

## INTRODUCTION

### *The Character of the Book*

The Revelation to John (or, according to its Greek title, the Apocalypse) is unique among the writings of the New Testament. Although recent scholarship has increasingly recognised the indebtedness of the earliest Christians, and even Jesus himself, to the apocalyptic mindset, Revelation plainly requires different interpretative skills than a Gospel or a Pauline letter. The Apocalypse's visionary, symbolic nature, with its cycles of cataclysm, angelic hosts, grotesque monsters and often puzzling numerology, presents the early Christian message in a quite distinctive discourse. Moreover, attempts to define the literary form of the book are often frustrated by its hybrid nature. Although the opening words describe it as an 'apocalypse' or 'revelation of Jesus Christ' (ἀποκάλυψις: 1:1), the author nevertheless presents his book as a 'prophecy' (προφητεία: 1:3; 22:7, 10, 18, 19). Furthermore, epistolary features reveal Revelation as a circular letter destined for 'the seven congregations of Asia' (1:4–6; 22:21). All these elements need to be taken seriously.

This complexity has led some to deny that Revelation belongs to the literary genre of 'apocalypse' (e.g. Roloff 1993). Certain features of this genre, such as pseudonymity (see below, pp. 5–7) are absent. Moreover, the detailed interpretation of symbolic visions, so important for apocalypses such as Daniel and *4 Ezra*, is not a major feature of the Apocalypse of John (the exceptions include 1:20; 7:14–17; 13:18; 17:9–18). This is not an insurmountable difficulty, however. Diversity is a feature of the apocalypse genre: the famous SBL definition distinguishes between the 'historical' apocalypses with their temporal focus and the more spatial apocalypses describing 'otherworldly journeys' (J. J. Collins 1979: 9).

Indeed, the Apocalypse of John fits the formal SBL definition well, as well as exhibiting other characteristics often associated with the genre. It claims to reveal or unveil heavenly mysteries, set within a narrative framework. This revelation is mediated by a number of 'otherworldly beings': the exalted 'someone like a son of man' (1:9–3:22), a heavenly elder (e.g. 7:13), interpreting angels (e.g. 17:1; 21:9). The book promises privileged access to a supernatural world,

in which the true source of authority is unveiled in the heavenly throne-room, and a slaughtered Lamb is proclaimed as victor in the decisive battle for the heart of the world (4:1—5:14). Moreover, although Revelation along with other apocalypses is concerned with a wide range of heavenly secrets (Stone 1976; Rowland 1982), it does have a particular focus on eschatology, that is the unfolding process which will culminate in the end of this age and the dawning of a new heaven and new earth (especially 19:11—22:11). Finally, Revelation shares with the apocalyptic tradition a dualistic perspective on the world. Not only does it distinguish between heavenly and earthly realms; it also describes a cosmic battle between the forces of God and the Lamb on the one hand, and those of Satan and his assistants on the other (although, as the commentary will reveal, this ‘dualistic’ description is much more subtle than at first appears).

The apocalyptic character of this book is a particular difficulty for many contemporary interpreters, who are less familiar than their forebears with features of the apocalyptic tradition. The division of the cosmos into heaven, earth and the underworld, or the belief that it is populated by diverse spiritual beings, both angelic and demonic, is foreign to the mindset of many. The ability to engage with the grammar of symbolic vision and numerology does not come naturally. In our global village, however, this difficulty can be overstated: interpreters from collectivist societies, or from cultures in which the spirit-world is omnipresent, may have an innate sympathy with the worldview that apocalypses espouse (for insight into this, see Rhoads 2005).

Nevertheless, ‘apocalypse’ is insufficient in itself for understanding the Apocalypse. Its other literary features must also be borne in mind. Its prophetic character is explicitly stated by the seer, who presents himself on a par with his brother prophets of the past (e.g. 1:3; 22:7, 9, 18–19; see D. Hill 1972). He acts as prophetic mouth-piece for the oracles of the exalted Christ to the churches addressed (2:1—3:22). He is bidden to eat a scroll containing divine words and to prophesy as a result, echoing the prophetic call of at least one of his predecessors (10:8–11; cf. Ezek. 2:8—3:11). His book contains regular prophetic exhortations to the faithful, as well as warnings about impenitence and compromise, and hints that repentance remains a possibility even for the ungodly (e.g. 2:5, 7; 8:13; 9:21; 11:13; 13:9–10; 14:12; 16:15). The lament over Babylon at Revelation 18 is effectively a prophetic doom song. The ‘I, John’ of 1:9 and 22:8 echoes the prophetic ‘I’ of Ezek. 1:1 and Dan. 10:2.

However, one should perhaps beware of making too sharp a distinction between ‘apocalyptic’ and ‘prophecy’. The combination of vision and audition that permeates John’s book is reflected in a number of prophetic books in the Hebrew Bible (e.g. Isa. 1:1–2;

Obad. 1:1; Neh. 1:1; Hab. 1:1). Indeed, two visionary prophets have exerted particular influence on Revelation: Ezekiel (Ezek. 1:1–3) and the apocalyptic Daniel, the latter also regarded as a prophet in first-century Judaism (e.g. Josephus, *Ant.* 10:245–49, 267–69; Mt. 24:15). Nor is John simply in the mould of Israel’s canonical prophets. He is also a representative of early Christian prophecy (Fiorenza 1980), which believed that the spirit of prophecy had been renewed in the new age inaugurated by Christ, and which manifested itself in oracles spoken in God’s or Christ’s name, received especially in a liturgical context (Acts 13:1–3; 1 Corinthians 14; cf. Mt. 7:15–20; *Did.* 11–13).

Finally, Revelation’s apocalyptic ‘word of prophecy’ is presented in the form of a letter, with epistolary features at both beginning and end (1:4ff.; 22:21). This also has implications for interpretation. It means on the one hand that its named recipients, ‘the seven congregations in Asia’ (Roman proconsular Asia: 1:4), are the primary focus of ‘what must soon come to pass’ (1:1). While attention to these primary addressees and their context does not exhaust the meaning of the book, interpretations which ignore them risk misunderstanding its purpose. On the other hand, unlike most of the letters in the Pauline corpus with which it is regularly compared (Galatians and possibly 2 Corinthians being the exceptions which prove the rule: Gal. 1:1–4; 2 Cor. 1:1–2), the Apocalypse is a circular letter addressed to seven diverse Christian congregations, to be read in its entirety to each. This more general focus, together with the apocalyptic–prophetic nature of the book, suggests that precision on the historical situation of specific congregations may not always be possible. It also invites closer comparison with those other circular letters in the New Testament, especially James and 1 Peter (Jas 1:1; 1 Pet. 1:1–2).

### *A Visionary Text*

Yet unlike the New Testament’s other circular letters, Revelation contains a significant proportion of visionary material. This is accompanied by repeated claims on the part of John that these are visions he ‘saw’, beginning with a dramatic inaugural vision of the exalted Christ received ‘on the Lord’s Day’ (1:9–11; cf. e.g. 4:1; 5:1; 7:9; 14:1). Commentators have often treated this aspect of the book as a literary fiction, the author using the apocalypse form as a convenient vehicle for conveying his message. Recent scholarship, however, has been more willing to consider actual visionary experience as at least one of the ingredients involved in Revelation and other apocalypses (e.g. Gruenwald 1980; Rowland 1982). This issue is a complex one, not least because of the influence of a visionary’s

cultural and religious background on visions received. Not only does a seer's heritage provide the language and thought-forms for subsequent attempts to articulate what was seen; it is also claimed that this heritage will have laid down foundational patterns to which visionary experience will conform (Ashton 2000: 113–16). Moreover, there is ample evidence for careful composition on the part of the author (see e.g. Bauckham 1993a), including conscious reflection upon and creative use of Old Testament texts (see e.g. Moyise 1995; Beale 1999: 76–99).

Although certainty is not possible, there are several reasons for taking seriously John's claim to visionary experience. First, the Apocalypse combines structured and stereotypical features (e.g. its series of sevens; patterns of eschatological woes also found in other apocalypses; occasional explicit interpretation of symbolic visions) with the more fluid, dream-like quality associated with the visionary. John's visions of 'someone like a son of man' (1:12–20) and the heavenly throne-chariot (*Merkavah*: 4:1–11) do not evidence straightforward literary dependence on their antecedents, such as Daniel 10 and Ezekiel 1. Rather, the author resorts to simile upon simile, as if struggling to articulate a profound visionary experience rather than exegete a previous text (similar fluidity is found in other *Merkavah* visions, e.g. *1 En.* 14; *T. Lev.* 5; *Apoc. Abr.* 18). Second, John regularly presents himself not simply as witness to his visions but as an active participant within them (e.g. 5:4; 10:10; 11:1; 17:3, 6; 21:10; cf. *1 En.* 71; *Apoc. Abr.* 10), and describes the awesome, terrifying and occasionally physically draining nature of what is seen (e.g. 1:17; cf. *1 En.* 14:13; 71:11; *4 Ez.* 6:29; 10:25, 30). Third, there are hints in his book of the careful preparation for visionary experience attested in Jewish and Christian mystical texts (e.g. prayer, 1:10; eating, 10:9; cf. *Ezek.* 2:8–3:3; *Dan.* 9:3; 10:2–3; *4 Ez.* 5:13; 6:35; 9:24–25; *2 Bar.* 5:7; 20:5, 11; 21:1; 47:2; *Apoc. Abr.* 12:1; see Boxall 2002: 30–36).

This visionary claim need not be in conflict with the fact that the Apocalypse is also a carefully crafted document, drawing heavily on Old Testament antecedents and the Jesus-tradition (note especially the parallels between Revelation 6 and Mark 13 and its Synoptic parallels), and showing evidence of conscious reflection on particular visions (though the latter is limited in scope: e.g. 1:20; 7:13–17; 17:7–18). Careful study has revealed hidden secrets embedded in the text (Bauckham 1993a: 29–37), as well as a quite sophisticated interweaving of themes and scenes. Yet there is some evidence that Jewish visionaries could also be precise exegetes (e.g. *Jer.* 25:11–12), although we should perhaps envisage John less as a scholar scouring textual variants at his desk than as a scholar-mystic who meditated systematically upon particular biblical books. Ezekiel's *Merkavah*

vision seems to have been especially favoured by Jewish mystics for study and meditation (Rowland 1982: 214–47), and Ezekiel is a particular influence on John. Nevertheless, one implication of interpretation is that it renders the search for authorial intention more difficult. If John believes he is transmitting actual visionary experience rather than simply using the visionary mode as a vehicle for his message, then his conscious intention cannot be the determining factor at every point. Accordingly this commentary, while not ignoring historical allusions which first-century audiences are likely to have detected within the text, will not treat these as exhausting the rhetorical power and multivalent resonances of its symbolism.

### *Author and Date*

#### *Author*

Who precisely was this John, and when was his literary work composed? The author of Revelation describes himself simply and modestly as ‘John’ (1:9; 22:8), God’s or Christ’s ‘servant’ (1:1), and ‘brother’ of fellow Christians (1:9). In a real sense, the precise identity of the author is immaterial, given that the book presents itself as the ‘revelation of Jesus Christ’ (1:1). John is only the messenger (Sweet 1979: 38), whose identity is not crucial to interpretation. Nevertheless, the authorship of Revelation is a question which has been debated since the early period. There are three main solutions worth considering:

(a) The author is John the apostle, son of Zebedee, so identified by early tradition (Justin, *Trypho* 81.4; a tradition earlier indeed than the identification of the apostle with the Fourth Evangelist). This also appears to be the view of the author of the *Apocryphon of John*, possibly dated in an early form to the mid-second century (Helmbold 1961; Feuillet 1965: 96). This became the dominant tradition among patristic authors.

(b) The author is another John well-known to early disciples of Jesus: John the Baptist (e.g. Ford 1975: 28–37); John Mark (e.g. Acts 12:12, 25; 15:37); the shadowy ‘Presbyter John’ or ‘John the Elder’ (Eus. *H. E.* 3.39.2–6, sometimes identified with ‘the Elder’ of 2 and 3 John); another, lesser-known prophet John. Ford’s identification of Revelation’s ‘John’ as John the Baptist, while highlighting the Apocalypse’s profoundly Jewish character, requires a complex theory of composition which has failed to convince many. It also depends upon Revelation being an essentially non-Christian text, whereas the gospel story of the crucified and risen Christ permeates the whole. The suggestion that the author is a less well-known John should only be resorted to when better-known candidates have been ruled out, which is not the case here. Moreover, it is less likely that such an

author's work would have survived outside its immediate circles, still less found a place (albeit with some reservations) within the New Testament canon. The 'John Mark' theory was already raised by the third-century Dionysius of Alexandria (Eus. *H. E.* 7.25.15), only to be dismissed by him because of the lack of evidence for John Mark's presence in Asia. The most plausible of these alternatives is the one identifying our author as 'John the Elder' (Eus. *H. E.* 3.39.6; cf. Swete 1906: pp. clxx–clxxxi: while inclining to the 'traditional view', Swete sees the merits in this alternative proposal). However, Eusebius' differentiation between 'John the disciple' and 'John the Elder' may be due to a misunderstanding of Papias, on whom he is dependent (*H. E.* 3.39.4). Similarly, the two tombs of John at Ephesus (Eus. *H. E.* 3.39.6; 7.25.16) may well be memorials to the same John, rather than to two different figures (cf. Jerome, *De Vir. Ill.* 9).

(c) The book, like other apocalypses, including the early Christian *Apocalypse of Peter*, is pseudonymous (see e.g. Dunkerley 1961: 298), written in the name of the apostle John. However, pseudonymity as found in the apocalypses is generally focused on figures of the distant past (e.g. Enoch, Moses, Abraham, Daniel). Those later Christian apocalypses which do claim authorship by a renowned Christian leader are explicit in their identification: 'Apocalypse of the holy apostle Paul' (Greek version of *Apoc. Paul*); 'Apocalypse of Saint John the Theologian' (2 *Apoc. Jn*: Court 2000: 33). Similarly, other New Testament books often regarded as pseudonymous (e.g. the Pastorals, 1 and 2 Peter) imitate the authentic letters in identifying their presumed author as an 'apostle'. The lack in Revelation of any explicit claim to apostleship by, and of further definition of, this 'John' (a name common among first-century Jews) counts against pseudonymity (as it does also for the letters of James and Jude).

While certainty is not possible, the grounds for rejecting the traditional apostolic authorship of Revelation are not conclusive. At least since Dionysius' discussion in the third century, the question has been tied up with that of the authorship of the Fourth Gospel. So well established was the apostolic authorship of the Gospel of John in Dionysius' day that his conclusion that the two texts could not have sprung from the same pen necessarily led him to deny apostolic authorship to Revelation. An alternative solution, however, is possible: that Revelation rather than the Fourth Gospel is the work of John son of Zebedee. This would accord with some recent trends in Johannine scholarship, which distinguish between the Fourth Evangelist and the rather shadowy 'Beloved Disciple' on whose testimony the work is based.

There is a significant correlation between the traditional portrait of John the apostle and the 'implied author' of the Apocalypse. Both are

Jewish followers of Jesus, probably of Palestinian provenance (e.g. Mk 1:19–20; Rev. 1:1; 2:9; 3:9), for whom Greek would have been a second language (e.g. Rev. 1:4; on Revelation's rather eccentric Greek, see e.g. Charles 1920: I, pp. cxvii–clix; Maier 2002: 108–16). Both were recognised leaders within the Christian community (e.g. Mk 9:2–8 and par.; Acts 3:1–11; Gal. 2:9; Revelation 1–3), such that they could be identified simply as 'John' (e.g. Acts 3:1; Rev. 1:9; 22:8). Both came to be associated with the Roman province of Asia, including the city of Ephesus (Iren. *Adv. Haer.* 3.1.1.; Rev. 2:1–3:22). Both, moreover, could experience dissent from their position within the church (e.g. Gal. 2:9; Rev. 2:2, 6, 14–15, 20). Indeed, it would not be inappropriate for a text such as Revelation, with its fiery visions of judgement, to spring from the pen of one known to posterity as a 'son of thunder' (Mk 3:17; Lk. 9:51–56).

Two objections might be made to this tradition of apostolic authorship, however. First, John of Patmos presents himself as a prophet rather than an apostle (1:3; 10:8–11; 22:7). But scholarship should beware about hard-and-fast distinctions between 'apostles', 'prophets' and 'visionaries': the apostle Paul could refer to both his prophetic gifts and his visionary experiences (e.g. 1 Cor. 14:19; 2 Corinthians 12), and also describe himself, as does John, as a 'servant' (Rom. 1:1; Gal. 1:10; cf. Jas 1:1; 2 Pet. 1:1; Jude 1; Rev. 1:1). It is not inconceivable that one of the Twelve should emphasise his prophetic credentials in a text which claims to transmit the prophetic word of the Lord (and in imitation of the prophet-Lord whose apostle he was: e.g. Mk 6:4; Jn 4:44). The second objection relates to Revelation's description of the 'twelve apostles of the Lamb' as the foundations of the new Jerusalem: i.e. as figures of a past apostolic age (see commentary on 21:14; cf. Eph. 2:2). Yet this may not be as insurmountable as at first appears, for Revelation's new Jerusalem vision is a vision not of the past but of the eschatological future. Its description of the Twelve, moreover, is not wildly dissimilar to their designation in an earlier period as 'pillars', presumably pillars of the new temple (Gal. 2:9).

A certain agnosticism is perhaps called for as to the precise identity of this early Christian prophet-visionary John of Patmos. Nevertheless, his traditional association with John son of Zebedee and 'son of thunder' deserves serious consideration, at least as much as Eusebius' alternative solution, which identifies him with the rather shadowy 'John the Elder'.

### *Date*

Early Christian witnesses attest a range of possible datings for the Apocalypse: to the reign of Claudius (41–54: Epiphanius), of Nero (54–68: two early Syriac versions), the later years of Domitian (81–

96: Irenaeus), and the reign of Trajan (98–117: an earlier tradition referred to by the eleventh-century writer Theophylact: Swete 1906: pp. c–ci). However, the dominant position in the patristic period follows Irenaeus in dating the book to the latter years of Domitian’s reign (c. 90–96: Iren. *Adv. Haer.* 5.30.3). According to the standard reading of Irenaeus, the Apocalypse was seen – i.e. John received his visions – towards the end of Domitian’s reign (an alternative reading is that *he*, i.e. John, was seen at that time: Boxall 2002: 90). Irenaeus’ words would not rule out the book itself having been written later, in the reign of Nerva or even Trajan. However, most early witnesses seem to have understood Irenaeus as dating the book itself to the 90s; this remains the consensus among scholars today.

Yet this view places great weight on the external evidence of Irenaeus. Much of the internal evidence is at best ambiguous, while other evidence tips the balance in favour of an earlier dating, during or soon after the reign of Nero, who died in 68. This date was favoured by nineteenth-century scholars, such as Westcott, Lightfoot and Hort, and is undergoing something of a revival in scholarly circles (e.g. Robinson 1976: 224–26; Bell 1978/79; Rowland 1982; Smalley 1994: 40–48; Boxall 2002: 89–98; for a recent robust defence of the Domitianic dating, see Beale 1999: 4–27). Though the apostolic authorship of Revelation does not necessarily require an early dating, that would make it more plausible. Moreover, if one allows for some theological connection between Revelation and the Fourth Gospel (e.g. Smalley 1994; though see Fiorenza 1985: 85–113), then Revelation would represent an earlier example of the Johannine stream, with the Gospel and Epistles as the more mature reflections of later Johannine authors. The following internal evidence is pertinent to the discussion:

(a) *The seven congregations.* The messages to the seven congregations (Revelation 2–3) present a mixed situation in which some Christians have faced or are facing hostility or even persecution, while others are condemned for spiritual lethargy. Some claim that this favours a later dating, to allow sufficient time for such spiritual deterioration to take place (e.g. Beale 1999: 16). Moreover, the Christians of Laodicea are criticised for their wealth and self-sufficiency (3:17): given that the city had been destroyed by a violent earthquake in 60/61, this is also thought to count against a dating in the late 60s. These arguments are not conclusive, however. ‘Spiritual lethargy’ need not require decades to set in. Further, the criticism of the Laodiceans could have been made within a few years of the devastating earthquake, not least given their arrogant refusal of imperial aid in the rebuilding programme (Tacitus, *Ann.* 14.27.1; see Hemer 1986: 193–94; *Sib. Or.* 4.107–08, dated to c. 80 CE, already knows of the resurrection of that city).

(b) *The Temple*. The description of the measuring of the Temple and its outer courts at 11:1–2 can be interpreted to support either dating. Some commentators understand it as a description of the Jerusalem Temple, still standing. For others, it presents a post-70 reflection on the events leading up to Jerusalem's destruction, or a symbolic reinterpretation of those events to refer to the new temple of the Church. Yet even this symbolic interpretation does not require a late dating, given the early ecclesial appropriation of temple-language (e.g. 1 Cor. 3:16–17, following the precedent set at Qumran).

(c) *Rome as Babylon*. The use of the symbol of Babylon to describe imperial Rome in Revelation 17–18 is often regarded as conclusive evidence in support of a post-70, Domitianic dating. The destruction of Jerusalem by Rome in 70 CE undoubtedly prompted comparisons among Jews and Jewish Christians with the destroyer of Solomon's Temple, Babylon (e.g. 2 Kings 25; cf. 1 Pet. 5:13; 4 Ez. 3:1; 2 Bar. 8:3–5). However, Babylon's significance should not be reduced to its destruction of the Temple: the city is remembered elsewhere in scripture as oppressor of God's people (e.g. Isaiah 47; Daniel 5; cf. Revelation 18) and as place of exile (Ps. 137:1; cf. Rev. 1:9). It is possible that a Jewish-Christian prophet prior to 70 could have chosen to describe Rome in such terms, particularly in the turbulent times of the late 60s with the outbreak of the Jewish revolt against the empire and with the Christian memory of Nero's persecution still raw (precedents would include 1QpHab 2.10–14, *Pss Sol.* 8:15, and the book of Daniel itself: see Boxall 2002: 94–96).

(d) *The Nero myth*. Many commentators accept that Revelation contains several allusions to a potent myth which evolved in the months and years following the demise of Nero (e.g. 6:2; 13:3–4; 17:8, 11). This took a number of forms: that Nero was not really dead but would return to reclaim the throne, or that he had fled to the East to raise up an army amongst the Parthians; that he had died but would return from beyond the grave. The presence of such allusions would rule out a dating during Nero's reign itself. Indeed, they have often been treated as supporting the 90s dating, on the grounds that 'presumably it took time for the myth to arise, develop, and circulate after Nero's death in 68 A.D.' (Beale 1999: 17). This is not so obvious, however: the first Neronian pretender emerged, on the back of intense speculation and rumour, in 69 (Tacitus, *Hist.* 2.8), prior to the death of Nero's immediate successor Galba.

(e) *The heads of the monster*. Revelation 17:9b–10 identifies the seven heads of the monster as seven kings or emperors, of whom 'five have fallen, one is now reigning, and the other has not yet come'. The usual reading of this is that John is writing in the reign of the sixth king. Though often ingeniously interpreted to make Domitian the sixth king currently reigning, the most straightforward correlations of

the heads to Roman emperors would suggest that Revelation was written in the late 60s, the sixth emperor being Galba (68–69) or, if the three short-lived emperors of 69 are omitted, Vespasian (69–79: see commentary on 17:9–14).

In short, much of the internal evidence is ambiguous, susceptible to interpretations which support datings in the late 60s or early-to-mid-90s. Only the weight of Irenaeus' testimony tips the balance in one direction. The most straightforward reading of the 'seven heads' passage, however, would appear to support the earlier dating. A mediating alternative, posited by David Aune, is that an earlier form of John's book underwent subsequent editing towards the end of Domitian's reign (Aune 1997: pp. lvii–lxx; this requires a complex theory about composition).

### *The Patmos Context*

Revelation 1:9 states that John 'was on the island called Patmos' when he had his visionary experience on which the Apocalypse is based. Although commentators have regularly, and rightly, attended to the context of Revelation's recipients in the Roman province of Asia, the neglected context of John remains fruitful for exploration. The precise reason for his sojourn there is stated only obliquely: literally 'on account of the word of God and the witness of Jesus' (see commentary on 1:9). But the most likely interpretation is the traditional one, that he was exiled to this small Aegean island as a result of his Christian testimony (e.g. Clem. Alex. *Quis* 42; Origen, *in Matt.* 16.6; Tert. *Praescr. Haer.* 36; *Act. Jn* 14; 88; Vict. *Apoc.* 10.11; see also Worth 1999: 93–100).

Despite the popular perception (reflected in representations of this scene by Western artists such as Bosch, Memling and Velázquez), Patmos in the first century was not a deserted cultural backwater, but a historic outpost of the mainland city of Miletos with a population large enough to support a gymnasium and various associations (Haussoullier 1902; Saffrey 1975; McCabe and Plunkett 1985). Moreover, the imaginative landscape would have been dominated by the cults of Artemis and her brother Apollo. Inscriptional evidence points to Patmos being regarded as Artemis' own island, appropriately marked by a temple, while the political dominance of Miletos may have encouraged the veneration on Patmos of Apollo (his oracle-shrine at Didyma was connected to Miletos by a Sacred Way). If local tradition is to be believed, the Temple of Artemis would have occupied the same dominant position over the island as does the Monastery of St John the Theologian today. Images from these rival cults may have penetrated the seer's visionary imagination, and surfaced in visions as diverse as the first horseman carrying a bow

(the symbol of Apollo: 6:2), the plague of demonic locusts presided over by Apollyon (9:1–11), the woman clothed with the sun (12:1–2: the woman echoes both Artemis and her mother Leto), and the second monster or ‘false prophet’ (13:11–18: ‘the Prophet’ (ὁ προφήτης) being the title of Apollo’s high priest in Didyma).

The broader imaginative landscape is provided by the Aegean Sea. Although Patmos is only about forty miles off the coast of Asia Minor (modern Turkey), the sense of physical separation from the mainland is palpable. The visible world is reduced to sea, small islands (some of which emerge monster-like from the water), and on the horizon the mountains of larger islands such as Samos. It may not be coincidental that, leaving aside Gospel references to the Sea of Galilee, the majority of New Testament references to ‘the sea’ are to be found in Revelation (26 occurrences), generally with negative connotations. The first monster is one that emerges ‘out of the sea’ (13:1), reflecting that Roman dominance over the waters evident to an exile on an Aegean island (cf. 18:17–19). The Day of the Lord is accompanied by the removal of every mountain and island (6:14), while the new heaven and new earth are characterised by the absence of sea (21:1). This is the perspective of the exile, consigned to a liminal place between land and sea, alienated from and urging resistance to the powers of the monster and Babylon, currently played out under the guise of imperial Rome (for contemporary readings of Revelation ‘from the margins’, see e.g. Boesak 1987; Richard 1995; Maier 2002; Rhoads 2005).

There is one further implication of this Patmos context. A Jewish-Christian prophet, regarding himself as exiled by an idolatrous empire for his faith, would not have been without antecedents for understanding his situation or role models for sustaining his prophetic ministry. It should not surprise us that particular influence upon John’s visionary book has come from those who were considered exiled prophets of the past: Jeremiah, Daniel, and especially Ezekiel. These have, as it were, provided the raw materials and the interpretative lens for making sense of John’s current situation, and for his urgent message for the churches. Indeed, in places Ezekiel’s influence is so strong as to have determined even the ordering of what John describes (see e.g. Vanhoye 1962; Goulder 1981; Ruiz 1989). John has ‘devoured Ezekiel’s scroll’ (10:8–11), consuming it and transforming it as he makes it his own.

### *The Setting of the Primary Addressees*

Nevertheless, Revelation has also been marked by John’s prophetic concern for his original addressees. These primary intended audiences are clearly stated: ‘the seven congregations in Asia’ (1:4). His

apocalyptic-prophetic letter was first sent from Patmos to representative Christian communities dwelling in seven named cities across the water on the mainland (though the number 'seven' marks them out as representatives of a larger number of Asian churches, with whom the book may well have been shared: cf. Col. 4:16). 'Asia', as elsewhere in the New Testament, refers to the Roman province of that name located in western Asia Minor. But what was the situation of these urban Christians, and what compelled John to address his visionary message to them?

### *Persecution*

A common answer is that they were undergoing and facing state persecution: according to most authorities who accept this view, following Irenaeus' dating and the tradition attested by Eusebius (Eus. *H. E.* 3.17–18), under the emperor Domitian. More recently scholarship has claimed that this setting is appropriate, on the grounds that apocalypses emerge out of a situation of crisis. On the surface, this does appear to be an appropriate setting for Revelation. The book is replete with visions revealing the rewards for those who remain faithful despite hostility and even death. Its visions of the souls under the altar (6:9–11) and the 144,000 clothed in white (7:9–17) have contributed much to a Christian theology of martyrdom. From earliest times (e.g. the *Letter from the Churches of Vienne and Lyons*, preserved in Eus. *H. E.* 5.1.2ff.; Tert. *Scorp.* 12), Christians facing persecution and even martyrdom have found in the Apocalypse inspiration and comfort for their situation.

But, however powerfully Revelation has spoken to subsequent generations of martyrs, there are two main reasons for questioning this as an account of the actual situation of Christians in the seven congregations: one internal, one external. The internal evidence of the messages to the seven congregations (Revelation 2–3) suggests a rather mixed picture. While actual or impending hostility is referred to for some (e.g. 2:9, 13; 3:9), others are criticised for their complacency and compromise (e.g. 2:4, 14–15, 20; 3:1–2, 16). Moreover, there is no clear indication that suffering is at the hands of Roman authorities, or involves formal legal proceedings (though that may have occurred in the case of the one named Christian martyr, Antipas of Pergamum, whose death was some time in the past: 2:13). Rather, the seven messages attribute hostility in Smyrna and possibly also Philadelphia to the instigation of 'those who say they are Jews but are not' (2:9; 3:9). This points to localised tensions in certain cities between John's supporters and other Jews (whether Christians or not: see commentary on 2:9), even if the civic authorities may have been brought in from time to time (cf. e.g. Acts 18:12–17).

Externally, in certain circles there has been a radical reassessment

of the portrait of Domitian as a megalomaniac demanding worship from his subjects, and doubts have been expressed as to the extent of any persecution of Christians during his reign (e.g. Thompson 1990; though see e.g. Janzen 1994). The standard Roman portrait of Domitian is largely dependent upon historians writing in the reign of Trajan (98–117), – Pliny the Younger, Dio Chrysostom, Suetonius and Tacitus – who had a vested interest in denigrating the Flavians in favour of the Antonines. The evidence for a Domitianic persecution of Christians is slight and ambiguous (e.g. it requires the identification of the executed Flavius Clemens and his exiled wife Domitilla as Christians: see Bell 1978/79; Boxall 2002: 98–100). Indeed, the early-second-century *Ascension of Isaiah* seems to know nothing of a persecution under Domitian, despite its allusion to what occurred under Nero (*Asc. Isa.* 4:3; Knight 1999: 24). However, the internal evidence of Revelation does not suggest a situation of state persecution, while the earlier dating cuts the link with the reign of Domitian. This is not to deny that martyrdom features strongly in the visionary section of the Apocalypse: but these are more likely allusions to Nero's past action against Christians in Rome, and visionary anticipations of what Rome will be capable of in the future, than descriptions of present state persecution.

### *Compromise with Culture*

If Revelation is not primarily written to comfort the persecuted, it nevertheless represents a rallying cry to Christians to place themselves in a position in which they might find themselves being persecuted. Warnings against assimilation to and compromise with an idolatrous and unjust culture run like threads throughout the book. The angel of the congregation in Ephesus has lost his initial love (2:4), while the lukewarm Laodiceans boast in their material wealth and self-sufficiency (3:17). Christians in both Pergamum and Thyatira are charged with following 'Balaam' and 'Jezebel' in eating idol-meat and in fornication/sexual immorality, a metaphor for idolatry (2:14, 20: this is probably also the content of the 'teaching of the Nikolaitans' at 2:6, 15). Most likely, this implies an enthusiastic participation in the lives of their respective cities, in which religion, politics and economics were intricately interwoven. The extent to which Christians could maintain membership of trade guilds (a particular issue in Thyatira), engage in commerce, and contribute to political well-being, without compromising their commitments, was a burning issue in earliest Christianity.

Other early Christians might have taken a more optimistic view of the Church's relationship to society (e.g. Romans 13; 1 Corinthians 8–10; 1 Tim. 2:1–4). Revelation's apocalyptic unveiling, however, presents a sinister picture of the dangers. The dualistic rhetoric of

Revelation draws a wedge between those who bear the name of God and the Lamb (14:1) and those marked with the branded mark of the monster (13:16–17). Economics is brought into the equation with the claim that the ability to buy and sell requires the monster’s mark (13:17). Moreover, references to the worship of the monster and the dragon (13:4, 12–14) are almost certainly allusions to the imperial cult, which arose in the East and was particularly popular in the eastern provinces as a means of proving loyalty (the goddess Roma had had a temple in Smyrna as early as 195 BCE, while Pergamum and Ephesus had temples to Roma and Augustus and Roma and Julius Caesar respectively). It is probably not the case, despite repeated claims, that official encouragement of the imperial cult reached new heights under Domitian. Indeed, the claim that he demanded to be called *dominus et deus noster* (‘Our Lord and God’, 4:11) is not attested by sources contemporary to his reign. But participation or non-participation in the imperial cult was one of those issues confronting Christians living in the urban centres of the first-century Roman world.

*Turbulent Times in the Empire*

Assimilation and temptation to compromise points to a situation of relative stability and contentment for at least some Asian Christians. Rome the beneficent had brought not only peace but also economic prosperity to the provinces. The stories that Rome and her emperors told about themselves were stories of order being restored out of chaos, of a golden age of tranquillity resulting from the birth of Augustus, of a universal *Pax Romana* enveloping the earth (see especially the commentary on Revelation 12). Yet John the prophet-visionary sees a very different picture. Fed by the scriptures of Israel, inspired by the radical witness of Jesus and alerted by his visionary experience on Patmos, John sees monsters on the horizon. If the earlier dating of Revelation is preferred, John’s prophetic intuition would have been especially insightful: with the death of Nero in 68, Rome was on the verge of civil war; in Palestine, the Jewish revolt against the Romans had already broken out; among the rumours circulating about Nero were hints that the Parthian enemy was in the ascendant.

Whichever dating is preferred, the alternative story told by Revelation turns the imperial story on its head. Imperial power and political rulers are revealed to be on the side of chaos, whereas order and peace are accomplished by the birth of another child, who is himself the victim of that empire. The apocalyptic story is the gospel story of the one who is victorious through allowing himself to be killed (e.g. 12:5, 10–11).

Moreover, this story is set within the context of two other ancient

and interlocking stories: that of the Exodus and of the return from exile, the latter viewed by prophets such as Second Isaiah as a New Exodus. God's people are once again enslaved to Egypt, with its dragon-like Pharaoh (12:3; cf. Ezek. 29:3; 32:2); liberation is available, however, through the shedding of a Lamb's blood and by passing through the Sea (1:5; 5:6; 15:2–4). Babylon has re-emerged, and God's people are once again in exile. The apocalyptic challenge is to wake up to the reality of this situation, and dissociate oneself from Babylon, as John the Patmos exile has done. The climactic chapters of Revelation will describe in great visionary detail the characteristics of both Babylon and the new Jerusalem toward which God's people are travelling (17:1—22:5).

### *Theatre of Reception*

The context in which this apocalyptic message is received is also important. The Apocalypse was originally intended to be read aloud to a group or groups of Christians. Reflecting ancient practices of public reading, Rev. 1:3 refers to the singular 'reader' and 'those who hear' (cf. e.g. Exod. 24:7; Neh. 8:3; 2 Macc. 2:25; Mk 13:14 and par.). This contrasts dramatically with the highly individualised, silent reading by which both scholars and many contemporary Christians approach the book. The seven congregations were not readers but audiences, and John's book has made its impact over many centuries as an aural experience. This is an important consideration in interpretation, and attempts to detect the structure of the book should appropriately attend to the impact on the ear, paying particular attention to repetitions, rhythmic patterns, assonance and alliteration in the Greek text, and natural breaks in the narrative flow.

Furthermore, there are good grounds for proposing that the book was designed for reading during Christian gatherings for worship, probably the Eucharist (Barr 1986; Garrow 1997; on reading in the early Church see Gamble 1995). Early Christian sources attest to the reading of what later became New Testament scripture within the Christian assembly (e.g. Col. 4:16; 1 Thess. 4:27; 1 Tim. 3:13; Justin, *Apol.* 1.67). Oracular prophecy, which has influenced the essentially literary prophecy of John, was normally uttered within the context of worship (e.g. 1 Cor. 14:29–33). References in the seven messages to eating from the tree of life (2:7; cf. 22:2), receiving the hidden manna (2:17), and sitting down to dine with Christ (3:20; cf. 19:9) are likely to have been heard as eucharistic allusions. The announcement of the Lamb's marriage feast (19:7, 9) represents the culmination of repeated references to the sacrificial death of that Lamb and the saving power of its blood. There is also a repeated note of 'thanksgiving' (4:9; 7:12; cf. 11:17) directed towards the one seated on the throne.

Particularly striking are the parallels with the eucharistic section of the *Didache*, notably the title of God as ‘Master Almighty’ (δέσποτα παντοκράτορ: *Did.* 10:3; *Rev.* 4:8; 6:10), the ascribing to God of ‘glory’ (*Did.* 9:2, 3, 4; 10:2, 4, 5; *Rev.* 1:6; 4:11; 5:13), and the prayer for the Lord to come (*Did.* 10:6; *Rev.* 22:20; cf. 1 Cor. 16:22). It is even possible that the book was so divided as to form manageable ‘instalments’ intended to be read during a series of successive Eucharists (see Garrow 1997).

If the eucharistic assembly was the Apocalypse’s intended ‘theatre of reception’, then this has significant corollaries. First, Revelation would have functioned imaginatively to connect the sporadic gatherings of early Christians with the eternal worship of heaven. Christian assemblies within the seven cities of Asia are likely to have been tiny in proportion to the overall urban population: one recent estimate of the size of the first-century church in Ephesus is between fifty and a hundred within a total population of approximately two hundred thousand (Howard-Brook and Gwyther 1999: p. xxii). Revelation’s visions of the heavenly liturgy, and its revelation that these small congregations are part of a huge multitude ‘too large to be counted’ (7:9), would have served as a powerful challenge to rival claimants to the throne, whose dominance was built into the very fabric of Asia’s Roman cities.

Second, given that early Christian prophetic oracles and revelations were generally delivered within a worship context, the reading of Revelation would have served as a literary and oral compensation for the absence in the liturgical assembly of the prophet-seer John, currently consigned to exile on an island. This would have given the reader a significant role as the mouthpiece of the absent seer, and through him of Jesus Christ (1:9; 2:1—3:22; cf. the similar function of Paul’s letters, e.g. 1 Cor. 5:3–5). The explicit statement that John received his inaugural vision ‘on the Lord’s day’ matches the time of the week when, across the sea, the seven congregations would have been gathered for worship (1:10; *Did.* 14:1). Finally, the conjoining of the Apocalypse with celebration of the Eucharist gives a further dimension to the frequent and urgent references to the ‘coming’ of the Lord (e.g. 1:4; 2:5, 16; 3:3, 20; 22:20). In the worship accompanying the reading of this text, these Christian communities would have encountered the repeated coming of Christ to them in judgement and salvation, anticipating that final coming at his Parousia (for the influence of the Apocalypse on the Orthodox Liturgy, see Ashanin 1990).

*Structure*

Readers over the centuries have frequently found themselves at a loss when it comes to making sense of the book's structure. Its haphazard juxtaposition of visions have resulted in a plethora of rival, and often mutually exclusive, structural analyses. Many commentators, indeed, have concluded that the text as we have it lacks an overall pattern, and have either attempted to 'improve' on it or posited complex theories of composition. Nevertheless, there are good grounds for upholding the essential integrity of the book (Bauckham 1993a, 1–37). If this is the case, our presumption should be that there is some underlying pattern or structure (though allowing for elements of fluidity appropriate to a text which claims its origin in visionary experience). The following comments are pertinent:

(a) A prologue and epistolary introduction (1:1–8) precedes John's account of his first Patmos vision at 1:9–20, and similar epilogue material is found towards the end of chapter 22.

(b) There is a natural break at 4:1, which marks the transition from the seven messages to John's heavenly ascent and symbolic visions proper.

(c) Sequences of seven, at least four of which are explicitly marked (messages, seals, trumpets, bowls), ought to be taken seriously. Moreover, given John's capacity to provide implicit sevens embedded in the text (e.g. seven beatitudes), one should not rule out the possibility of other implicit septets.

(d) There are good grounds for making a break halfway through the book (at 12:1 or more likely 11:19). The new section, which deals with the fate of God's people in the events leading up to the last day, is often related in some way to the 'little scroll' delivered to John in chapter 10. Moreover, the second half overlaps to some degree with the first half: warnings from the seven messages about remaining faithful and resisting compromise (Revelation 2–3) are played out in visionary form in the battle between the woman and the dragon, and the appearance of the two monsters (Revelation 12–13); there is a striking similarity between the trumpet-plagues of 8:2–11:18 and the bowl-plagues of 15:5–16:21).

(e) There is evidence for significant interludes which delay the action and prepare for what is yet to come (e.g. 7:1–17; 10:1–11:14), and also evidence for overlapping, whereby different sections are bound to each other by passages which look forward and back simultaneously (e.g. 8:3–5).

(f) Recapitulation of the trumpets sequence in the bowls septet, albeit with some progression, should alert us to the possibility of similar recapitulations elsewhere, and warn against viewing Revelation as primarily chronological in sequence. Rather it may present

different aspects of the same scene or theme at different times: e.g. God's people are at one time the temple of God measured for divine protection, at another the whole holy city, at another a pregnant woman, at another a mighty army (11:1–2; 12:1–2; 14:1–5; see also the succession of 'battle scenes', e.g. 12:7–12; 16:12–16; 17:13–14; 19:17–21; 20:7–10).

(g) There are strong literary parallels between the visions of Babylon (17:1–19:10) and the new Jerusalem (21:9–22:9; Giblin 1974). Both are introduced by the appearance of one of the seven bowl angels, who carries John off 'in the spirit' with a similar invitation (17:1–3; 21:9–10); both describe a woman who is also a city; both, moreover, conclude with the seer being rebuked for trying to worship the interpreting angel (19:10; 22:8–9). This could mean either that the two visions create an *inclusio* around the intervening visions (thus forming a substantial final section incorporating 17:1–22:9), or that they are parallel endings to two separate sections (15:5–19:10; 19:11–22:9 or —22:11). Garrow's instalment theory would suggest the latter, allowing for six instalments of relatively equal length.

Three further general observations are also pertinent:

(h) Revelation claims to be a text based upon visionary experience, however much subsequent reflection and ordering has taken place. If one allows for this possibility, then lack of apparent structure in places ought not to be a surprise. Visions, like dreams, are not necessarily received in chronological or even thematic sequence.

(i) Literary criticism has recently highlighted the importance of story and plot in interpreting narrative texts such as the Gospels and Revelation. Attention to Revelation's story or plot will provide clues as to whether our structural pattern is on the right lines. Moreover, repetition, and passages which might appear out of place because they delay progress, may in fact be evidence of deliberate literary artistry and dramatic tension.

(j) As stated above, the Apocalypse was intended to be read orally, probably in a liturgical setting. Its first audiences would have relied on aural indicators as they heard the book read, such as repetition, in order to make sense of the whole. Moreover, the proposal (Garrow 1997) that the book was not intended to be read in one sitting, but is structured according to six instalments, is an attractive one. The number six, rather than the complete seven, is appropriate: the book in itself is incomplete, for it offers only the promise of the End, not the End itself (Boxall 2002: 80–81).

All of these considerations have been taken into account in the body of the commentary, and in the following structural outline.