

COMMENTARY

Prologue (1:1–8)

The words ‘Apocalypse of John’ by which Revelation is commonly known are not original (the book’s true title is ‘Apocalypse [*or* Revelation] of Jesus Christ’). They may well have been added by a scribe either to the beginning or, more likely, to the end of a scroll, or attached to it on a label, in order to identify it more easily (Aune 1997: 3–4). It was certainly known by this title from the second century onwards (e.g. Iren. *Adv. Haer.* 4.14.2; cf. *Mur. Can.* 71). As the book was increasingly copied in codex form, this title (now firmly the inscription) became more elaborate, ‘Apocalypse of St John the Theologian’ (or ‘St John the Divine’) being the most famous.

The opening verses of the book proper comprise two sections (1:1–3 and 1:4–8), which highlight different aspects of its literary genre. Nevertheless, there are good literary grounds for treating both sections together as the prologue to the work. Careful analysis points to striking literary parallels with Revelation’s epilogue in chapter 22. The claim that God (or Jesus) has sent his angel to show his servants what must soon happen (1:1) is reiterated at 22:6 (cf. 22:16). The divine statement ‘I am the Alpha and the O’ concludes the prologue at 1:8 and is repeated towards the beginning of the epilogue at 22:13. Both sections contain a beatitude (1:3; 22:14; cf. 22:7), and a warning that the time is near (1:3; 22:10). The liturgical response ‘Yes indeed! Amen!’ is found at 1:7 and 22:20, in conjunction with sayings about the Lord’s coming (see also 1:3 = 22:18; 1:7 = 22:12). These parallels form an overarching *inclusio* for the whole text.

Superscription (1:1–3)

(1) A revelation from Jesus Christ, which God gave him to reveal to his servants what must soon come to pass. Jesus made it known by signs to his servant John, through his angel whom he sent to him. (2) John now bears witness to all the things he has seen: God’s word, that is, the witness which Jesus Christ himself bore. (3) Happy is the one who reads aloud, and happy are the people who hear the words of this

prophecy and observe what is written in it. For the crucial time is very close!

Ancient books were often prefaced by a title or superscription defining the nature of the work (e.g. Mk 1:1; Mt. 1:1), or by a fuller prologue setting out the author's intentions (e.g. Lk. 1:1–4; Josephus, *C. Ap.* 1.1). The first three verses of John's book fulfil this task. Although, as we shall see (1:4–5a; 22:21), Revelation is presented in the form of a letter, this title declares that it is primarily revelatory and prophetic in character. Indeed, many have been struck by the way in which these opening verses (in fact the whole section, 1:1–20) echo the prologues of Old Testament prophetic books. The opening chapter of Ezekiel seems to have been a particular influence: that prophet describes how he received 'visions' while in exile by the River Chebar (Ezek. 1:1; cf. Rev. 1:9–12), in which the 'word of the Lord' came to him (Ezek. 1:3; cf. Rev. 1:2); the opening vision describes Ezekiel's vision of the throne-chariot, surrounded by the four cherubim (Ezek. 1:4ff.; cf. Rev. 4:1ff.). Ezekiel will continue to exert a crucial influence throughout John's Apocalypse (Goulder 1981). However, the openings of other prophetic books may also have left their mark: some speak of the word of the Lord coming to the prophet (e.g. Jer. 1:1–4; Hos. 1:1; Hag. 1:1), others of visions received (e.g. Isa. 1:1; Obad. 1:1). Our author is clearly – and boldly! – locating his work within the same tradition of Israelite prophecy.

The fact that Revelation's title is in the third person, contrasting with the 'I, John' (or occasionally 'I, Jesus') of the rest of the book, has led to the suggestion that 1:1–3 is the work of an anonymous editor of John's visions (Malina and Pilch 2000: 29). Comparisons with the canonical prophets, however, render such an explanation superfluous: here we find the same combination of third person in the title and first person (of the prophet or the Lord) in the main body of the text. A single author, modelling his work on this prophetic tradition, could be expected to follow this pattern.

- 1 Yet the prophetic tradition is not the only influence on John's book. His title defines it as a **revelation**, an 'unveiling' or 'uncovering'. Whether or not the author intends to describe here the particular literary genre 'apocalypse', he certainly invites comparison with both the oral 'revelations' of early Christian liturgical assemblies (e.g. 1 Cor. 14:26) and the literary apocalypses and related literature of the Judaeo-Christian tradition. There are particular literary parallels with *1 En.* 1:1–2, *Apoc. Abr.* 1:1, the prologue to *3 Baruch*, and *Apoc. Adam* 1:1–3. John's first-century audiences are led to expect that his book will reveal heavenly mysteries normally hidden from human eyes,

forcing them to reconsider their limited perspective on the world and their place in it.

But unlike these Jewish apocalypses, which link the revelation or apocalypse with the name of the seer, John's revelation is defined specifically as a **revelation from Jesus Christ**. This claim to heavenly origin gives the book its incontestable authority. The Greek has the ambiguous 'of Jesus Christ'. This could mean that Jesus is the content of the revelation (objective genitive); i.e. this is a revelation about Jesus Christ. Yet far more will be revealed in this book than christological secrets. More likely, John is describing the process by which the revelation comes to him: it is an unveiling which Jesus Christ passes on to him (subjective genitive). This is supported by the statement that **God gave it to Jesus**. God is the ultimate origin of what this book describes; the one who reveals it, and therefore reveals God, is Jesus Christ (cf. Jn 1:18).

The claim that this revelation is primarily that of Jesus has led some commentators to relate it to the so-called 'Little Apocalypse' of the Synoptic Gospels (Mark 13 and par.), in which the departing Jesus speaks of the events of the end (e.g. Sweet 1979: 19–21). Certainly there are interesting parallels between the Synoptic passage and John's revelations (not least in the visions of Revelation 6). We should perhaps not be surprised if the teaching of Jesus, as well as Israel's scriptures, has left its mark on the work of a Christian visionary such as John. Nevertheless, verse 9 will make clear that this book emerges primarily out of John's post-Easter visionary experience on Patmos. However much John's apocalyptic imagination has been fired by the sayings of his Lord and the writings of the prophets, the primary context for the visions described in this book is his Patmos experience.

Nevertheless, if we take seriously that this is a **revelation from Jesus Christ**, the quest for John's intention and purpose (while not unimportant) becomes less central. John claims to be transmitting visions and auditions received from the heavenly realm, rather than articulating his own message. Even though his personality and cultural heritage will have shaped his written text, and there are rare points at which explicit interpretations are offered (e.g. 1:20; 7:14; 17:8–10), Revelation may not reflect authorial intention to the same degree as a Pauline letter or even a Gospel. Hence even the identity of the author can fade into the background, so as not to detract from the heavenly message he mediates.

The intended recipients of this message are **his** (probably God's) **servants**. Though John can speak elsewhere specifically of 'his servants the prophets' (10:7; possibly 11:18; cf. Amos 3:7), its use here seems to have a wider application to all those who acknowledge the lordship of God, i.e. all faithful followers of the Lamb (see also 2:20;

7:3; 19:2, 5; 22:3, 6). The revelation to be disclosed is for the churches, not simply an educated or 'wise' elite within them (compare *4 Ez.* 14:46). Its content is **what must soon come to pass**. While many over the centuries have plundered the pages of Revelation for eschatological schemes and timetables related to their own time, the primary focus is on John's own generation. Whatever capacity it has to inspire subsequent generations, the Apocalypse must have had a particular message to those first-century congregations who originally heard it.

But what precisely will be revealed over the next twenty-two chapters? The phrase **what must soon come to pass** may hold the key. It echoes a similar one in the book of Daniel (Dan. 2:28), which ranks alongside Ezekiel as one of John's major influences. Certain Jewish visionary writings suggest that Jewish mystics meditated upon particular biblical texts as preparation for visionary experience. It is not impossible that Ezekiel and Daniel were used by John in this particular way (Ezekiel's vision of the throne-chariot seems to have been particularly favoured). Certainly the John who has the Old Testament scriptures pulsating through his veins seems to hold these two books at the forefront of his visionary imagination. In Dan. 2:36b–45, Daniel interprets a disturbing dream which has been troubling the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar, concerning what must come to pass 'at the end of days' (2:28). The composite statue which the king sees in his dream is interpreted as a succession of four great kingdoms, beginning with Nebuchadnezzar's own (i.e. the Babylonian, Median, Persian and Greek). Just as the terrifying statue is destroyed, so will this succession of pagan empires give way to another kingdom established by God, which will never be destroyed (Dan. 2:44).

Jewish Christians among Revelation's first hearers would no doubt detect the allusion. It signals the transition from the kingdoms of this world to the kingdom of God. But what for Daniel was to be kept for the distant future 'at the end of days', for John's audiences was to take place **soon**. The urgency of John's words may well have contrasted with the expectations of many of his Christian contemporaries, for whom an impending crisis in the political realm may have been far from their minds (see comment on Revelation 2–3).

Having established Revelation's divine authority as from God through Jesus, a further chain of communication is set up. Jesus has **made it known to John**, not directly but **through his angel whom he sent to him**. Interpreting angels play a key role in the apocalypses, and John's is no exception. The mighty angel of Rev. 10:1 may be particularly in view here, though the seer will encounter others along the way (e.g. 7:2; 14:6; 17:1; 21:9). The sequence Jesus–angel–John will apparently be broken, at least temporarily, when

‘someone like a son of man’, almost certainly the exalted Christ, reveals himself directly to John at 1:13. Nevertheless, the order of delegation (God–Jesus Christ–his (Jesus’) angel–John) may provide a clue to the structure of the book as a whole. In the heavenly vision of Revelation 4–5, the one on the throne will hand over a sealed scroll to the Lamb; this will be followed in chapter 10 by a mighty angel delivering a little scroll (the same scroll, it will be argued) to John, enabling him to prophesy God’s word. The manner in which Jesus transmits the revelation is also significant for interpreters. Jesus **made it known by signs**: although the verb $\sigma\eta\mu\alpha\acute{\iota}\nu\omega$ can be simply translated ‘indicate’ or ‘make known’, it is related to the word for ‘sign’ ($\sigma\eta\mu\epsilon\acute{\iota}\omicron\nu$). The choice of this verb should alert the reader to be attentive to the symbolic nature of the visions as they unfold (Beale 1999: 52).

John is at the end of this revelatory chain, and indeed is referred to as **his** (probably Jesus’) **servant**. On the surface at least, this has the effect of distancing John the seer from the aforementioned heavenly beings; he is on same level as the other servants to whom his book is addressed. Yet perhaps we should not be too swift to draw this conclusion. The rhetoric of this passage actually has the effect of exalting John’s status as a privileged communicator of heavenly secrets to whom his Christian hearers should attend. The term ‘servant’ was one claimed by Israel’s prophets to describe their privileged role (e.g. Isa. 49:5; Jon. 1:9 LXX), and was also used of privileged individuals such as Moses (e.g. Mal. 4:4), David (e.g. Ezek. 37:24) and Zerubbabel (e.g. Hag. 2:23). Moreover, John is not on equal terms with the recipients of Revelation, for they are one stage further down the chain of communication. He has established his position as the mediator of an authoritative revelation, which will countenance no disagreement or opposition (see Carey 1999).

Whatever the nature of John’s visionary experience, he has reflected 2 upon it and **now bears witness to all the things he has seen**. Though the verb **bears witness** is literally in the Greek past (aorist) tense, it is probably an epistolary aorist appropriately translated as present (Aune 1997: 6): John bears witness in the present as he writes or dictates his Apocalypse, though it will be a past event by the time his book reaches its recipients. Revelation is John’s written testimony to **all the things he has seen**. Some, particularly those who hold to apostolic authorship, see this as a reference to John’s record of Jesus’ earthly ministry. While we should not rule this out completely, he is primarily referring to the visions described in this book (note the repeated phrase ‘and I saw’). Bearing witness is a crucial activity in the Apocalypse, and links it to the Fourth Gospel. Jesus is the first to do so ($\tau\eta\nu\ \mu\alpha\rho\tau\upsilon\rho\iota\acute{\alpha}\nu\ \text{’}\text{I}\eta\sigma\upsilon\acute{\upsilon}\ \text{X}\rho\iota\sigma\tau\omicron\upsilon$ understood as a subjective

genitive, **the witness which Jesus Christ himself bore**: e.g. Sweet 1981; contrast Vassiliadis 1985), in his life and particularly in his death (1 Tim. 6:13). His followers continue to bear witness to God's truth, just as Jesus did, even if that leads to hostility and even death (e.g. 6:9; 11:7; 12:11; 19:10). Though this verse is not easy to translate, the witness which Jesus Christ himself bore and **God's word** are probably two ways of speaking of the same reality. The word of God is particularly his secret purposes as revealed in the prophets (e.g. Amos 3:7). But those secret purposes have now been made clear in Jesus Christ, in the witness of his life, teaching, and especially his death and resurrection. John's vision of the risen Lord, and the revelations mediated through Christ's angel, have opened his eyes to this. Not for nothing has Revelation been called the climax of prophecy (Bauckham 1993a).

- 3 But John's testimony to all this is not to remain silent in a book. It is to come alive in Christian congregations through oral performance. Revelation distinguishes between **the one who reads aloud**, the lector, and **the people who hear**, the audience. Partly, this reflects the social reality of the early Christians, many of whom would have been illiterate. But there are clues throughout the Apocalypse that a liturgical – even eucharistic – context is the implied arena for the public reading of this text (e.g. 1:10; 2:7, 17; 19:7, 9; 22:17, 20; cf. 1 Cor. 16:22; *Didache* 9–10; Barr 1986; Garrow 1997). This would not be surprising in a Judaeo-Christian environment (Neh. 8:2; Lk. 4:16; Acts 13:15; Col. 4:16; 1 Thess. 5:27; 1 Tim. 4:13; see Tert. *De Anima* 9). Hearing the text in a liturgical setting, attending to its narrative plot, its sequences of sevens, its recurring themes and repetitions, early Christian congregations would have entered imaginatively into the world of the text. Their worship – perhaps as vulnerable minorities in the back streets of great Roman cities – would have been caught up into the worship of the heavenly temple, presenting them with an alternative vision to challenge the visions presented by city and empire. Perhaps this aspect of Revelation is the most challenging for twenty-first-century readers, whose imaginative muscles have become rather flabby, and whose capacity for attentive listening is severely reduced.

The role of lector would have been important for another reason. In the ancient world, the art of reading demanded careful preparation. Ancient Greek manuscripts lacked punctuation, and even divisions between individual words. Thus **the one who reads aloud** would not have taken the initial task lightly, and no doubt would have continued to study the text carefully in preparation for subsequent readings. Indeed, the reader may have been called upon to explain

and clarify disputed points in the text (the phrase ‘let the reader understand’ at Mk 13:14 may point to a similar role).

Yet **the people who hear** are no less important. Other apocalypses reserve access to revealed secrets to ‘the wise’ or literate elites (e.g. Dan. 12:3–4; 4 Ez. 14:46). This may have functioned as a literary device to explain how revelations, apparently made known to seers such as Abraham, Daniel or Ezra many centuries before, had only recently been published. The early Christian belief that the last days were upon us, however, removed the need for such a device. This urgent message is not for the scribal class alone, but is to be shared with all God’s people.

Both the reader and the audience are declared **happy**, provided they **hear** and **observe** the words. This is the first of seven beatitudes scattered throughout the book (see also 14:13; 16:15; 19:9; 20:6; 22:7; 22:14), which speak in their different ways of the salvation promised to those who remain faithful (see Table 1). Their increasing frequency towards the end of the book may be related to the narrative tension as the eschatological events reach their climax. What they are to observe are **the words of this prophecy** (which suggests that the author does not expect his book to be read once and then shelved). This apocalyptic unveiling of what must soon take place is to be regarded as the prophetic word (a challenge to biblical scholars who are perhaps too eager to separate ‘prophetic’ and ‘apocalyptic’ traditions). We have already seen how this whole section imitates the form and style of Old Testament prophetic writings, and this will continue throughout the book. Revelation sets itself up unself-consciously as a prophetic message, and implicitly, it sets up John as a prophet.

As if to heighten the need for faithful response, this section concludes with the warning: **For the crucial time is very close!** The *καίρος* refers to an appointed or opportune time (e.g. Gen. 18:14; Exod. 23:15; Hab. 2:3), and often describes the eschatological time when God will act decisively (e.g. Jer. 50:27; Dan. 7:22; 11:27; Mt. 13:30; Mk 1:15; Lk. 12:56; 19:44). John’s hearers would be in no doubt of the imminence of the crisis prophesied by Daniel.

Epistolary Opening

(1:4–8)

(4) From John, to the seven congregations in Asia.

Grace and well-being to you from he who is, and who was, and who is coming, and from the seven spirits before his throne,

(5) and from Jesus Christ, the trustworthy witness, the first to be born from the dead, and the ruler of earth’s kings.

To the one who loves us and has set us free from our sins by