

INTRODUCTION

IF an intelligent reader, hitherto unfamiliar with the Bible, were set to read St. Matthew's Gospel or the Epistle to the Romans, he would certainly be puzzled by some of the details, but he would be in no serious doubt about the general drift of what he was reading; and summaries of either, given by two such readers, might be expected to be recognizably accounts of the same book. But could this be said of the Revelation of St. John? Is not the untutored reader bound to end with the question, 'What on earth is this all about?' In one sense, of course, it is perfectly obvious what the book is about: it is about an exile and the visions which he describes for the benefit of seven churches, about a throne and a scroll, seals, trumpets, and bowls, horsemen, locusts, and scorpions, a dragon and a monster, two women, one clothed in heavenly, the other in earthly finery, and two cities, the one worldly and the other not of this world. But what *on earth* is it all about? For these are heavenly symbols. Do they correspond to anything, past, present, or future, in the experience of ordinary men and women? No sooner is this question asked than others follow. How did this book find its way into the New Testament? Is it a really Christian book? Can the heavenly figure it portrays be identified with Jesus of Nazareth? It is even a moral book? Does not its author take altogether too much delight in gloating over the doom of the wicked? The prophet Jeremiah, though he predicted disaster, protested that he had never wanted the fatal day to come (Jer. xvii. 16); but John seems to welcome a whole succession of catastrophic events. The Romans denounced the early Christians as enemies of the human race, partly at least because they suspected them of praying for the downfall of civilization. Does not the Revelation justify their suspicions?

The mystified reader may derive some consolation, though little help, from the discovery that his difficulties have been shared throughout the centuries by humble believer and scholar alike. The great Jerome wrote to Paulinus, bishop of Nola:

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'The Apocalypse of John has as many secrets as words. I am saying less than the book deserves. It is beyond all praise; for multiple meanings lie hidden in each single word.' (*Ep.* liii. 9) Others of equal eminence have considered it beyond the possibility of praise. 'My spirit,' wrote Martin Luther in his 1522 Preface, 'cannot accommodate itself to this book. There is one sufficient reason for the small esteem in which I hold it—that Christ is neither taught in it nor recognized.' No other book can have aroused such equally passionate love and hatred. It has been the inspiration of poetry, music, and art, the fountain of worship and devotion, the comfort of the bereaved, and the strength of the persecuted. But it has also been roundly denounced by more critics than Luther as a work of vindictive and unchristian spirit. In the second century Justin Martyr (*Tryph.* 81), Melito of Sardis (Eusebius, *H.E.* iv. 26. 2), the author of the Muratorian Canon, Irenaeus (*Haer.* iii. 11. 1; iv. 20. 11; v. 35. 2), and Tertullian (*Marc.* iii. 14. 24) all accepted Revelation as scripture and attributed it to the apostle John; but there were others who called it 'unintelligible and illogical' and thought that its author must have been John's traditional enemy, Cerinthus (Eus. *H.E.* vii. 25. 1-2). From the time of the millenarian Papias to the present day it has been the paradise of fanatics and sectarians, each using it to justify his own peculiar doctrine and so adding to the misgivings of the orthodox. And in modern times scores of commentaries have been written on it so diverse as to make the reader wonder whether they are discussing the same book.

It might appear, then, that the reader's plight is even worse than he had supposed. He is faced not only with a bewildering book, but with an even more bewildering array of interpretations. Now it would be theoretically possible to write a very long introduction, in which all these theories were classified and debated, until by a process of exhaustion, both of the subject and of the reader, one solution only was left.¹ But there are at least two excellent reasons for not adopting this procedure. The first has been succinctly put by A. M. Farrer: 'An exposition of the Revelation is at the same time an argument. And it is one

¹ For an admirably concise survey see A. Feuillet, *L'Apocalypse: l'état de la question.*

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of those arguments in which nothing short of the whole story proves the case.¹ It is better therefore to postpone all argument until we come to the commentary, where the whole story can be told, and to allow John to unfold his theme in his own way. The other reason is still more cogent. John was not compiling a week-end problem book. Whatever else he may have intended, he cannot have set out to mystify. Even the implausible theory that he wrote in code to deceive the secret police is belied by the open reference in xvii. 9 to the seven hills of Rome. John was a pastor, writing with a passionate concern that ordinary men and women should understand what he had been charged to tell them, and, rightly or wrongly, he must have believed that they would be able to understand. No doubt an effort of comprehension was required of them, for a revelation would not be worth communicating if it did not transcend their previous knowledge; but the effort must have been within the competence of the ordinary members of the churches of Asia. Whoever had ears to hear might hear what the Spirit was saying to the churches. If only we can learn to put ourselves in the place of those Asiatic Christians, we may expect to find that John has said exactly what he means and that he is his own best interpreter.

The one question therefore which we need to ask before beginning to read is this: what did those early Christians know about this book which we do not know? If we can be clear about that, we can measure the full extent of the advantage which they had over us and make the necessary allowances. What is required of us is that we shall turn historians. For it is the task of the historian by the exercise of an informed and sympathetic imagination to enter into the experience of a past generation and so to bring it to life that it becomes meaningful for his own time.

The recipients of the Revelation knew the identity of the author, and we do not. But there are three distinct points involved here. As we have seen, there was a strong tradition from the time of Justin Martyr, whose debate with the Jew Trypho is located in Ephesus c. A.D. 135, that the author was John the apostle, though some vigorously denied this. The evidence of a man who lived in Ephesus only forty years after the probable date of the writing of Revelation might seem to be unassailable.

¹ *The Revelation of St. John the Divine*, p. 19.

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But in fact second-century traditions about the apostles are demonstrably unreliable. Irenaeus undoubtedly confused James the apostle with James the Lord's brother (*Haer.* iii. 12. 14 f.), and wrongly supposed that Papias had been a disciple of the apostle John (*Eus. H.E.* iii. 39. 1). Polycrates, bishop of Ephesus, in a letter to Victor, bishop of Rome, written *c.* A.D. 190, confused Philip the apostle with Philip the evangelist (*Eus. H.E.* iii. 31. 3); and this mistake appears to have been shared by Papias, who was bishop of Hierapolis, the very town in which Philip the evangelist was living with his prophetic daughters at the time of his death (*Eus. H.E.* iii. 39. 9). Moreover, the John who wrote Revelation does not give the impression of being an apostle; he does not appeal to apostolic authority, and he speaks of the twelve apostles in a way hard to understand if he were one of them (xxi. 14). It would be interesting to have our curiosity on this point satisfied once and for all, but nothing more than curiosity is involved. The apostles were eyewitnesses of the ministry of Jesus, and in matters of historic fact their authority was of supreme importance. But the authority of a prophetic vision lies wholly in its content. The little that we know of the apostle John would add nothing to our ability to interpret the Revelation, and its authority would be neither increased if his authorship of it could be proved nor diminished if it were disproved.

A much more important question is whether John of Patmos also wrote the Gospel and Epistles of John, since this would give us a very deep insight into the working of his mind. There are striking similarities between the five Johannine writings, as well as striking differences, and it is certain that they all came from the same geographical, cultural, and theological setting, if not from the one hand. The chief reason for ascribing Revelation to a different author is the character of the Greek in which it is written, as Dionysius of Alexandria pointed out in the third century. The Gospel and Epistle, he claimed, were written in flawless Greek, free from barbarism, solecism, or vulgarism; whereas the Apocalypse was written in inaccurate Greek, full of barbarous idioms and solecisms (*Eus. H.E.* vii. 25. 24-27). To most modern scholars this argument still appears decisive, though some have wanted to add that there are equally impres-

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sive differences in theology. There is, however, a growing consensus that both these arguments have been somewhat overstated. It is, indeed, possible so to interpret the Revelation that the author of the Fourth Gospel could not conceivably have written it; but this, as we shall see, is not the only, nor even the most natural, way of interpreting it. R. H. Charles has argued most persuasively that John's Greek, for all its idiosyncrasy, is not ungrammatical, but has a grammar of its own, unparalleled in any other ancient writing, but none the less real and consistent, the hybrid grammar of a man thinking in Hebrew while he wrote in Greek.¹ But because a man writes in Hebraic Greek, it does not inevitably follow that this is the only Greek he is capable of writing. He may have adopted this style quite deliberately for reasons of his own, as Luke appears to have imitated the style of the Septuagint in his nativity stories, and as the Jew Aquila, in a much more pedantic fashion, chose to reproduce the details of Hebrew idiom in his Greek translation of the Old Testament. John's Greek may be all his own, but it is not the product of incompetence, for he handles it with brilliant lucidity and compelling power, so that it cannot be held accountable for any of our difficulties of comprehension. It is thus possible to put up a case for common authorship, though the balance of probability is still against it. What must be said is that the closer together we date these documents the less likely it is that they all came from the same hand. In any case it is worth while to remember that we are not here at any disadvantage compared with the first readers of the Revelation. For if one man wrote both Revelation and Gospel, it is certain that the Revelation came first. The Gospel could conceivably be earlier, but not if it came from the same author. Thus, when the Revelation was read in the churches of Asia, the congregations either knew the Fourth Gospel and were aware that John of Patmos was not its author, or, more probably, they were still unacquainted with it.

The first readers of the Revelation knew the date at which it was written. This is a far more serious gap in our knowledge

¹ *The International Critical Commentary*, pp. cxvii-clix. Charles, however, went too far when he reduced this grammar to strict rules, which he thought could then be used to detect the interpolations of a later and bungling editor.

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than our ignorance of the identity of the author. We cannot expect to decipher the book unless we know what happened to account for John's visionary experience and what he expected to happen in the imminent future; and certainty about its precise historical setting would carry us a long way. The only early evidence comes from Irenaeus, who assigns John's visions to the closing years of the reign of Domitian (A.D. 81-96). The majority of scholars, ancient and modern, have been prepared to accept this statement. But there are some passages in the book which have been thought to require an earlier date. It has been argued, for example, that xi. 1-2 implies a date in the reign of Nero, when the Jerusalem temple was still standing; and that the description of the seven heads of the monster in xvii. 10 can only have been written in the reign of Vespasian. Three courses are open to us: we may accept an early date, we may accept the Domitianic date with the qualification that John used earlier material which he very imperfectly assimilated, or we may accept the Domitianic date and find some other explanation for the apparently conflicting evidence. The first proposal may be discounted, because no two pieces of evidence point to the same early date, and because the demand for emperor-worship reflected in the chapter on the monster was openly made for the first time by Domitian. Our choice between the second and third courses will depend largely on our opinion of John's literary abilities, since the second would commit us to the view that he was an exceedingly slovenly craftsman. Clearly the only wise procedure is to start with the hypothesis that the date of writing was *c.* A.D. 95 and see where it leads us.

The first readers were almost certainly well versed in the sort of symbolic language and imagery in which the book is written. Whether they had formerly been Jews or pagans, they would read the language of myth as fluently as any modern reader of the daily papers reads the conventional symbols of a political cartoon. Much of this language we can reconstruct for ourselves from the Old Testament and the Jewish apocalyptic writings on the one hand and from Greek and Roman literature, inscriptions, and coinage on the other.¹ Our difficulties begin when we try to decide how far to take this picture language

¹ See esp. E. Stauffer, *Christ and the Caesars*.

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literally and how far to take it figuratively. When John echoes the Roman legend that the dead Nero was about to return, how literally does he mean it? Does he believe that Nero was not in fact dead, or that he would be resurrected, or that another paranoiac would come to fill his empty shoes? When he uses images from the Old Testament does he give them their exact Old Testament value, or are they baptized with a Christian spirit and meaning? Are his numbers part of a system of numerology and his astrological references integral to the structure of his work, or are they but passing allusions to things that everybody took for granted? Does he use a code, in which each symbol has a precise translation value (which is a kind of literalism), or are his images of the deep, evocative kind to be found in great poetry? Is he the slave or the master of his sources and models? Is he a painstaking stitcher of patchwork traditions or an artist handling his material with creative originality? We have all known times when a contemporary of ours has left us wondering whether to take him literally or not. Only if we know the speaker personally can we be sure that this will not happen. The great advantage that the Christians of Asia had over us was that John was their personal friend. He might write things that were strange to them, but they must have had a pretty shrewd idea how his mind worked. Where they walked with confidence, we can only grope our way.

In other respects the first readers were no better off than we are. If they wanted to ask questions about the nature of John's experience, the structure of his book, or the meaning of his warning message, they had to look for their answers exactly where we must look, in the book itself. And if they asked the last and vital question, whether this book is the word of God, whether God had indeed spoken through John to their immediate condition and beyond them to the church of all time—that is a question which every man must answer for himself.