THE REVELATION
OF ST. JOHN THE DIVINE
I
THE PROPHET'S CALL
i. 1-3. THE TITLE

(1) The Apocalypse of Jesus Christ,
given him by God, to show his servants what is bound to
happen soon. He made it known by sending his angel to
his servant John, (2) who hereby bears witness to all that
he saw—the purpose declared by God and attested by
Jesus Christ. (3) Blessed is the reader, and blessed are the
congregation who listen to the words of this prophecy
and heed what is written in it. For the crisis is near.

John calls his book an apocalypse or revelation, and this title not only describes its content, but classifies it as a recognized type of literature. During the three hundred years between the persecution of the Jews by Antiochus Epiphanes (167 B.C.) and the destruction of the Jewish nation by Hadrian (A.D. 135) Jewish writers produced a series of apocalypses—of which the first and greatest was the Book of Daniel—to encourage Jewish resistance to the encroachments of paganism, by showing that the national suffering was foreseen and provided for in the cosmic purpose of God and would issue in ultimate vindication. It is characteristic of these writings that they portray the present crisis, whether it be the persecution of Antiochus or the fall of Jerusalem, against a background of world history, the present struggle as part of the agelong struggle between the kingdom of light and the kingdom of darkness, and victory over the immediate enemy as the embodiment of the final victory of God. It is also characteristic of them that they are written in symbolic language. The writers believed that every earthly person, institution, and event had a heavenly equivalent, so that a seer, transported to heaven in an ecstatic rapture, could see enacted in the symbols of heavenly drama the counterpart of earthly
events, past, present, and future. He would thus be able, for the benefit of his fellows in distress, to interpret the past and predict the future. For example, in Daniel we hear of a battle between the Prince of Greece and the Prince of Persia (Dan. x. 20). The earthly event is the invasion of Persia by Alexander the Great. Yet the two princes are not Alexander and Darius III, but the angelic rulers and representatives of the two empires, whose meeting in heavenly battle is the counterpart of the earthly battles of Granicus, Issus, and Gaugamela. It follows, therefore, that, in order to explain an apocalypse, we must first identify the earthly realities to which the heavenly symbols correspond, and then see how by the use of this symbolism the author has tried to interpret earthly history.

When we begin to ask what John’s symbolism means, we shall rightly expect guidance from the Jewish apocalyptists and from the Old Testament, which was his Bible as well as theirs. But we shall do well to be cautious. John’s apocalypse is unlike the others. For one thing, all Jewish apocalypses are pseudonymous; that is, they purport to have been written by some ancient worthy—Noah, Lamech, Enoch, Baruch, Shealtiel, Daniel, Ezra—who sealed up the message until the time when it should become relevant, the time of the actual author. But John writes openly in his own name for his own contemporaries, and is explicitly told not to seal his book. These works also cover a very wide range of literary and religious worth. The Jewish rabbis who were responsible for putting Daniel into the canon of Old Testament scripture and excluding the others were men of sound judgment. For Daniel is the product of an original mind, but the others are for the most part imitative and pedestrian. The Book of Enoch has been justly called one of the world’s six worst books. The Ezra Apocalypse, which somehow found its way into the Vulgate, and so into the Apocrypha under the title of 2 Esdras, is responsible for many of the most deplorable features of mediaeval theology. It is therefore quite unjust to John to insist that he must be judged by such company as this. For John, though he adopts the apocalyptic form, claims over and over again to be a prophet. If Old Testament scholars are right in drawing a sharp distinction between apocalypse and prophecy, John would insist that his book was
prophecy. But the most important difference is that his book is the apocalypse of Jesus Christ. The gospel of Jesus was new wine which could not be contained within the old leather bottles of Judaism, yeast which kept working until nothing was left unleavened. Whatever he touched he transfigured, and not least the language and imagery of religious thought. We shall expect, then, to find that John's symbols do not mean exactly what they would have meant to a Jewish writer. We shall expect what Farrer has called 'a rebirth of images'.

In his opening sentence John tells us in general terms what his book is about. It has to do with current events: God has instructed him to warn his fellow Christians about an impending crisis; and if his book is still relevant to our critical times, this is because it was first relevant to them as they faced their imminent ordeal. What is bound to happen is an echo of Daniel ii. 28, and John clearly expected his readers to know their Old Testament well enough to pick up his frequent allusions to it. Sometimes, no doubt, he uses biblical phrases, much as the Puritans did, simply because the language of the Bible came naturally to his mind and was the natural vehicle for his self-expression. But here something more seems to be involved. For this phrase comes from Daniel's prediction of the end of the four tyrannical world empires and the establishment of a new empire under the sovereignty of God, and this prophecy is to play a substantive part in John's later visions. Thus by this allusion John is indicating that his prophecy gathers up all the threads of Old Testament hope; the crisis is sure to come, not for any merely political reason, but because it has been written by God in the scroll of the world's destiny and prefigured in the scriptures (cf. iv. 1, where the phrase is repeated).

The content of his message is, in fact, the purpose declared by God. Here, as in John i. 1-14, 'word' is a quite inadequate rendering of the Greek logos. God never speaks simply to convey information, but always to achieve results. 'He spoke and it happened; he commanded and it came into being' (Ps. xxxiii. 9). 'My word shall not return to me empty-handed, but shall accomplish what I purpose and succeed in the task I sent it to do' (Isa. iv. 11). The word which came to the prophets was always a statement of God's intentions, combined with a
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demand for man's co-operation. 'Surely the Lord God does nothing without revealing his secret plan to his servants the prophets' (Amos iii. 7). It is just such a plan that John has seen dramatically disclosed in his heavenly vision—rather it is the plan, the purpose of God for all mankind, for all creation, already attested by Jesus Christ in his life and teaching, when 'the Purpose took human flesh' (John i. 14). How John conceived this absolute and ultimate purpose to be related to the immediate crisis we shall see as the narrative unfolds.

What then was it that John expected to happen soon? There is a general agreement that he expected persecution of the church by the Roman Empire. But like the other apocalyptic writers he has set this threat against a background of world history, and his prophecy carries us from a vision of God the Creator at one extreme to a vision of the Last Judgment and the eternal city of God at the other. We cannot, however, do justice to his very plain opening statement (cf. i. 3; iv. 1; xxii. 10) by saying that he foresaw a long series of events covering centuries, which could be described as imminent because they were to begin shortly. Whatever earthly realities correspond to John's symbols, he expected them to be accomplished quickly in their entirety. We must choose between two answers to our question. The one answer, which would have the support of a majority of modern scholars, is that John expected the End, the final crisis of world history, the return of Christ in victory and judgment; and that everything else in his vision, the last plagues, the emergence of Antichrist, the great martyrdom of the church, and the fall of Babylon, are only premonitory signs heralding the great day of God. The other answer, which I believe to be the true one, is that John's coming crisis was simply the persecution of the church, and that all the varied imagery of his book has no other purpose than this, to disclose to the prospective martyrs the real nature of their suffering and its place in the eternal purposes of God, or, in Bunyan's language, to take them about to the backside of the wall.

John's instructions are to write to the churches all that he saw. An older generation of commentators doubted whether John's claim to be a visionary could really be taken seriously. They believed that, while prophecy was the product of spon-
taneity and inspiration, apocalyptic was an artificial and purely literary affair, and that John was no exception to the general rule. Visions would not spontaneously arrange themselves in elaborately balanced groups of seven, nor would angelic choirs quote extensively from the Old Testament. In any case, many of the things John claims to have seen, e.g. living creatures full of eyes inside and out (iv. 8), and a city 1,500 miles high, are incapable of being visualized, and therefore cannot have been communicated to John in vision. These objections will appear less impressive to a generation which has accepted surrealistic art and has become familiar with the kaleidoscopic quality of dream imagery. For the rest, we must remember that John never supposed that vision could be communicated without the intervening medium of art. What he offers us may be regarded as vision recollected in tranquillity; but, as Farrer has pointed out, it reads much more like a continuous meditation on the Old Testament, and John was told to write before he began to see. He was a man who thought with his pen, and whose meditations bodied forth into fresh vision as he wrote, so that vision and art were not two processes but one. It is some indication of his consummate artistry and of the validity of his claim to inspiration that he never fails to make a profound impression even on those who imperfectly apprehend his meaning. Much of the New Testament is written for those who have ears to hear, but this book is written for those who have eyes to see; and for a generation whose mental eye has been starved of imagery it is in some ways the most important book in the New Testament.

John expected his book to be read publicly in church to a congregation, and so he couched it in the form of a letter. Here and there he uses a phrase which suggests that he may have known some of the letters of Paul, and this may have influenced his choice of literary form, though he shows little trace of any other Pauline influence. E. J. Goodspeed has propounded an interesting theory, which has had considerable popularity, that Paul’s letters had already been collected, to form a corpus of letters to seven churches, of which John’s sevenfold letter was a deliberate imitation—a theory which neatly reverses that of the

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Muratorian Canon. But we shall find shortly that there are other and more obvious reasons for John's use of the number seven.

The recipients of the letter do not have to be told who the author is, for they know him. Unfortunately we do not have their advantage. It is improbable that he was John the son of Zebedee; for the only authority he claims is that of a prophet, and he speaks of the twelve apostles as though they belonged to a bygone age (xxi. 14). It is improbable, though not impossible, that he was the author of the Fourth Gospel (see Introduction). The two books could conceivably have come from a single author if they could be assigned to separate periods of his life. But all the evidence goes to show that they were written during the same decade. According to Irenaeus (Haer. v. 30. 3), John wrote the Revelation at the end of the reign of Domitian, who was emperor from A.D. 81 to 96, and this accords well with the internal evidence.

i. 4-8. THE ADDRESS

(4) From John to the seven churches in the province of Asia. Grace to you and peace from Who is and was and is coming, from the seven spirits before his throne, (5) and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, the ruler of earthly kings. To him who loves us and has released us from our sins with his own life-blood, (6) who has appointed us to be a royal house of priests to his God and Father—to him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen. (7) Behold he comes with the clouds, and every eye shall see him, everyone who pierced him, and all the tribes on earth shall lament for him. So be it, Amen. (8) 'I am Alpha and Omega,' says the Lord God, 'who is and was and is coming, the Omnipotent.'

4 John uses the number seven as a symbol for completeness or wholeness. He has a pastor's concern for individual congregations and writes to them by name, showing a knowledge of local

conditions. But there were more churches in the Roman province of Asia than those he names, certainly at Troas (Acts xx. 5-12), Colossae (Col. i. 2), and Hierapolis (Col. iv. 13), and almost certainly at Magnesia and Tralles where the churches were well established when Ignatius wrote to them not more than twenty years later. John chooses seven of the churches to indicate that his message is really addressed to the church at large. Each of the separate letters that follows contains 'what the Spirit is saying to the churches'. Similarly the seven spirits represent the Spirit of God in the fulness of his activity and power. Possibly John had in mind the sevenfold spirit with which the Messiah was to be endowed (Isa. xi. 2). But a more important source of his ideas is Zechariah iv, where the prophet describes a candelabra (Israel) with seven lamps ('the eyes of the Lord which range over the whole earth'); and the burden of his vision is, 'Not by might or power, but by my Spirit,' says the Lord of hosts.1 We have here the first example of John's kaleidoscopic variations on Old Testament imagery; for in his vision the church is symbolized as an earthly reality by seven lampstands, and as a heavenly reality by seven stars in the right hand of Christ (i. 20), but it draws its life and power from the seven lamps or spirits before the throne (iv. 5), which are also said to be held by Christ (iii. 1) and are identified with the seven eyes of the Lamb (v. 6). At all these points Zechariah was John's primary source. But he may also have been aware of the part played by the seven planets in pagan mythology and politics. Coins from the early part of Domitian's reign portray the emperor's heir, who had died in childhood, as an infant Zeus playing with the stars, as though he had been compensated by a cosmic dominion for the earthly empire he was never to inherit. The use that John makes of the seven spirits, lamps, or stars was a direct challenge to the imperial myth of the divine ruler, and, since defiance of emperor-worship was one of the main themes of his vision, it is reasonable to suppose that the challenge was intended.4

1 See E. Stauffer, Christ and the Caesars, p. 152. The idea that the Menorah or seven-branch lamp represented the seven planets must have been in the air, for it is found also in Philo (Q. R. D. H. 221 f.; Vit. Mor. ii. 103 f.; Quaest. in Exod. ii. 75 f.).
The title of God, **Who is and was and is coming**, is a Christian elaboration of that found in the Septuagint translation of Exodus iii. 14, where the name Yahweh is rendered 'He who is' (cf. Jer. i. 6; xiv. 13; xxxix (xxxiii). 17). It sets the church's coming ordeal against a background of God's eternity, but it also brings God down into the arena of history. He is Lord of past, present, and future. But the order of the tenses is significant. The temporal order is meaningful to God, for it is the scene where he is working out his purpose. Yet at all times past and future are embraced in his eternal present. This is a theme of paramount importance for John's theology, and he will expound it in greater detail in a moment. Although he uses a preposition which takes the genitive, John keeps the divine title in the nominative. God is, so to speak, always in the nominative, always the subject; he always holds the initiative, and things happen because he chooses, not because men force his hand and so put him into the accusative (cf. Rom. ix. 15-18; John x. 18).

The titles of Christ are equally carefully chosen for John's pastoral purpose. His friends are called to bear the costly witness of martyrdom, trusting that in his death Christ has been a **faithful witness** to God's way of overcoming evil; to look into the open jaws of death, remembering that he has risen as the **firstborn** of many brothers; to defy the authority of Imperial Rome in the name of a **ruler** to whom Caesar himself must bow. However exalted the terms he uses, John's thinking about Christ is from first to last rooted in earthly fact. As we shall see even more clearly and forcibly in chapter v, all Christ's heavenly authority is grounded in his earthly existence and the subsequent earthly existence of his church. Because on earth he was the **faithful witness** (cf. 1 Tim. vi. 13), he has become the risen head of the church, **firstborn of the dead**; and in so far as the church of which he is head continues his witness, he can exercise his authority over **earthly kings**. John is here adapting the promise made in Psalm lxxxix. 27 to the Davidic Messiah:

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'I will appoint him firstborn,  
Highest of the kings of earth.'
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By two small adjustments he has given a profoundly Christian application to the words of scripture. It is in virtue of his death
and resurrection that the Messiah has entered on his promised reign; and so for him firstborn, instead of being an honorific title, is the guarantee that others will pass with him through death to kingship. The same thought is put in a different way in the doxology which follows. The love of Christ is an eternal love, as the present tense indicates; but it has shown itself in the once-for-all, historic act of redemption through which the church has been constituted a royal house of priests. This is the first of many instances in which John applies to the church Old Testament descriptions of Israel (Exod. xix. 6), and so expresses the belief, which he shares with other New Testament writers, that the church is the true people of God. But his quotation raises a very important theological question of a different kind. What is involved in being a royal house of priests? Is theirs purely a Godward function, or do they have a manward function as well? Is their sole task to offer to God that sacrifice of obedience and worship which the world is incapable of offering, or do they have the further task of mediating God's blessing to the world? When the author of Exodus xix. 1-6 called Israel 'a kingdom of priests', it is unlikely that he had any thought of a world-wide mission. They were a kingdom because they belonged to God the King; and they were priests because they had been set apart out of all nations for a special vocation of holiness, just as within Israel the tribe of Levi was chosen to offer to God a representative holiness. But John is not necessarily bound by the limitations of the Old Testament. He believed that those whom Christ had released from their sins were called to be a royal house, not merely because he reigned over them as King, but because they were to share his regal authority over the nations (cf. ii. 26; iii. 21; v. 10; xx. 6). Ought we not therefore to expect that they are to share his priestly office also, and be a body through which he can exercise his redemptive as well as his regal power?

The repeated use of the words 'witness' and 'testimony' is one of the many points of resemblance between the Revelation and the Fourth Gospel. In Greek as in English these words could be treated as dead metaphors, without any conscious reference to the lawcourt, which was their primary setting. But both these books use the words in their primary, forensic sense.
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The author of the Fourth Gospel, perhaps inspired by the example of Second Isaiah, presents his argument in the form of a lawcourt debate, in which one witness after another is summoned, until God's advocate, the Paraclete, has all the evidence he needs to convince the world that Jesus is the Son of God, and so to win his case. In the Revelation the courtroom setting is even more realistic; for Jesus had borne his testimony before Pilate's tribunal, and the martyrs must face a Roman judge. What they have to remember as they give their evidence is that that evidence is being heard in a court of more ultimate authority, where judgments which are just and true issue from the great white throne.

The earthly kings and their subjects are not as yet aware of the sovereignty of Christ. John's object in writing is to help his friends to discern behind the throne of Caesar the superior authority of Christ, so that they may 'endure as seeing the Invisible' (Heb. xi. 27). But what they now see with the eyes of faith will one day become open and incontrovertible fact, which the enemies of Christ will recognize with sorrow. John's description of the Parousia or Advent of Christ is a combination of phrases from Daniel vii. 13 and Zechariah xii. 10-xiii. 1; and, since the same combination of texts occurs also in Matthew xxiv. 30, it is likely that both writers were drawing on an older tradition of scriptural exegesis. In the Zechariah passage the mourning is quite evidently said to be penitential grief, which is followed by divine pardon, cleansing, and restoration. It is commonly assumed that John used the scriptural words with a different intention, to describe the futile remorse with which the world will grieve over its own prospective doom.1 What John 7 in fact says is that men will see the pierced but triumphant Christ and will lament, not for themselves, but for him. This can only mean that they will have compunction for the wounds they have caused him. Whether this grief will amount to a true repentance John does not for the present discuss (but see the notes on iii. 8-9 and xi. 13), for he is here concerned, not with the ultimate fate of men, but with the ultimate vindication of

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1 This may be the correct interpretation of Matt. xxiv. 30, where the words ἐπ' αὐτόν are omitted. For koptesthai epi with acc., meaning to 'to grieve for', cf. Rev. xviii. 9, 11; Luke xxiii. 28.
Christian faith. Nor is it true to say that John is preoccupied with the idea of the Parousia. For the Christ who will come one day in the sight of all comes constantly to those who have the faith to perceive him (iii. 20). He is 'the same yesterday, today, and for ever' (Heb. xiii. 8), and his coming is the coming of God, who is and was and is coming. For this reason John can speak of his final advent in the present tense. Only to the faithless is the Parousia of paramount importance; for he who is Alpha and Omega is also the great I am, in whose presence Christians are perpetually confronted with the Beginning and the End.\(^1\) The Omnipotent (Pantokrator) is one of the several Septuagint translations of Yahweh Sebaoth (Lord of hosts), but like all other Old Testament terms John uses it with a difference; for he has learned from Christ that the omnipotence of God is not the power of unlimited coercion but the power of invincible love.

\[\text{i. 9-11. THE EXILE}\]

(9) I John, your brother and partner in the ordeal and sovereignty and endurance which are ours in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos because of the word spoken by God and attested by Jesus. (10) On the Lord's day I fell into a trance and heard behind me a great voice like a trumpet. (11) 'What you see write in a scroll and send it to the seven churches, to Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea.'

Nothing that John wrote gives us a clearer insight into the working of his mind than his description of the Christian calling which he shares with his friends: the ordeal and sovereignty which are ours in Jesus. Like the fourth evangelist (John xii. 23 ff.; xiii. 31) and unlike other New Testament writers (Luke xxiv. 26; 1 Pet. i. 11) he does not think of the suffering of Christ as the prelude to kingly glory; Christ reigns from the Cross (v. 6). So too for his followers the coming ordeal

\(^1\) For I AM as a divine title see C. H. Dodd, The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel, pp. 93-96.
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is not a qualifying test through which they must pass in order to enter upon their promised reign with Christ. **Ordeal** and **sovereignty** are obverse and reverse of the one calling; for those who endure with Christ also reign with him, and reign in the very midst of their **ordeal. Endurance** is, as Charles puts it, 'the spiritual alchemy which transmutes suffering into royal dignity'.

By the **ordeal** John means the persecution of the church which he expected to happen shortly. But this does not mean that we are entitled to use the Revelation as evidence that a major persecution actually occurred in Domitian's reign. Before the end of the second century a strong Christian legend had sprung up that Domitian had been the second great persecutor of the church, 'the replica of Nero's cruelty' (Tertullian, *Apol.* 5); but it does not seem to have been based on any genuine evidence. All we may properly glean from the Revelation is that Antipas had been put to death at Pergamum—and it would surely be a strange thing to single him out for special mention if he had been one of a great host of martyrs—and that John himself had been exiled. From Pliny's letter to Trajan in A.D. 112 (Ep. x. 96) we learn that Pliny was unacquainted with the customary procedure in legal cases involving Christians, which implies that there had in the past been occasional, though not necessarily frequent, instances of Christians being taken to court on a criminal charge; and that some of those who were accused of being Christians claimed that they had abandoned their Christian faith twenty years before, which suggests that there was some kind of severe social pressure at work in A.D. 92. In Rome a number of leading citizens fell victim to the neurotic suspicions of the emperor, but there were at least as many Stoics among them as Christians. Domitian had a deep sense of inferiority, the result, no doubt, of being constantly overshadowed by a dominant father and a brilliant elder brother; and he lived in morbid terror of being supplanted. It was to offset this sense of insecurity that he began to demand towards the end of his reign that his subjects should worship him as Lord and God (*Dominus et Deus*: see Dio Cassius lxvii. 13; Suetonius, *Dom.* 13; Martial v. 8). In the last year of his life he ordered the execution of the consul, Titus Flavius Clemens, and
the banishment of his wife, Domitilla, who were his own cousin and niece, and whose eldest son was his designated heir. Suetonius describes Clemens as ‘a man of most despicable sloth’, but admits that he was put to death ‘on very slender suspicion’ (Dom. 15). Dio Cassius gives the charge as ‘atheism’, and adds that other eminent Romans, including a former consul, Manlius Acilius Glabrio, were executed on the same charge (lxvii. 14). It is likely that Clemens and Domitilla were Christians, and that ‘sloth’ and ‘atheism’ are two different ways of describing a refusal to join in the imperial cult, which a consul could achieve only by studied inactivity. But it was their high rank that drew the emperor’s attention to them and cost them life and liberty. There is no evidence that, at the time when John wrote, there had been any open and systematic persecution of Christians since the days of Nero.

Patmos was one of the group of islands off the coast of Asia Minor called Sporades, and there is ample evidence in Roman literature that the Sporades and Cyclades (round Delos) were regularly used for the banishment of political offenders (Tacitus, Ann. iii. 68; iv. 30; xv. 71; Juvenal, Sat. i. 73; vi. 563 f.; x. 170). All these were cases of deportatio in insulam, a penalty which involved confiscation of property and loss of civil rights, and which corresponded to the aquae et ignis interdictio of Republican times (Digest, xlviii. 13. 3). Sir William Ramsay argued that this penalty cannot have been applied to John, (a) because it ‘was reserved for persons of good standing and some wealth’, and (b) because ‘it is impossible to suppose that the crime of Christianity could have been punished so leniently at that period’. He therefore conjectured (without any further evidence) that Patmos must have been a penal settlement, where John was sentenced to hard labour in the quarries; and this conjecture has been widely adopted by others as though it were a well attested fact. The first of Ramsay’s objections is sound enough as far as it goes, but the second rests, as we shall see, on a misrepresentation of the legal status of Christians. On the first point Ramsay seems to have overlooked the fact that there was

1 The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia, p. 84.

2 Many commentaries invoke the authority of Pliny; but all that Pliny has to say about Patmos is that it is thirty miles round (Hist. Nat. iv. 69).
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another and more lenient form of banishment, \textit{relegatio in insulam}, which involved loss of neither property nor rights. Only the emperor could pronounce a sentence of \textit{deportatio}, but a provincial governor could sentence a man to \textit{relegatio}, provided that he had a suitable island within his jurisdiction (\textit{Digest}, xlvii. 22. 6-7). Tertullian, who was a lawyer and can be trusted to use legal terms accurately, tells us that this was the sentence John had incurred: \textit{'Ioannes \ldots in insulam relegatur'} (\textit{De Praescript. Haer.} 36).

What then was the legal standing of Christians, which made such a sentence possible? In Roman law religion was regarded as a department of state, so that the only legal religion was the officially approved cult, and participation in state religion was regarded as a sign of political loyalty. In practice foreign religions were tolerated, provided that they did not interfere with the local cult or with public order; and, since most of the subjects of the empire were polytheists, the adherents of one religion could take part in the ceremonies of another without any violence to conscience. An exception had been made in favour of the Jews, who were allowed to practise their religion in any part of the empire and were exempted from all forms of official religion. As long as Christians were officially regarded by the Romans as a sect of Judaism, they benefited from this tolerance (see, e.g., Acts xviii. 12-17). During the investigations that followed the fire of Rome in A.D. 64 it was discovered that Christianity was in fact a new and, from the Roman point of view, pernicious religion. It does not, however, follow that Christianity automatically became a crime meriting a death penalty, as Ramsay seems to have supposed. Christians had lost their legal security, but what happened to them depended on two unpredictable factors. In the provinces the administration of justice lay wholly within the \textit{imperium} of the governor, unrestricted by any rules of procedure or any legal code, other than the laws which gave special privileges to Roman citizens and those which required the governor to submit to scrutiny at the close of his tenure of office.\footnote{See A. N. Sherwin-White, \textit{Roman Society and Roman Law in the New Testament}, pp. 1-23.} As judge he could make his own rules and assess his own penalties. The one thing he must
not do, except in cases of breach of the peace, was to initiate procedure; there must be an accuser (delator).\textsuperscript{1} After A.D. 64, then, the fate of the Christians depended firstly on their ability to keep on such sufficiently good terms with their neighbours that nobody would lay an accusation against them; and secondly on the personal attitude of the Roman governor. John must have been unlucky in the first respect and comparatively fortunate in the second.

It was not, therefore, his own experience of exile that led John to expect widespread martyrdom. It must have been Domitian's new insistence on the worship of the reigning emperor that provided the stimulus for his visions. Emperor-worship had been conducted in Asia since the days of Augustus. But John must have seen in Domitian's edict the emergence of a new totalitarianism which Christians were bound to resist, and which would therefore result in war to the death between church and state, between Lamb and Monster. The persecution did not actually come at that time, because within a year Domitian had died by an assassin's knife. But that fact deprives John's vision of none of its depth and power.

(i. 12-20. THE SON OF MAN)

(12) I turned to see whose voice was speaking to me, and having turned I saw seven gold lamps, (13) and among the lamps one like a son of man, dressed in a long robe, with a gold girdle round his breast. (14) The hair of his head was white as snow-white wool, and his eyes flamed like fire; (15) his feet were like pure bronze fresh from the furnace, and his voice was like the roar of many waters. (16) In his right hand he had seven stars, and out of his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword; and his face was like the sun shining in its strength. (17) When I saw him I fell like a dead man at his feet, but he laid his right hand on me, and said, 'Do not be afraid. I am the first and the last, (18) the living one who was dead; now I am alive for ever and hold the keys of death and the grave. (19) Write down

\textsuperscript{1} See Trajan's reply to Pliny's letter about the Christians (Pliny, \textit{Ep.} x. 97).
therefore what you see, what now is and what is to happen hereafter. (20) Here is the secret of the seven stars which you saw in my right hand and of the seven gold lamps: the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lamps are the seven churches.\footnote{See G. B. Caird, \textit{Principalities and Powers}, pp. 1-30.}

The churches to which John is told to write are represented in his vision by a double symbolism, which illustrates what we have already said about the correspondence between the heavenly and the earthly in apocalyptic thought. The \textit{seven gold lamps} are the empirical, earthly churches, \textit{the seven stars} their heavenly counterpart. The imagery of the lamps is derived from Zechariah's vision of the seven-branched candelabra of Israel, a passage which would be well known to anyone who had regularly attended the synagogue, because it was one of the readings for the Feast of Lights. Once again John is asserting that the church is the new Israel, the true people of God, but with this difference: whereas Israel was represented by a single candelabra with seven lamps, the churches are represented by seven separate standing lamps; for according to the teaching of the New Testament each local congregation of Christians is the church universal in all its fulness. The unity of the church is to be found only 'in Jesus', in him who holds \textit{the seven stars}. The \textit{angels} are not to be identified with bishops or pastors. The Jews had long since become accustomed to the idea that each nation had its angelic representative in heaven, who presided over its fortunes and was held accountable for its misdeeds,\footnote{See G. B. Caird, \textit{Principalities and Powers}, pp. 1-30.} and John is simply adapting this familiar notion to a new situation. We must not confuse John's apocalyptic way of thinking with Platonic idealism, and suppose that the angel symbolizes the perfect heavenly pattern of which the earthly church is only a shadowy and imperfect reproduction. For John addresses his letters not to the earthly churches but to the angels, and holds them responsible for the faults of the communities they represent. If we are to understand John's mind, we must rid our own minds of the presupposition that earth is the place of faults and failings and heaven the place of perfection. In John's world heaven and earth are equally parts of the physical universe which God created, they belong in-
separably together, and everything on earth, including its evil, has its equivalent in heaven.¹ When the old order is finally destroyed, John sees a new heaven as well as a new earth, for the former heaven and earth together, along with their contaminating evil, have been removed. The angels, then, are the ‘spiritual counterparts of human individuals or communities, dwelling in heaven, but subject to changes depending on the good or evil behaviour of their complementary beings on earth’.² But the stars which symbolize the angels are no doubt also the seven planets, pictured as a necklace of glittering jewels hanging from the hand of the Son of Man.

It is of the utmost importance for John’s theology that the first statement he makes about the heavenly Christ is that he saw him among the lamps. He is no absentee, who has withdrawn from earth at his Ascension, to return only at his Parousia, meanwhile exercising his authority over the churches by remote control through their heavenly representatives, the angels. The first characteristic of Christ revealed to John in his vision is that he is present among the earthly congregations of his people, and whatever John has later to say about the coming of Christ must be interpreted in the light of this salient fact.

The description of the Son of Man is full of Old Testament phrases, which we may track down to their various sources. The figure bears a general resemblance to the angel of Daniel’s vision (Dan. x. 5-6). The robe and girdle are the garb of the high priest (Exod. xxviii. 4; xxxix. 29), the white hair is the mark of the Ancient of Days (Dan. vii. 9), the bronze feet remind us of Ezekiel’s cherubim (Ezek. i. 7), and the voice of the returning glory (Ezek. xiii. 2). But to compile such a catalogue is to unwave the rainbow. John uses his allusions not as a code in which each symbol requires separate and exact translation, but rather for their evocative and emotive power. This is not photographic art. His aim is to set the echoes of memory and association ringing. The humbling sense of the sublime and the majestic which men experience at the sight of a


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16 roaring cataract or the midday sun is the nearest equivalent to the awe evoked by a vision of the divine. John has seen the risen Christ, clothed in all the attributes of deity, and he wishes to call forth from his readers the same response of overwhelming and annihilating wonder which he experienced in his prophetic trance.

17 None but the pure in heart may see God and live. John falls like a dead man, and is revived from his death-like swoon by the assurance that the living one himself had laid aside his immortality to undergo the sharpness of death. By the resurrection he had not just resumed the eternal life which he had with the Father before the world began; he had entered upon a new, victorious life in which death was for ever conquered. Not only had he burst out of the prison, he had carried away the keys. His followers may pass confidently into the dungeons of death and the grave, knowing that he holds the authority to unlock the gates and set them free. The grave is a translation of the Greek Hades, which itself stands for the Hebrew Sheol. But nothing is gained by retaining either of these proper names in English, except in vi. 8, where Death and Hades are personified. Hades to the Greek and Sheol to the Jew were nothing other than the common grave, the long home of all men which had many entrances.

19 John is instructed to write to the churches what you see, what now is and what is to happen hereafter. Those scholars who believe that the imminent crisis John expected was the Parousia have tended to see here a threefold division corresponding to a threefold literary structure of the book: thus what you see denotes the present vision of chapter i, what now is covers the analysis of the condition of the churches in chapters ii and iii, and chapters iv-xxii are concerned with what is to happen hereafter, i.e. the Parousia and its premonitory signs. But this is a grotesque over-simplification. Chapters ii and iii, though mainly appraisal, contain both threats and promises; and the remaining chapters include many tableaux which can only denote events already past or present at the time when John was writing. It is better therefore to take the words what you see to mean the whole of John’s vision, which in all its parts is equally concerned with the interpretation of past and present and the anticipation of the future.