
§1 Prologue (Rev. 1:1–3)

The author's prologue to Revelation intends to establish its content as a **revelation** (*apokalypsis*) of **Jesus Christ**. The book's opening phrase has a twofold function. First, it situates the composition within a particular literary and theological tradition: apocalypticism. Within this tradition, the idea of revelation refers to a process whereby God makes known through visions the final days of salvation's history. Such visions are not like dreams; they are revelatory acts of God, mediated typically through angels and received by a seer, who, under the influence of the spirit of prophecy, is able to transmit divine revelation to the community of believers.

Second, the opening phrase validates the author's authority and as a result the importance of his composition. Much like Paul in his letter to the Galatians (1:11–16), John establishes his credentials by linking what he has written to the revelation he has received from Jesus Christ. Further, because his subject matter is derived from divine revelation, John expects his audience to recognize his composition as **the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ**: it is the gospel of God, given to and witnessed by Jesus Christ. Given the apocalyptic character of his composition, such an expectation is intensified because **the time is near**. What John has written down intends to unveil the mysteries of God's salvation for those who live at the end of time. Of course, the purpose of any epistolary composition, even an apocalyptic one, is pastoral; indeed, John has written down his visions with a careful eye to the theological crises of his first readers. Revelation was written to transform the way believers "see" their own worlds and as a consequence respond to God and to neighbor in truth and love.

1:1 / **John**, who writes in service of **Jesus Christ**, claims to have received divine **revelation** through visions (1) from Christ's angel, who presumably received it (2) from Christ, to whom it

was first given (3) by God for the community of Christ's disciples on earth. This scheme, where prophetic truth has its ultimate source in God, envisions the "vertical" theology of the Johannine tradition. Just as in John's Gospel, Jesus' mission as God's Christ was to incarnate the truth about God which he had heard and seen, thus ensuring its trustworthiness and effectiveness for life and faith.

In accord with the apocalyptic tradition, Christ has conveyed the apocalypse to John through his angel (cf. 17:1-3). The angel's immediate function is to facilitate God's wish that the revelation, which had previously been disclosed to the heavenly Christ, now be disclosed to the church. That Jesus sends **his angel** not only suggests the angel's subordinate role in the communication between the Lord and John, it also assumes Jesus' exalted status as the Risen Christ of God: Jesus sent his angel "from heaven." Further, John would no doubt have recognized the angel from the Lord as his "celestial double"; thus, such a vision represents the continuing and expected activity of the Risen Christ.

John is singled out to receive the apocalypse because he is Christ's **servant**. As with the epistolary introductions of other biblical writers (cf. Rom. 1:1; James 1:1), John's use of the servant motif does not refer to a lowly status but ironically to his authority to transmit divine revelation to Christ's other **servants** on earth. To be sure, there is a degree of passivity implied by the very terms of the phrase, **his angel to his servant John**: the revelatory process which begins with God and ends with the readership is preserved from unwanted or intrusive agents.

1:2 / This point is underscored by the subsequent description of John's vocation, which **testifies to everything he saw**; his mission is to transmit what he sees and nothing more. This phrase does not mean that John's composition is the product of spontaneous inspiration; rather, the very act of seeing entails a theological rather than a literary claim on John: his revelation is from God and about God's reign, rather than from a human author with his own agenda to promote. Of course, we realize that no author can be completely distanced from his or her composition. Thus, even though the raw material of this composition was received spontaneously and involuntarily by prophetic inspiration, the very fact that it was written down in a particular

genre for deliberate reasons presumes that John's visions were not communicated to his readers without his "intervention."

1:3 / The beatitudes of Revelation share a common perspective with the beatitudes found elsewhere in the NT: they assure the hearers of their future participation in God's promised salvation. In this sense, the parallel beatitudes, **blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy/blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it**, do not describe a particular response to what John has written as much as they promise an eschatological reality into which those who obey its message enter, when the **time**, now near, finally arrives.

John Barton has recently argued that in the time of the NT the **words of prophecy** would have been perceived as containing "mysteries" beyond apostolic instruction and even predictions of future events. The modern critical interpretation of Revelation has almost dismissed this element entirely, perhaps in reaction to the literalism of fundamentalistic interpretations as characterized by Hal Lindsey's *The Late Great Planet Earth*. Many scholars prefer to understand the idea of prophecy as referring to a prophetic "style"—forthtelling rather than foretelling—which prepares the readers for criticism and conversion (Boring, *Revelation*, p. 80). If we are true to John's intent, however, then we must read Revelation as containing the prediction of the future of God's salvation, focused especially in the promise of Christ's parousia. The fulfillment of this promise is the very essence of the gospel, "the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ."

Additional Notes §1

1:1-3 / Schüssler Fiorenza is no doubt correct in commenting that "For the average Christian . . . Revelation has remained a book with 'seven seals' and an 'esoteric revelation'—despite its claim to be the revelation of Jesus Christ for Christian communities" (*Revelation*, p. 35). Yet, by attending to John's introduction of his composition in 1:1-3 the reader receives three important clues for understanding Revelation. These suggestions, adroitly introduced by the author, run against the current tide of Revelation scholarship during the modern period. Generally, there are two opinions asserted about the character of the composition itself. Some argue that Revelation is the product of a pseudepigrapher's imagi-

nation, purposely cast as an apocalypse for theological or sociological intentions. More conservative commentators argue that John has written down in an objective and orderly fashion an accurate description of the visions he saw. Neither opinion takes the author's own assessment of his composition seriously enough; both are biased by assumptions about the nature of divine revelation itself.

First, John's opening words tell us that he has received visions from God; later, he is commissioned to write down the visions received (1:11, 19). Revelation is a book of visions, a description of what John actually saw and heard. What John saw and heard was then recognized and described in the terms of his traditions (biblical and of Jesus), as well as in light of his own religious and cultural experiences. A vision is never simply "seen"; any perception includes an interpretation of what is sensed. Throughout Revelation, we find echoes and images borrowed from John's Bible or from his world to present what he has seen and heard in intelligible ways. For example, when John turns to locate his commissioner, he sees "someone like a son of man"; that is, John identifies the Risen Christ in terms of a well-known biblical image from Daniel. He further edited his memories, arranging them by the ancient literary genre of letter in order to address crises of Christian faith found within particular congregations of believers.

Second, John understands his vision as "the word of God and the testimony of Jesus" (1:2); its message is completely consistent with the gospel of Christian faith he preaches and for which he is now imprisoned (1:9). Indeed, the theological convictions which center Revelation are completely consistent with the Bible's two testaments to God's glory and grace. The interpreter makes a mistake in our view by reading Revelation as a prediction of current world history or as a blueprint of a period of history yet to come. Likewise, the interpreter confuses John's purposes by assuming the importance of each element of Revelation's complex symbol systems. If Revelation is gospel, then its whole message and the meaning one makes of any part of it should always be measured by its consistency with the good news that God has triumphed over the evil powers and has fulfilled the promise to restore and bless God's covenant people, and through them all creation, through the risen and exalted Jesus Christ.

Finally, John views his composition as "words of prophecy" (1:3) and thus instructive for Christian faith and life; its raw material has a divine source, and he is inspired to write it down. Within the Johannine tradition, the act of writing inspired prophecy carries a certain measure of importance: it is the authoritative medium by which the believing community is nurtured and corrected by the word of God (cf. 1 John 1:4; 2:12-14, 21, 26; 5:13). Further, the exhortation to *hear* these "words of prophecy" suggests the first audience derived an understanding of God's triumph through Christ from those impressions recovered by listening to Revelation read aloud.

While he has seven Christian congregations in mind, there is reason to believe that the seer understood the number seven to carry uni-

versal significance. Further, the canonizing church, in recognizing the book's inspiration, included it as part of the Christian biblical canon because of its normative character for subsequent generations of believers. The point is this: the interpreter should not assume that Revelation is esoteric writing, relevant only for an ancient Christian people doing battle with the evil forces of the Roman Empire. The proper hermeneutical judgment, consistent with its author, is that Revelation is useful in forming Christian faith for today.