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 T. F. Glasson
 Excerpt
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THE REVELATION OF JOHN

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The Revelation of John is the only book of its kind in the New Testament. Elsewhere we have narrative (the Gospels and Acts) and letters (Romans to Jude). But this book presents a different type of writing. The Greek title is *apokalupsis*, which produces the English word apocalypse, and the book of Revelation is sometimes known as the Apocalypse.

WHAT IS AN APOCALYPSE?

The word means an uncovering, an unveiling, either (*a*) of future events, or (*b*) of the unseen realms of heaven and hell. There are many apocalypses in existence; one of the best known is the book of Daniel, the apocalyptic part being found mainly in chapters 7–12. Outside the Bible there are such books as 2 Esdras (in the Apocrypha), 2 Baruch and Enoch.

Prophetic and apocalyptic writings are closely related and cannot be entirely separated; they overlap and one class runs over into the other. But broadly speaking they represent different tendencies and emphases. The difference can be better felt than defined; when we read the book of Enoch we feel that we are in a somewhat different world from that of Amos and Isaiah. The following points draw out some of the contrasts, at the risk of some simplification; in a fuller statement all kinds of qualifications would need to be made.

(1) A prophecy was usually *spoken*, though it may be preserved to us in a written form. Such men as Isaiah, Jeremiah and Amos spoke their messages publicly. The apocalypses on

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[More information](#)

REVELATION

What is an Apocalypse?

the contrary were, as a rule, *written* products from the start. One can hardly imagine chapters of Enoch or Revelation being delivered in the open air. They are more artificial and less spontaneous than prophetic utterances.

(2) Prophecy is usually given in straightforward terms, but the apocalypses frequently adopted what we may call 'cartoon' language. We are accustomed to newspaper cartoons in which Russia is represented by a bear, England by a lion, China by a dragon. This will help us to understand the language of these books. An apocalypse is usually something of a riddle, and the weird pictures may be interpreted in different ways. Part of the reason for this is that it would be dangerous to speak of a ruler or a nation by name. But cryptic symbols would avoid such a risk.

(3) Apocalypses were usually written at a time of crisis and danger. One of their purposes was to strengthen the believer at a time of persecution and to encourage him to stand firm. This is true of the book of Daniel which appeared in the second century B.C., when the Jews were fiercely persecuted for their faith. Although apocalypses spring from profound faith and burning conviction, the writers generally despair of the present and pin all their hopes on the future. They look for some great divine intervention in the near future, often on a world-wide scale, to put an end to an intolerable situation. It is true that the prophets also looked for divine action in the future; but there was a difference. The prophets appealed to men to change their attitude in order that by their repentance the threatened doom might be withdrawn (cf. Jonah 3: 10, 'And God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God repented of the evil, which he said he would do unto them; and he did it not'). But with the apocalyptists there was a kind of *fatalism*. The future was fixed and ordered according to a divine calendar of events; this is 'what must shortly happen' (Rev. 1: 1) and no human action can alter it.

(4) Many apocalypses were written under assumed names.

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 Excerpt
[More information](#)

Who was John?

REVELATION

No one believes that Enoch and Elijah actually wrote the books which pass under their names. This 'pseudonymity', as we call it, is not invariable but it applies to a large number of these books. It does not hold true, in the main, of the great prophets of the Bible.

In the case of the book of Revelation, points (1), (2) and (3) apply; but as far as (4) is concerned, there is no reason to believe that it was written under an assumed name. The writer tells us his name was John (1: 1, 4, 9) and we have no grounds for doubting this.

WHO WAS JOHN?

Long tradition has ascribed five writings of the New Testament to the Apostle John, the son of Zebedee: the Fourth Gospel, the three Johannine epistles, and the book of Revelation. But there are grave difficulties in this view. While the Gospel and the epistles are similar in style to each other, the Revelation is very different and has a type of Greek which is unique; it is full of grammatical irregularities though the writer uses it with powerful effect. Again, the thought of the writer of Revelation—his hopes, his view of Christianity—provides a marked contrast with the thought of the Gospel and the epistles. As long ago as the third century, a bishop of Alexandria named Dionysius saw that it was almost impossible to ascribe all the five works to a single writer. He suggested that the Gospel and epistles were written by the Apostle, and Revelation by another John.

A little later Eusebius, bishop of Caesarea, in his famous *History of the Church* quoted a passage from a writer of the early second century named Papias, which seemed (though this is far from certain) to distinguish two Johns: the Apostle John and John the Elder. Eusebius thought this might provide a solution for the problem; the book of Revelation (which he did not like) could be ascribed to John the Elder, and the other Johannine writings to the Apostle.

It is impossible to mention all the theories about the author-

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Excerpt

[More information](#)**REVELATION** *How was the Book received by the Church?*

ship of the Johannine writings which have been put forward. Some authorities have pointed to the fact that the sons of Zebedee, James and John, were called by Jesus 'sons of thunder' and such a nickname could well be applied to the author of Revelation. All we can say with fair certainty is that the book was written by a Christian named John, who was for a time banished to the island of Patmos. He had a connexion of some kind with the seven churches of Asia Minor to which he writes; but he was not necessarily a church leader. He was a man of visionary and prophetic gifts who felt led to write this book as a message from God to the churches. The fact that he calls himself John without any title or description beyond the words in 1: 9 suggests that he was not John the son of Zebedee; and there are other reasons which suggest that he was not the Apostle. He writes as 'I, John, your brother, who share with you in the suffering and the sovereignty and the endurance which is ours in Jesus'. From the contents of the book we may gather with some certainty that he was a Jewish Christian.

Patmos was used as a place of exile to which prisoners could be sent, and the words of the opening chapter suggest that John had been banished there as a punishment for his Christian allegiance and witness. The island lies in the Aegean Sea, between Turkey and Greece. It is about 30 miles from the mainland which in those days was known as the Roman province of Asia, the western portion of what we sometimes call Asia Minor. Patmos is almost due west of Miletus, the coastal town where Paul met the Ephesian elders (Acts 20: 15-17). The seven churches to which John wrote letters (chs. 2-3) were all situated in Asia. (See map on p. xi.)

HOW WAS THE BOOK RECEIVED BY THE CHURCH?

If the book had been known from the beginning to be the work of an Apostle, it would be difficult to understand the slowness with which it gained acceptance throughout the

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*How was the Book received by the Church?* REVELATION

Christian world. One reason for the opposition of certain authorities in early centuries was the teaching of Rev. 20 concerning the Millennium; it is stated there that when Jesus returns to the earth he will reign for a thousand years with the resurrected martyrs. This doctrine, known as millenarianism, was believed literally by certain early Christian writers, such as Justin Martyr and Irenaeus. It flourished mainly in Asia Minor, the very area from which the book of Revelation emerged. It is inconsistent with the main stream of Christian thought, which has preferred to emphasize the fact that Jesus has already begun his reign. The frequency with which Ps. 110 is quoted in the New Testament shows that this is a basic conviction of the faith. This is the psalm which begins, 'The Lord saith unto my lord, Sit thou at my right hand...'

It was Augustine, the bishop of Hippo (354-430), who gave the final blow to millenarianism; he said that the Millennium is not a literal period of time or a visible reign. The Millennium in Rev. 20, he said, begins with the binding of Satan (20: 2-3) and this took place at Christ's first coming; it was then that Satan was bound, for Jesus himself in Mark 3: 27 spoke of his work in terms of binding the strong man, that is, the devil. This explanation of Augustine, while not an accurate interpretation of Rev. 20, brought John's conception of the reign of Christ into line with the rest of the New Testament. Augustine's contemporary Jerome included Revelation in the Vulgate, his Latin translation of the Bible; and through the predominant influence of Augustine and Jerome, further resistance to the book was difficult in the west.

The eastern communities, however, in some areas hesitated for centuries. Revelation was not at first included among the Scriptures used at Antioch. And when the New Testament was translated into Syriac, it did not contain this book. Even as late as the eleventh century its position as scripture was not undisputed. A few centuries after this, when the Reformation

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[More information](#)

REVELATION

The Background in History

period began, its place was again in jeopardy in the west. Luther at first did not accept it as a book of scripture, and he placed it with a few other New Testament writings in an appendix to the Bible devoted to works of inferior authority. Calvin, who wrote commentaries on most books of the Bible, missed out the book of Revelation, evidently sharing Luther's feelings. Zwingli, the Swiss Reformer, said, 'It is not a book of the Bible'.

In spite of all this one cannot help feeling that the book of Revelation provides a climax for the Scriptures. Its skilful weaving together of strands taken from many parts of the Old Testament makes it a kind of triumphant finale to the Bible; it reminds us of a composer gathering up the themes of his symphony in a closing burst of glorious music. Some of its teaching strikes us as unchristian: pictures of horses wading in deep pools of pagan blood (14: 20), the apparent gloating over the appalling sufferings and judgements which await the enemies of the Church, torment day and night for ever (20: 10)—these things are hard to reconcile with the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. But it must be remembered that this writing emerged from a period of bitter persecution and critical danger for the whole Christian cause in the world. It can only be understood in the light of its historical background, and to this we now turn.

THE BACKGROUND IN HISTORY

The 'Babylon' of the book stands for the persecuting Roman empire. Babylon is also used to indicate Rome in 1 Pet. 5: 13. The heavenly city of God is contrasted with Babylon; and after the latter has finally gone up in flames, the new Jerusalem comes down out of heaven from God. This is one instance of several contrasting pairs; thus we have the beast and the Lamb; the great whore and the Lamb's bride; the dragon or Satan standing over against God himself. Some of these parallels are worked out in detail; thus the very phrase

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[More information](#)

The Background in History

REVELATION

concerning the Lamb, 'with the marks of slaughter upon him', is used also of the beast. We shall see the meaning of these phrases when we come to them. Our point at the moment is that the great enemy of the cause of God in the world is Babylon, standing for the persecuting Roman empire and demanding worship for its emperor.

Two Roman emperors are of special importance in understanding the book (for a list of Roman emperors see p. x):

(1) *Nero* (54–68), the first great persecutor of the Church, who killed Paul and probably Peter too. He murdered his own mother and kicked his wife so severely that she died. At the time of the great fire of Rome in A.D. 64, a rumour started that Nero himself was responsible for the blaze. So he had to find a scapegoat, and blamed the Christians of Rome. As Tacitus (c. 54–120), the famous Roman historian put it, 'So in order to drown the rumour, Nero shifted the guilt on persons known to the people as Christians, and punished them with exquisite tortures' (*Annals* 15: 44). This is the first mention of Christians by a Roman historian. Tacitus refers to the fact that Christ had been sentenced by Pontius Pilate; and he goes on to describe Nero's treatment of the Christians; some were crucified, others were mauled by dogs, others were set on fire and burnt after twilight by way of nightly illuminations in Nero's own gardens. Even the people of Rome, he says, at last began to feel pity for the Christians.

It was not long after this that the dissatisfaction with Nero's rule was so strong that he was forced to commit suicide. Strange to say, a belief soon arose that he was not really dead but was in hiding in the east and would later be returning at the head of the Parthian army to destroy Rome. Later several pretenders appeared, claiming to be Nero. Another form of the belief was that Nero was actually dead but would come to life again.

Now, the Jews had long believed that some great figure of evil would arise at the end of the age as the great enemy of God. Some of them came to think that Nero when he

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[More information](#)

REVELATION

The Background in History

returned would be this 'man of sin'. Here is a quotation from a Jewish writing in which this belief is expressed:

'In the time of the end, and the last days of the moon, there shall be a mad, world-wide war, treacherous and guileful. And from the ends of the earth shall come the man who slew his mother, a fugitive, pondering piercing counsels in his mind, who shall subdue all the earth...and the city which caused him to fall, he shall capture at a blow.' (H. N. Bate's trans.)

This comes from a work known as the Sibylline Oracles, book 5: 361-8; 'the man who slew his mother' is clearly Nero. Several other examples could be given. But the point at the moment is that if Jews adopted this widespread belief about the return of Nero, it is not surprising that the same belief was adopted by the Christians. This is what we find in the book of Revelation. Nero is the beast's head, smitten unto death and yet his death-stroke was healed (13: 3). Again in chapter 17 mention is made of 'the beast that once was alive and is alive no longer', and yet comes back to reign again (17: 11). See also 11: 7, 'the beast that comes up from the abyss'.

This belief lingered for centuries. Even Augustine, 300 years later, mentions that some people thought that Nero would rise again and be the Antichrist, and that others thought he was not really dead but was still alive at the same age and vigour at which he was slain, until the time should come for him to return to his kingdom. (We may recall that long after the death of the German emperor Frederick Barbarossa he was said to be asleep in a cave. In the present century, after Hitler's suicide some believed or feared he was still alive and in hiding.)

(2) *Domitian* (81-96). It is generally thought that Revelation was completed in Domitian's reign; this tradition goes back to Irenaeus (end of second century). Domitian extended persecution of the Church to a much wider area, Nero's activities being confined to Rome itself. Now there was 'a

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[More information](#)

The Background in History

REVELATION

succession of sharp, sudden partial assaults, striking down one here and one there from malice or jealousy or caprice, and harassing the Church with an agony of suspense'. There were traces of insanity about him; the poet Juvenal said that to talk with Domitian about the weather was to risk your life. He took much more seriously than his predecessors the issue of emperor-worship. He ordered all official proclamations to begin with formulae recognizing his deity. ('Our lord and god orders this to be done'). The aim was to consolidate the empire. To refuse to worship the emperor was treason.

Over a century earlier a temple for the worship of Rome and Augustus had been erected at Pergamum. It was the first of its kind in the province of Asia and this may help to explain Rev. 2: 13 where Pergamum is described as 'the home of Satan'; the same verse refers to Antipas who was martyred there. Another of these shrines was at Smyrna, and at the time of Domitian it was apparently the main centre of the cult in this area. The church of Smyrna must have had a specially hard ordeal and in the light of this we can appreciate the message to them in Rev. 2: 8-11. Incidentally, the 'dignitaries of the province' (Greek: *Asiarchs*) mentioned in Acts 19: 31 were the priests of emperor-worship. It is curious that there they are found befriending Paul at Ephesus. At that time the issue had not become acute and no pressure was put upon the Christians to share in this cult.

Emperor-worship, so important for our understanding of this book, is not merely a matter of ancient history. The whole question of the relation of the Church to the State is tied up with it. Again and again, Christians have had to resist claims made by human rulers which usurped the prerogatives of God. In the present century, the Christians of Japan and Germany have had to ask themselves if in responding to the increasing demands of the State rulers they were compromising their loyalty to Christ.

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[More information](#)

REVELATION

What is the Book's Meaning?

WHAT IS THE BOOK'S MEANING?

It is against this background of emperor-worship and persecution that the book can best be understood. The writer says he is speaking of 'what must shortly happen' (1: 1); and we must frankly admit that it did not happen. The various events and woes outlined did not develop in the way John expected. Nevertheless, the essential message of the book still stands. It shows the invincible faith of the Christians at a crisis when annihilation threatened them. The hymn verse adapted from J. R. Lowell's lines expresses one of its main messages:

Though the cause of evil prosper,
 Yet 'tis truth alone is strong;
 Though her portion be the scaffold,
 And upon the throne be wrong—
 Yet that scaffold sways the future,
 And, behind the dim unknown,
 Standeth God within the shadow,
 Keeping watch above His own.

When the connexion between Revelation and the events of the first century was lost sight of, and the time for immediate fulfilment of the prophecies had passed, the book came to be regarded as a veiled account of the history of the world, from the time of Christ to the end of history. It is curious to note that whenever men look at Revelation in this way, they always believe they themselves are living in the last time; they are always in the period of chapters 17–18 or thereabouts. Attempts to identify the beast, the figure of evil so prominent in the book (sometimes called Antichrist), vary in this way according to historical circumstances. Muhammad, the Pope, Frederick II, Luther, Napoleon have all been suggested.

We have considered two ways of interpreting the book. The first connects it with its original historical circumstances; and the second regards it as a detailed prophecy of the Christian centuries. Two other ways may be mentioned.