

## CHAPTER 1

*Reading the Book of Revelation*

## WHAT KIND OF A BOOK IS REVELATION?

It is important to begin by asking this question, because our answer determines our expectations of the book, the kind of meaning we expect to find in it. One of the problems readers of the New Testament have with Revelation is that it seems an anomaly among the other New Testament books. They do not know how to read it. Misinterpretations of Revelation often begin by misconceiving the kind of book it is.

At least in the case of ancient books, the beginning of the work is usually the essential indication of the kind of book it is intended to be. The opening verses of Revelation seem to indicate that it belongs not to just one but to three kinds of literature. The first verse, which is virtually a title, speaks of the *revelation* of Jesus Christ, which God gave him and which reaches God's servants through a chain of revelation: God → Christ → angel → John (the writer) → the servants of God. The word 'revelation' or 'apocalypse' (*apokalypsis*) suggests that the book belongs to the genre of ancient Jewish and Christian literature which modern scholars call apocalypses, and even though we cannot in fact be sure that the word itself already had this technical sense when John used it there is a great deal in Revelation which resembles the other works we call apocalypses.

However, 1:3 describes Revelation as a *prophecy* intended to be read aloud in the context of Christian worship, and this claim to be a prophecy is confirmed by the epilogue to the book (cf. 22:6–7, which echoes 1:1–3, and especially 22:18–19). But

then 1:4–6 can leave no doubt that Revelation is intended to be a *letter*. Verses 4–5a follow the conventional form of letter-opening used by Paul and other early Christian leaders: statement of writer and addressees, followed by a greeting in the form: ‘Grace to you and peace from . . .’ There are differences from Paul’s usual form, but the early Christian letter form is clear and is confirmed by the conclusion of the book (22:21), which is comparable with the conclusions of many of Paul’s letters. Thus Revelation seems to be an apocalyptic prophecy in the form of a circular letter to seven churches in the Roman province of Asia. This is explicit in 1:11: what is revealed to John (what he ‘sees’) he is to write and send to the seven churches which are here named. This command applies to all the visions and revelations which follow in the rest of the book. The habit of referring to chapters 2–3 as the seven ‘letters’ to the churches is misleading. These are not as such letters but prophetic messages to each church. It is really the whole book of Revelation which is one circular letter to the seven churches. The seven messages addressed individually to each church are introductions to the rest of the book which is addressed to all seven churches. Thus we must try to do justice to the three categories of literature – apocalypse, prophecy and letter – into which Revelation seems to fall. In considering each in turn it will be appropriate to begin with prophecy.

#### REVELATION AS CHRISTIAN PROPHECY

Virtually all we know about John, the author of Revelation, is that he was a Jewish Christian prophet. Evidently he was one of a circle of prophets in the churches of the province of Asia (22:6), and evidently he had at least one rival: the Thyatiran prophetess whom he considers a false prophet (2:20). Thus to understand his book we must situate it in the context of early Christian prophecy. John must normally have been active as a prophet in the churches to which he writes. The seven messages to the churches reveal detailed knowledge of each local situation, and 2:21 presumably refers to an earlier prophetic oracle of his, addressed to the prophetess he calls Jezebel at Thyatira.

John was no stranger to these churches but had exercised a prophetic ministry in them and knew them well.

Since Christian prophets normally prophesied in the context of Christian worship meetings, we must assume that this is what John usually did. The reading of this written prophecy in the worship service (1:3) was therefore a substitute for John's more usual presence and prophesying in person. Usually in the early churches prophets delivered oracles which were given to them by God in the worship meeting. They declared the revelation as they received it (cf. 1 Cor. 14:30; *Hermas*, *Mand.* 11:9). It took the form of a word of God spoken to the church, under the inspiration of the Spirit, in the name of God or the risen Christ, so that the 'I' of the oracle was the divine person addressing the church through the prophet (cf. *Odes Sol.* 42:6). But early Christian prophets seem also to have received visionary revelations which they conveyed to the church later in the form of a report of the vision (cf. Acts 10:9–11:18; *Hermas*, *Vis.* 1–4). In this case the vision was initially a private experience, even if it happened during the worship service, and was only subsequently reported to the church as prophecy. We can make a useful, though not absolute, distinction between these two types of prophecy: oracles, spoken in the name of God or Christ, and reports of visions, in which the prophets had received revelations in order subsequently to pass them on to others. The whole book of Revelation is a report of visionary revelation, but it also includes oracular prophecy within it. This occurs in the prologue (1:8) and the epilogue (22:12–13, 16, 20); the seven messages to the churches (2:1–3:22) are oracles written as Christ's word to the churches; and also throughout the book (e.g. 13:9–10; 14:13b; 16:15) there are prophetic oracles which interrupt the accounts of the visions.

Yet if Revelation resembles in a very general way the kind of prophecy John might have delivered orally in person, it is also a far more elaborate and studied composition than any extemporary prophecy could have been. Revelation is a literary work composed with astonishing care and skill. We should certainly not doubt that John had remarkable visionary experiences, but he has transmuted them through what must have been a

lengthy process of reflection and writing into a thoroughly literary creation which is designed not to reproduce the experience so much as to communicate the meaning of the revelation that had been given him. Certainly Revelation is a literary work designed for oral performance (1:3), but as a complex literary creation, dense with meaning and allusion, it must be qualitatively different from the spontaneous orality of most early Christian prophecy.

Therefore it may not have been just because he could not be with his churches in person that he wrote this prophecy. He wrote from Patmos (1:9), an inhabited island not far from Ephesus. It has most often been assumed that 1:9 indicates he was exiled there, whether in flight from persecution or legally banished to the island. This is possible, but it is also possible that he went to Patmos in order to receive the revelation ('on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus' could refer back to 1:2, where these terms describe what he 'saw'; but on the other hand, cf. 6:9; 20:4).

Although most early Christian prophecy was oral, not written, John had plenty of models for a written prophecy, both in the prophetic books of the Hebrew scriptures and in the later Jewish apocalypses. In its literary forms what he writes is indebted to both kinds of model. It is clear that John saw himself, not only as one of the Christian prophets, but also as standing in the tradition of Old Testament prophecy. For example, in 10:7 he hears that 'the mystery of God will be fulfilled, as he announced to his servants the prophets'. The reference (with allusion to Amos 3:7) is almost certainly to the Old Testament prophets. But then John goes on to record his own prophetic commissioning (10:8–11) in a form which is modelled on that of Ezekiel (Ezek. 2:9–3:3). His task is to proclaim the fulfilment of what God had revealed to the prophets of the past. The whole book is saturated with allusions to Old Testament prophecy, though there are no formal quotations. As a prophet himself, John need not quote his predecessors, but he takes up and reinterprets their prophecies, much as the later writers in the Old Testament prophetic tradition themselves took up and reinterpreted earlier prophetic

cies. It is a remarkable fact, for example, that John's great oracle against Babylon (18:1–19:8) echoes every one of the oracles against Babylon in the Old Testament prophets, as well as the two major oracles against Tyre.<sup>1</sup> It seems that John not only writes in the tradition of the Old Testament prophets, but understands himself to be writing at the climax of the tradition, when all the eschatological oracles of the prophets are about to be finally fulfilled, and so he interprets and gathers them up in his own prophetic revelation. What makes him a Christian prophet is that he does so in the light of the fulfilment already of Old Testament prophetic expectation in the victory of the Lamb, the Messiah Jesus.

#### REVELATION AS AN APOCALYPSE

Biblical scholarship has long distinguished between Old Testament prophecy and the Jewish apocalypses, which include the Old Testament book of Daniel as well as such extra-canonical works as 1 Enoch, 4 Ezra and 2 Baruch. The extent and character of the continuity and the differences between prophecy and apocalyptic are highly debatable. But the distinction means that the relationship between Revelation and the Jewish apocalypses has also been debated. Often the issue has been posed in a misleading way, as though John himself would have made the kinds of distinction modern scholars have made between prophecy and apocalyptic. This is very unlikely. The book of Daniel, which was one of John's major Old Testament sources, he would certainly have regarded as a prophetic book. If he knew some of the post-biblical apocalypses, as he most probably did, he will have seen them as a form of prophecy. The forms and traditions which Revelation shares with other works we call apocalypses John will have used as vehicles of prophecy, in continuity with Old Testament prophecy.

We may still ask in what sense Revelation belongs to the

<sup>1</sup> Babylon: Isa. 13:1–14:23; 21:1–10; 47; Jer 25:12–38; 50–1. Tyre: Isa. 23; Ezek. 26–28. For this point, as with many other aspects of Revelation's use of the Old Testament, I am indebted to the important work of J. Fekkes III, 'Isaiah and Prophetic Traditions in the Book of Revelation: Visionary Antecedents and their Development' (Ph.D. thesis, University of Manchester, 1988).



genre of ancient religious literature we call the apocalypse. J. J. Collins defines the literary genre apocalypse in this way:

‘Apocalypse’ is a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial, insofar as it involves another, supernatural world.<sup>2</sup>

The reference to eschatological salvation would be disputed in some recent study of the apocalypses. Although the apocalypses have conventionally been thought to be about history and eschatology, this is not necessarily true of all of them. The heavenly secrets revealed to the seer in the extant Jewish apocalypses cover a rather wide range of topics and are not exclusively concerned with history and eschatology.<sup>3</sup> John’s apocalypse, however, is exclusively concerned with eschatology: with eschatological judgment and salvation, and with the impact of these on the present situation in which he writes. The heavenly revelation he receives concerns God’s activity in history to achieve his eschatological purpose for the world. In other words, John’s concerns are exclusively prophetic. He uses the apocalyptic genre as a vehicle of prophecy, as not all Jewish apocalypists did consistently. So it would be best to call John’s work a prophetic apocalypse or apocalyptic prophecy. With that qualification, it obviously fits the definition of the genre apocalypse quoted above, and there should be no difficulty in recognizing its generic relationship to the Jewish apocalypses, while at the same time acknowledging its continuity with Old Testament prophecy.

There are many ways in which John’s work belongs to the apocalyptic tradition. He uses specific literary forms and particular items of apocalyptic tradition that can also be traced in the Jewish apocalypses.<sup>4</sup> But for our purposes, it is more impor-

<sup>2</sup> J. J. Collins, ‘Introduction: Towards the Morphology of a Genre’, *Semeia* 14 (1979), 9.

<sup>3</sup> See especially C. Rowland, *The Open Heaven* (London: SPCK, 1982).

<sup>4</sup> For examples of Jewish apocalyptic traditions in Revelation, see R. Bauckham, ‘Resurrection as Giving Back the Dead: A Traditional Image of Resurrection in the Pseudepigrapha and the Apocalypse of John’, forthcoming in J. H. Charlesworth and C. A. Evans, eds., *The Pseudepigrapha and the New Testament: Comparative*

tant to indicate two very broad ways in which Revelation stands in the tradition of Jewish apocalyptic literature.

In the first place, John's work is a prophetic apocalypse in that it communicates a disclosure of a transcendent perspective on this world. It is prophetic in the way it addresses a concrete historical situation – that of Christians in the Roman province of Asia towards the end of the first century AD – and brings to its readers a prophetic word of God, enabling them to discern the divine purpose in their situation and respond to their situation in a way appropriate to this purpose. This contextual communication of the divine purpose is typical of the biblical prophetic tradition. But John's work is also *apocalyptic*, because the way that it enables its readers to see their situation with prophetic insight into God's purpose is by disclosing the content of a vision in which John is taken, as it were, out of this world in order to see it differently. Here John's work belongs to the apocalyptic tradition of visionary disclosure, in which a seer is taken in vision to God's throne-room in heaven to learn the secrets of the divine purpose (cf., e.g., 1 Enoch 14–16; 46; 60:1–6; 71; 2 Enoch 20–1; Ap. Abr. 9–18).

John (and thereby his readers with him) is taken up into heaven in order to see the world from the heavenly perspective. He is given a glimpse behind the scenes of history so that he can see what is really going on in the events of his time and place. He is also transported in vision into the final future of the world, so that he can see the present from the perspective of what its final outcome must be, in God's ultimate purpose for human history. The effect of John's visions, one might say, is to expand his readers' world, both spatially (into heaven) and temporally (into the eschatological future), or, to put it another way, to open their world to divine transcendence. The bounds which Roman power and ideology set to the readers' world are broken open and that world is seen as open to the greater purpose of its transcendent Creator and Lord. It is not

*Studies* (to appear in the *Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha* Supplement Series; Sheffield Academic Press, 1992); and chapter 2 ('The Use of Apocalyptic Traditions') in R. Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy: Studies in the Book of Revelation* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1992).

that the here-and-now are left behind in an escape into heaven or the eschatological future, but that the here-and-now look quite different when they are opened to transcendence.

The world seen from this transcendent perspective, in apocalyptic vision, is a kind of new symbolic world into which John's readers are taken as his artistry creates it for them.<sup>5</sup> But really it is not another world. It is John's readers' concrete, day-to-day world seen in heavenly and eschatological perspective. As such its function, as we shall notice in more detail later, is to counter the Roman imperial view of the world, which was the dominant ideological perception of their situation that John's readers naturally tended to share. Revelation counters that false view of reality by opening the world to divine transcendence. All that it shares with the apocalyptic literature by way of the motifs of visionary transportation to heaven, visions of God's throne-room in heaven, angelic mediators of revelation, symbolic visions of political powers, coming judgment and new creation – all this serves the purpose of revealing the world in which John's readers live in the perspective of the transcendent divine purpose.

A second important sense in which Revelation stands in the tradition of the Jewish apocalypses is that it shares the *question* which concerned so many of the latter: who is Lord over the world? Jewish apocalypses, insofar as they continued the concerns of the Old Testament prophetic tradition, were typically concerned with the apparent non-fulfilment of God's promises, through the prophets, for the judgment of evil, the salvation of the righteous, the achievement of God's righteous rule over his world. The righteous suffer, the wicked flourish: the world seems to be ruled by evil, not by God. Where is God's kingdom? The apocalyptists sought to maintain the faith of God's people in the one, all-powerful and righteous God, in the face of the harsh realities of evil in the world, especially the political evil of the oppression of God's faithful people by the great pagan empires. The answer to this problem was always, essentially, that, despite appearances, it is God who rules his

<sup>5</sup> See D. L. Barr, 'The Apocalypse as a Symbolic Transformation of the World: A Literary Analysis', *Int.* 38 (1984), 39–50.



*Differences from other apocalypses*

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creation and the time is coming soon when he will overthrow the evil empires and establish his kingdom.<sup>6</sup> John's apocalypse in important ways shares that central apocalyptic concern. He sees God's rule over the world apparently contradicted by the rule of the Roman Empire, which arrogates divine rule over the world to itself and to all appearances does so successfully. He faces the question: who then is really Lord of this world? He anticipates the eschatological crisis in which the issue will come to a head and be resolved in God's ultimate triumph over all evil and his establishment of his eternal kingdom. How John deals with these themes is significantly distinctive, as we shall see, but the distinctiveness emerges from his continuity with the concerns of the Jewish apocalyptic tradition.

DIFFERENCES FROM OTHER APOCALYPSES

At this point, having fully recognized that Revelation belongs to the literary genre of the apocalypse, we should notice two purely formal, literary ways in which it is distinctive when compared with other apocalypses. The first is rarely noticed. John's work is highly unusual in the sheer prolific extent of its visual imagery. It is true that symbolic visions are typical of the genre. But in other apocalypses other forms of revelation are often as important or more important. There are often long conversations between the seer and the heavenly revealer (God or his angel), in which information is conveyed in terms quite different from the visual symbols that dominate Revelation (cf., e.g., 4 Ezra 3–10; 2 Bar. 10–30). There are often long passages of narrative prophecy (e.g. Dan. 11:2–12:4), of which Revelation has very little (cf. 11:5–13; 20:7–10). The proportion of visual symbolism in Revelation is greater than in almost any comparable apocalypse. But there are further differences beside the proportion. Symbolic visions in the apocalypses commonly have to be interpreted by an angel who explains their meaning to the seer (e.g. 4 Ezra 10:38–54; 12:10–36; 13:21–56; 2 Bar. 56–74). Such interpretations are rare in

<sup>6</sup> See, e.g., R. Bauckham, 'The Rise of Apocalyptic', *Theol.* 3/2 (1978), 10–23; Rowland, *Open Heaven*, 126–35.

Revelation (7:13–14; 17:6–18), whose visual symbols are so described as to convey their own meaning. The symbols can thus retain a surplus of meaning which any translation into literal terms runs the risk of reducing.

Furthermore, the kind of symbolic vision which is typical of the apocalypses is relatively short and self-contained, comprising just one section of an apocalypse (e.g. Dan. 7; 8; 4 Ezra 10; 11–12; 13). The imagery of such a vision will be peculiar to it, not recurring in other parts of the apocalypse. Revelation, by contrast, is really (from 1:10 to 22:6) a single vision. The imagery is common to the whole. From time to time the scene shifts and fresh images may be introduced, but, once introduced, they may recur throughout the book. Thus John's vision creates a single symbolic universe in which its readers may live for the time it takes them to read (or hear) the book. Both the profusion of the visual imagery and the unity and continuity of the visionary sequence make Revelation distinctive among the apocalypses.

This is not to be explained simply by supposing that John had a remarkably powerful visual imagination. The power, the profusion and the consistency of the symbols have a literary–theological purpose. They create a symbolic world which readers can enter so fully that it affects them and changes their perception of the world. Most 'readers' were originally, of course, hearers. Revelation was designed for oral enactment in Christian worship services (cf. 1:3).<sup>7</sup> Its effect would therefore be somewhat comparable to a dramatic performance, in which the audience enter the world of the drama for its duration and can have their perception of the world outside the drama powerfully shifted by their experience of the world of the drama. Many of the apocalypses could have something of this effect. But Revelation's peculiarly visual character and peculiar symbolic unity give it a particular potential for communicating in this way. It is an aspect of the book to which we shall return.

A second formal, literary difference between Revelation and

<sup>7</sup> See D. L. Barr, 'The Apocalypse of John as Oral Enactment', *Int.* 40 (1986) 243–56.