne: Macmillan/St. Martin's, 1966²) 323; R. H. Gundry, *Mark: A Commentary on his Apology for the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) 331.

52 M. Pérez Fernández, *Textos fuente y contextuales de la narrativa evangélica: metodología a una selección del evangelio de Marcos* (Navarra: Verbo Divino, 2008) 418.

53 R. A. Guelich, *Mark 1–8:26* (WBC 34A; Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1989) 188.

transformed into green pastures (Isa 35.1–2). In other words, the green grass would symbolise a time in the future when the desert blooms and flourishes.⁵⁴

In both these interpretations, the expressive function of *χλωρός* transcends the more direct meaning of the colour green and suggests another reality: the benefits of the good shepherd and an ideal eschatological time.

After this analysis, it can be concluded that the text is open to two different interpretations by the listener/reader, or even that it is possible to maintain both of them,⁵⁵ although it does seem almost certain that the adjective *χλωρός* is used in the Gospel of Mark for connotations that can be derived from it and its symbolism, rather than to describe the colour of the grass.

2.5 *Synthesis*

From this study, it can be deduced that colour is used in the gospels and the letters not so much to allude to the denoted colour of an object, but more to express another reality that transcends the literal meaning. Hence, colours are not used with a merely descriptive function, but as a way of connoting another reality characterised by that colour. One could, therefore, suggest that colours in the gospels and the letters play an informative role, telling the listeners/readers about an individual's rank, his condition or nature, his age; even providing chronological information or conveying a symbolic meaning, since the colour word can denote a different reality.

3. Colour in the Apocalypse

By contrast to other NT writings, the Apocalypse is characterised by a greater presence of colour – colour adjectives appear thirty-two times – and by their chromatic variability: white, black, green, blue, yellow and four different shades of red: *πυρρός*, 'bright red';⁵⁶ *πύρινος*, 'fiery red';⁵⁷ *κόκκινος*, 'scarlet'; and *πορφυροῦς*, 'purple'.

As mentioned previously, the colour adjectives used help to make the reality much more vivid and the description more effective, as the real world is constantly submerged in colour. The author of the Apocalypse experiences a revelation in the form of visions and voices, which complement each other. When he writes it

54 Pérez Fernández, *Textos fuente*, 417–19; E. Schweizer, *The Good News according to Mark* (trans. D. H. Madvig; Atlanta: John Knox, 1970) 139; Stein, *Mark*, 315; M. D. Hooker, *The Gospel According to Saint Mark* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991) 166.

55 P. Lamarche, *Évangile de Marc: commentaire* (Paris: J. Gabalda, 1996) 174; B. Standaert, *Évangile selon Marc: commentaire. Deuxième partie: Marc 6,14 à 10,52* (Pendé: J. Gabalda, 2010) 511.

56 J. P. Louw and E. A. Nida, *Greek–English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains* (2 vols.; New York: United Bible Societies, 1988) 1.79.31, s.v. *πυρρός*; Romero, *El adjetivo*, 119.

57 Louw and Nida, *Greek–English Lexicon*, 1.79.33, s.v. *πύρινος*; *BDAG* 6441, s.v. *πύρινος*.

down, he tries to reproduce faithfully the message he has received, so that the community he is writing for can preserve it and, in some way, participate in the visions and spoken messages (Rev 1.1–3). In this way, colour plays an important role in the Apocalypse. The colour adjectives constitute a resource that makes it easier for John of Patmos to help the listeners/readers visualise what he actually saw, ὅσα εἶδεν (Rev 1.2).⁵⁸ Thanks to his use of adjectives, the visions he describes are impregnated with colour. Consequently, the denoted colour of the adjective is not accidental in the Apocalypse, nor does it refer to an alternative reality, as in the NT texts. Instead, the colour has a value of its own, and is sometimes an essential element to identify the characters. Moreover, when John describes his vision by adding colour, he is emphasising the veracity of what he is saying, because his visions are full of colour, as in the real world.

3.1 *Colour in the Descriptions*

This explains the presence of colour in the different descriptions of the Apocalypse. For the descriptions καὶ εἶδον (which provide a detailed description of most important features of the characters),⁵⁹ John chooses λευκός, πυρρός, κόκκινος and πορφυροῦς from the colour palette. Λευκός, ‘white’, is the colour of the resurrected Christ’s hair in John’s first vision (Rev 1.14),⁶⁰ of the garments worn by the twenty-four elders (Rev 4.4), and of the crowd (Rev 7.9), of the cloud upon which the son of man appears (Rev 14.14), and of the rider’s horse and of all his horsemen (Rev 19.11,14); πυρρός, ‘bright red’, is the colour of the seven-headed dragon (Rev 12.3); κόκκινος, ‘scarlet’, is the colour the author of the Apocalypse uses to describe both the beast upon which the prostitute is mounted (Rev 17.3), and her dress, which also has another colour: πορφυροῦς, ‘purple’ (Rev 17.4).

Colour is also one of the elements used in the descriptions ἐν τῇ διηγήσει (inserted in the narratives as a single lexeme or syntagm).⁶¹ Hence, λευκή is used to describe the robe of the ones who were sacrificed (Rev 6.11), λευκός, God’s throne (Rev 20.11) and χλωρός, for the plants (Rev 9.4).⁶² Sometimes, in spite of the shortness of the chromatic description, the author seems to fill the vision with colour, because of the wide range of colours that appear. This can be seen in the description of the four riders (Rev 6.1–12), who ride different coloured horses: the first is λευκός, ‘white’ (Rev 6.2); the second πυρρός, ‘bright red’ (Rev 6.4); the third μέλας, ‘black’, (Rev 6.5) and the fourth χλωρός (Rev 6.8). In this

58 Contra H. H. Gowen, ‘The Color Terms’, 151.

59 L. García Ureña, *El Apocalipsi: pautas literarias de lectura* (Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 2013) 80–95.

60 John also clearly explains the shade of white through the two similes he uses afterwards: ὡς ἔριον λευκὸν ὡς χιῶν, ‘as white wool, as snow’.

61 García Ureña, *El Apocalipsis*, 134.

62 Although χλωρός is used as a noun at Rev 9.4, it is clear that its expressive function is the denotation of colour: whatever green.

case, the meaning of *χλωρός* does not seem to be 'green' as in Rev 8.7 or 9.4, as the context in which the adjectival lexeme appears is almost certainly not vegetation but instead refers to death – this is the name of its rider; *χλωρός* here would refer to the unhealthy hue of an ill person's skin, as witnessed also by Homer, Hippocrates and Thucydides.⁶³ Here, the translation of *χλωρός* would be 'pale greenish-grey'.⁶⁴

In the descriptions τὰ προλεγόμενα (of groups referred to previously in the story),⁶⁵ the presence of colour is especially intense when describing the breast-plates of the horsemen who will exterminate a third of mankind (Rev 9.16–19). Here, John uses the three primary colours – red, blue and yellow – but with specific shades that convey different sensations: *πύρινος*, 'fiery red', *ὑακίνθινος*, 'blue like sapphire'⁶⁶ and *θειώδης*, 'yellow like sulphur' (Rev 9.17). This chromatic sensation is intensified by the description immediately afterwards of the *πῦρ καὶ καπνὸς καὶ θεῖον*, 'fire, smoke and sulphur' (Rev 9.17) expelled from the horses' mouths – elements of nature to which, to a greater or lesser extent, the colours alluded: *πῦρ*, 'fire', denotes *πύρινος*, 'fiery red'; *καπνός*, 'smoke'; *ὑακινθίνους*, 'blue'; and *θεῖον*, 'sulphur', *θειώδεις*, 'yellow like sulphur'.

Colour is relevant to the description not only of characters, but also of τόποι (a picture in words of a specific place or how a natural physical phenomenon has occurred),⁶⁷ such as the cataclysms (Rev 6.12; 8.7). In this case, the use of colour adjectives is sparing – the author of the Apocalypse only uses one in each case: *μέλας*, 'black', or *χλωρός*, 'green'.⁶⁸ However, he fills the scene with colour: in addition to the colour adjective, the seer also uses elements of nature that express colour such as *αἶμα* (Rev 6.12; 8.7) or *χάλαζα καὶ πῦρ*, 'hail and fire' (Rev 8.7).⁶⁹ I will analyse the most representative example, Rev 6.12, in some detail.

63 Thayer, *Greek-English Lexicon*, 5718.2, s.v. *χλωρός*; *BDAG* 7938.2, s.v. *χλωρός*.

64 Versus 'dappled, vigorous' proposed by A. Volokhonskii, 'Is the Color of That Horse Really Pale?', *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies* 18 (1999) 167–8.

65 García Ureña, *El Apocalipsis*, 116–23.

66 Louw and Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon*, 1.79.37, s.v. *ὑακίνθινος*, suggest that *ὑακίνθινος* represents a dark blue colour, like that of the hyacinth flower. In fact, this is the meaning that predominates in LXX: P. Prigent, *Commentary on the Apocalypse of St. John* (trans. W. Pradels; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001) 320. Hence, this could be translated as 'blue like hyacinth'. However, since this flower was not well known, *ὑακίνθινος*, denoting dark blue, would be associated more with gemstones, so it could be translated as 'blue like sapphire' (Louw and Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon*, 1.79.37, s.v. *ὑακίνθινος*). In fact, this interpretation is the one most coherent with Rev 21.20, which mentions *ὑάκινθος*, the precious dark blue stone that resembles the hyacinth flower. In accordance with E. F. Lupieri, *L'Apocalisse di Giovanni* (Rome/Milan: Fondazione Lorenzo Valla/Arnoldo Mondadori, 1999) 169, I have maintained the translation 'blue like sapphire'.

67 García Ureña, *El Apocalipsis*, 128–34.

68 *Χλωρός* (Rev 8.7; 9.4) denotes the green colour, because it is used in the vegetation context.

69 About the use of these elements: L. García Ureña, 'The Eloquence of the Color Nouns in the Book of Revelation' (in progress).

After the opening of the sixth seal there is a great earthquake and, consequently, ὁ ἥλιος ἐγένετο μέλας ὡς σάκκος τρίχινος καὶ ἡ σελήνη ὅλη ἐγένετο ὡς αἷμα, ‘the sun became black as sackcloth made of hair and the full moon became as blood’. The only colour adjective is μέλας, although the chromatic impression is stronger than that produced by a single lexeme. On the one hand, this is because of the contrast between μέλας and ἥλιος, ‘sun’. Compared to the yellow rays of the sun, the star becomes black in colour. Moreover, to clarify the shade of the colour μέλας a simile is used that would be familiar to the Johannine community, ὡς σάκκος τρίχινος, ‘like sackcloth of hair’. As David E. Aune explains, σάκκος is the term used to refer to the garments of the two witnesses (Rev 11.3).⁷⁰ It was, therefore, the robe of penitence. Τρίχινος, usually translated as ‘made of hair’, does not really help to determine its colour, although the translation offered by the Vulgate does: *cilicinus*, which, as H. B. Swete explained, means ‘made from black goat hair’.⁷¹ On the other hand, in this brief description the colour red is also present through the simile with an element of nature: αἷμα, ‘blood’. The author of the Apocalypse does not use αἷμα to refer to blood as such (‘organic red-coloured fluid essential to life, which is an integral part of living beings’), but rather to allude to its colour.⁷² In this way, the description of the earthquake is dominated by the presence of colour: black and blood red.

3.2 *Colour in the Dialogues*

Colour is not only part of John’s visions, but is also present in the voices, dialogues and messages he hears. The speakers use colour so that their listeners/readers remember a characteristic element of a character or object that is mentioned, to help identify it or single it out. For example, while dictating the letters, Jesus uses the colour white to describe the stone which the victorious one will receive with his name on it (Rev 2.17), or to describe the garments of those faithful to him (Rev 3.4, 5, 18). At another time, when one of the twenty-four elders asks John who makes up the crowd in front of them, he uses colour so that John knows whom he is talking about: οὗτοι οἱ περιβεβλημένοι τὰς στολὰς τὰς λευκάς τίνες εἰσὶν καὶ πόθεν ἦλθον; ‘These wearing white tunics, who are they and where have they come from?’ (Rev 7.13). Later on, when the voice from the heavens describes the merchandise with which they traded in Babylon, he again uses the term κόκκινος, in this case as a noun: γόμον ... κοκκίνου, ‘merchandise ... of scarlet’ (Rev 18.12). When the traders are lamenting over the fall of Babylon, he again uses colour to describe it: οὐαὶ οὐαὶ, ἢ πόλις ἢ μεγάλη, ἢ περιβεβλημένη βύσσινον καὶ πορφυροῦν

70 D. E. Aune, *Revelation 6–16* (WBC 52B; Nashville, TN: T. Nelson, 1998) 413.

71 Swete, *Commentary on Mark*, 93.

72 J. Mateos and J. Peláez (eds.), *Diccionario griego-español del Nuevo Testamento: análisis semántico de los vocablos* (Córdoba: El Almendro, 2000) 172, 179, s.v. αἷμα.

καὶ κόκκινον ...', 'woe, woe, the great city, dressed in linen, purple and scarlet ...!' (Rev 18.16).⁷³

3.3 *Aural Effect of Colour*

John writes the Apocalypse to be read aloud in an assembly.⁷⁴ Therefore, as the colours are repeated in the different descriptions of the story, in addition to denoting colour, these words also acquire another series of connotations for the listeners/readers due to the aural effect of the repetition.

For example, λευκός, 'white', is the first colour that is mentioned in the Apocalypse. The seer uses this word to describe the head and hair of the resurrected Christ (Rev 1.14). After this, the colour white is used several times to describe the robes of those faithful to Christ (Rev 3.5, 18; 6.11; 7.9, 13; 19.14) or the elders (Rev 4.4); the stone of the victorious one (Rev 2.17); the conquering horse (Rev 6.2; 19.11), and those following the heavenly army (Rev 19.14); the cloud upon which the son of man appears (Rev 14.14), and God's throne (Rev 20.11). When listeners/readers hear repetitions of λευκός, they realise that in some way everything that is associated with Jesus or with God is described with this colour. The adjectival lexeme λευκός acquires a new aural connotation: to inform the listeners/readers that anything described as white belongs to or follows God or the Lamb of God, in other words, it forms part of the celestial context.⁷⁵

By contrast, the different shades of red, πυρρός, 'bright red', πύρινος, 'fiery red', κόκκινος, 'scarlet' and πορφυροῦς, 'purple', provide the listeners/readers with very different information. Taking into account that πυρρός is the horse that causes the war during the opening of the second seal (Rev 6.4), and also the dragon that attacks the woman (Rev 12.3–6), it is logical that when the breastplates of the horsemen during the last plague are described as πύρινοι (Rev 9.17), the listeners/readers feel terrified. This also happens when they hear κόκκινος, the colour of the beast and of the prostitute's dress (Rev 17.3, 4), or πορφυροῦς, 'purple' (Rev 18.16). It is important not to forget the negative connotation in the OT of a woman dressed in these colours. The colour red, therefore, acquires a negative meaning for the listeners/readers, since it is the colour associated either with those who bring misfortune to mankind, or with those who oppose the Lamb of

73 Louw and Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon*, 1.6.169, s.v. πορφύρα, πορφυροῦν, maintain that πορφυροῦς in this case is a noun. This is not supported in any other dictionary (*BDAG*; Thayer, *Greek-English Lexicon*; LSJ), and since John knows the noun πορφύρα (Rev 18.12), I am more inclined to consider it to be an adjective.

74 L. García Ureña, 'The Book of Revelation: A Written Text towards the Oral Performance', *Orality and Literacy in the Ancient World*, vol. x: *Between Orality and Literacy: Communication and Adaptation in Antiquity* (ed. R. Scodel; Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2014) 309–30, at 310–13.

75 García Ureña, *El Apocalipsis*, 52.

God. It could, therefore, be said that red evokes the context of cataclysms or of evil, in other words, those who go against the Lamb of God.

Something similar also occurs with μέλας. This term has had negative connotations since ancient times. The author of the Apocalypse reinforces this. The black horse he describes is responsible for spreading hunger across the earth's sphere (Rev 6.5–6), and the sun changing into a star as black as sackcloth made of black hair marks the beginning of one of the great cataclysms in the Apocalypse (Rev 6.12–17).

Finally, although the adjectives χλωρός with the meaning of 'greenish-grey', ὑακίνθινος, 'blue-like sapphire', and θειώδης, 'sulphurous yellow', only appear once, the context in which they are used gives them a negative connotation associated with destruction and death: χλωρός because its rider is called Θάνατος, 'Death', which will be his mission (Rev 6.8), and ὑακίνθινος with θειώδης, because they appear in the same context as πύρινος and the very different colours of the horses further intensifies the terrifying image of those who will destroy a third of mankind (Rev 9.18).⁷⁶

3.4 Synthesis

In view of this study, it can be concluded that the author of the Apocalypse uses colour adjectives for their denotation: their colour. They are used to describe characters, objects and events in a vivid and real way, achieving one of the effects of description *ut pictura poesis*. The extent of this is such that sometimes the seer recreates scenes in which colour is the predominant element, either through the accumulation of colour adjectives (Rev 6.2–8), or by the addition of lexemes which, by nature, express colour (Rev 6.12; 8.7). However, the function of colour adjectives in the Apocalypse goes further than this. Since this is a text to be read aloud, the repeated and systematic use of colour creates an aural effect in the listeners/readers that gives extra information to help identify the characters, making it easier for them to follow the story. Hence, colour in the Apocalypse also acquires a symbolic meaning.

4. Conclusion

The use of colour adjectives in the NT, while limited, is very important. When they appear in the gospels or letters, this is not so much to denote the colour of something, but rather as an instrument with which the author can inform the listeners/readers, or to suggest the presence of another reality, where the symbolic contents play an essential role. This, however, does not

⁷⁶ In that sense I do not agree with the idea of E. Lupieri that ὑακίνθινος connotes a divine sphere (*L'Apocalisse*, 169). The presence of πύρινος and θειώδης transmits terror and destruction.

occur in the Apocalypse, where the use of colour is altogether more complex. The author chooses the colour adjectives, with their different shades or hues, very carefully. Colour not only increases the realism of the descriptions of the catastrophes that take place, the visions experienced and the characters involved, making them easier for the audience to identify, but the colour adjectives also have an aural effect, developing other symbolic connotations closely linked to the colour, which help listeners/readers to follow and understand the story.