

GORDON D. FEE

REVELATION

A NEW COVENANT COMMENTARY



NCCS  New Covenant Commentary Series

REVELATION

NCCS | New Covenant Commentary Series

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Preface

Stepping into the Revelation from the rest of the New Testament is to enter into a strange, bizarre new world; and this is true even in the days of Lord of the Rings and Harry Potter. Instead of narratives, arguments, or plain statements of fact, the Revelation is full of angels, trumpets, and earthquakes; of strange beasts, dragons, and bottomless pits. Most believers, therefore, take one of two extremes: some simply avoid it in despair; others take an exaggerated interest in it, thinking to find here all the keys to the end of the world.

Both of these positions, I would argue, are simply wrong. On the one hand, in the providence of God it is Holy Scripture, a part of the twenty-seven-document canon of the New Testament. Indeed, it serves as the ultimate—and marvelous—conclusion to the whole of Scripture. On the other hand, a great deal of what has been written about it, especially at the popular level, tends to obscure its meaning rather than to help the reader understand it. In fact many years ago, when I was teaching a course on the Revelation at Wheaton College, one of the options for a term paper was to analyze the exegesis of Hal Lindsay's *The Late Great Planet Earth*. Two students took me up on this alternative, both of whom independently came to the conclusion that the task was altogether impossible, since there is not a single exegetical moment in Lindsay's entire book. John himself would surely have found Lindsay's book as "apocalyptic" as most modern readers do John's.

The purpose of the present book is therefore singular: to offer one New Testament scholar's exegetical reading of the text, with very little concern for anything except to help people hear it for the word of God that it is. And therefore none of the so-called alternative ways of understanding the book will hereafter be mentioned in this book. At the same time, I would be deceiving the reader if I did not admit that I am equally concerned that the exegesis leads to theological understanding. That is, what does it mean for God and his Christ to be the one and only sovereign(s) in a universe in which others compete for sovereignty and

Preface

worship; and what does it mean for contemporary people of God to be a countercultural alternative in such a world, just as John himself was, and was encouraging his readers to be? Furthermore, with theology there must be worship, because whatever else is true about this marvelous Revelation, John recognizes that truly Christian theology should lead to doxology. That is, descriptions of God that do not lead to the worship of God might be intellectually useful, but they are unrelated to biblical reality; and biblical reality is what John wants his readers to see and hear. In a form of divine sovereignty that often accompanies biblical prophecy, John wrote what turned out to be the final book in the Christian canon; and thus it serves fittingly as the climax to both the New Testament and to the entire biblical story—which begins in Eden and concludes with a restored Eden.

Finally, I should note that the biblical text used throughout is the (yet to be published) 2011 edition of the NIV, which has been used by permission of the Committee on Bible Translation who are responsible for the translation (to which I have access before publication as a member of the translation committee) and of the Zondervan Corporation who will publish it.

Gordon D. Fee
October 2009

Introduction

The purpose of this introduction is twofold: to introduce the reader both to the Book of Revelation and to this commentary on the book. We begin with the former. At issue is the fourfold question of what, why, who, and when.

THE REVELATION: WHAT IS IT?

Readers of the New Testament experience something of a shock when they come to the book of Revelation—at least once they get past the first five chapters, which are quite manageable. Even the two scenes in heaven in chapters 4 and 5—which may be a bit different, to be sure—are still manageable. At chapter 6, however, with its four colored horses, souls under the altar, and great earthquake, everything changes. At this point most contemporary readers have a sense of being thrown into a strange new world, and those who from a sense of duty keep on reading to the end find themselves in a constant struggle to stay with it. It is not difficult to understand horses or beasts as such, but colored horses and beasts with seven heads and ten horns do stretch the imagination—especially so for those who draw mental pictures as they read.

So the first task for any reader of a book is to understand (or at least anticipate) the kind of literary genre of the writing; and that is where in this case everything tends to break down. People understand what letters are, and how they function, and so have access to the New Testament Epistles. For the most part they are also able to recognize the style and poetry of the Old Testament Prophets—although with a degree of difficulty at times, to be sure. Thus the images themselves for the most part lie within the worldview of the reader, and that because the images are expressions of reality. But with Jewish apocalyptic writings (Daniel 7–11 and much of Ezekiel) all of that changes, since many of the images are intentionally bizarre and thus their meaning is uncertain.

Introduction

What one must understand before reading John's Revelation is that he has purposely set out to write something that has not been done before, something that he sets up his readers to understand at the very beginning. Thus in 1:1 he identifies what he is about to write as an *apocalypse*, translated "revelation" in the NIV, which in 1:3 he refers to as a *prophecy*. But in the next two verses he begins again with all the formal aspects of an ancient *letter*. So the reader is given these three different pieces of information at the outset. What is unique about John's *Apocalypse* is the fine blending of each of these three kinds of literature—apocalypse, prophecy, letter—into a single whole piece.

We begin, then, with the Revelation as an *apocalypse*, a word used to describe a kind of literature that flourished first among Jews and then Christians for roughly the four-hundred-year period between 200 BCE and 200 CE, although its roots lie much earlier. The taproot of apocalyptic was deeply embedded in the Old Testament Prophets, which means that whatever else, these writers, including John, were concerned about judgment and salvation. But the prophets, in contrast to the apocalyptists, were not primarily *writers*. Rather, they were first of all *spokespersons* for Yahweh, who only later set their spoken words to writing. The apocalypses, on the other hand, are carefully structured and worked out *literary works* from the start. Part of the reason for this is that apocalyptic was born during the time of powerful world empires, which was often a time of persecution for the Jewish community. These writers, therefore, were engaged in a kind of subversive literature, prophesying cataclysmic judgments on their persecutors—God's own enemies—who at the time of writing appeared so powerful that there was no hope for their collapse except by divine intervention. Thus these writers no longer looked for God to bring about their redemption *within* history; rather, they pictured God as bringing a cataclysmic *end* to history, which also ushered in a redemptive conclusion for God's people.

The substance of apocalyptic included several recognizable literary devices. First, regarding their *form*, the apocalyptists were recording visions and dreams. Whether or not there were actual experiences of dreams simply cannot be known. Second, their *language*, especially their imagery, was deliberately *cryptic* and *symbolic*. Thus, for example, the apocalyptist "sees" a woman clothed with the sun; and whereas one understands both a "woman" and the "sun," the combination is not an expression of any known reality. Similarly, the apocalyptist sees a beast

having seven heads and ten horns; and while we understand what a “beast” might be, and what “heads” and “horns” are, human beings have no experience of them in this combination. Third, the apocalypses tend to be *formally stylized*, which often includes the symbolic use of numbers. Time and events are divided into neat numerical packages, as in John’s Apocalypse, where the three major sections (chs. 6–7, 8–11, 15–16) are all sets of 4-2-1, with a twofold interlude between the last two (sixth and seventh) in each case.

While John is true to the genre in each of these first three characteristics, he differs radically from them in the final two—and that because he is not just an apocalyptic *writer*, he is himself a Christian *prophet* who is speaking directly to his own generation. Thus, in contrast to other apocalypses, all of which come to us under pseudonymous names, John identifies himself from the outset—and does so as a fellow traveler and fellow sufferer with those to whom he writes. Because of his abandonment of pseudonymity, he also abandons the fifth feature of all prior apocalypses, namely, the command to “seal up” what he has written for it to be read at a “later time.” This is a literary device the earlier apocalyptists employed so as to give their own document a sense of “hoary age,” so that what they were writing to their contemporaries appeared to come to them from centuries past. By way of contrast John is explicitly told *not* to “seal it up” (22:10), precisely because John understands what he has written to be “the words of the prophecy of this scroll” (22:18).

John, therefore, is not simply *anticipating* the End, as were his Jewish predecessors and contemporaries; rather, he knows the End to have begun with Jesus, through his death, resurrection, and ascension. Absolutely crucial to all of this is his understanding of the Spirit as having come to be with God’s people until the End, and thus as the way the Risen Lord continues to be with them. Other apocalyptic writers wrote in the name of an ancient worthy, because theirs was the age of the “quenched Spirit”; hence prophecy, which comes by the Spirit, had ceased. But John belongs to God’s “new era,” evidenced by the coming of the Spirit. Thus John says about his book that he “was in the Spirit” (1:10–11), and that what he writes is “this prophecy” (1:3; 22:18–19); and this because “the testimony of [the risen] Jesus is the Spirit of prophecy,” that is, that the message given by and about Jesus is the clear evidence that the prophetic Spirit has come.

Introduction

The result is that John has given the church a combination of apocalyptic and prophetic. The book is cast in the mold of *apocalyptic*: it was born in (or on the brink of) persecution; he intends to speak about the End; it is a carefully crafted piece of literature, using cryptic language and also the imagery of fantasy; and it is ultimately dealing with salvation and judgment. But above all else it is *prophetic* in intent and content. Thus it is a word from God *to their present situation*, but written against the backdrop of the future, with its certain judgment and salvation. At the same time this book comes as an *epistle*, written to and for the churches in their present situations. Whatever else, it is *not* a word sealed until the end of time; for John, with the death and resurrection of Christ, the End had already begun. He writes for the encouragement (and watchfulness) of churches that stand on the brink of a holocaust about to be let loose on them by the Roman Empire.

John's purpose thus seems eminently clear. He is told to write what he has seen (in these visions), which is about "what is and what is about to happen" (1:19). The beatitude (1:3) is for the one who reads this aloud to each congregation and for those who listen and *keep* what is written. Since one cannot "keep" judgments on others, this seems clearly to be a call for them to "keep the faith" in light of what they are about to experience at the hands of the Empire. And that leads us to the questions of why, when, and who.

THE REVELATION: WHY WAS IT WRITTEN?

In raising the question of purpose one comes to the crucial matter of the Revelation's being a *letter* as well as an *apocalypse*. On this point two matters dominate the entire book, both of which emerge early on. First, the most dominant theme throughout the book is that of the Holy War. This biblical motif, which begins in Genesis 3:15 with enmity between Satan and the woman and her offspring, is the main theme of Exodus 15, and is picked up again in Joshua 6:1–3 and 1 Samuel 8. In John's Revelation the theme takes on a thoroughly New Testament twist, where it is played out at the highest theological levels. Here God is called *ho pantokratōr*, which is used regularly in the Septuagint to translate the Hebrew term "God Almighty," mostly in contexts of God as warrior (= "Yahweh of hosts [heavenly armies]"). Furthermore, in his earliest appearance in heaven the risen Christ is identified as "the

Lion of the tribe of Judah” (5:5), picking up language from the blessing of Judah in Genesis 49:10–12 with its promise that “the scepter will not depart from Judah.” Moreover, the elder who makes this identification for John then notes that this “Lion from Judah” has “triumphed,” a verb denoting victory in battle, which makes seventeen of its twenty-eight New Testament appearances in this book. Nonetheless, when John turns to see the mighty Lion, all he sees is a Lamb—a “slain Lamb” at that—the figure that dominates the Revelation until Christ finally appears as a heavenly warrior (19:11–21).

The role of God’s people is to engage in the Holy War. And herein lies the heart of the book, because their lot in the war will be one of suffering, which for them is both already present and impending. Indeed, what makes John a true prophet is that he has divinely been given insight to recognize that the martyrdom of Antipas of Pergamum (2:13) was but the forerunner of many more to come. Thus this theme pervades the book, beginning with 1:9 (“I John, your brother and companion in the suffering”) and repeated several times in the letters to the seven churches (2:3; 2:8–9; 2:13; 3:10), while each of the letters concludes with the verb for “triumph” noted above (NIV, “those who are victorious”).

Furthermore, one of key passages early on in the book is 6:9–11, where the fifth seal when opened reveals “the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained.” This is followed in 7:14 with the great multitude in white robes who “have come out of the great tribulation,” and who now appear in heaven “before the throne of God,” where they are promised no more suffering (vv. 16–17). The same thing happens again in the opening visions of the second half of the book (12:11 and 17), where their suffering and death is linked to their “holding fast their testimony about Jesus.” Then, in the rest of this half of the book (chs. 13–22) their suffering and death are specifically attributed to the Empire itself (“the beast”).¹

This motif is the obvious key to understanding the historical context of the book, and fully explains its occasion and purpose. John himself is in exile, apparently for his faith; others are at the same time experiencing various degrees of suffering. John has the prophetic in-

1. See, for example, 13:7, 10; 14:12–13; 16:5–6; 18:20, 24; 19:2; and 20:4.

Introduction

sight to recognize that the martyrdom of Antipas of Pergamum (2:13) is but the beginning of a holocaust that will soon overtake those who proclaim as Lord not only someone other than Caesar himself, but One whom a former Caesar had executed as a criminal of the state. At the same time—and this is John's greater urgency—chapters 2 and 3 make it plain that there are some internal disorders that make him not at all certain God's people are ready for the great onslaught that is about to come upon them. Indeed, at issue for him is a church that is on the brink of disaster—concern over the issue of sovereignty and oppression by the Empire, on the one hand, and fear lest the church not be able to resist it, on the other.

This especially accounts for the words found in the opening and closing *inclusio*. In 1:3 God's blessing rests on those who "keep" (NIV "take to heart") what is said in this book; in 22:7 the closing benediction rests on "those who keep the words of the prophecy in this scroll." This also accounts for the (otherwise strange) collocation of verses 11 to 15 at the very end:

¹¹*Let those who do wrong continue to do wrong; let those who are vile continue to be vile; let those who do right continue to do right; and let those who are holy continue to be holy.*

¹²*"Look, I am coming soon! My reward is with me, and I will give to everyone according to what they have done. ¹³I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End.*

¹⁴*"Blessed are those who wash their robes, that they may have the right to the tree of life and may go through the gates into the city. ¹⁵Outside are the dogs, those who practice magic arts, the sexually immoral, the murderers, the idolaters and everyone who loves and practices falsehood.*

Here is a sudden, concluding appeal for faithfulness and watchfulness, with a beatitude for God's faithful ones and an (assumed) curse on all the others.

Such a view of things further accounts for the repeated warnings throughout the book; especially those in connection with the plagues and, in chapters 13–14, about going along with the beast. Thus when John sings his funeral dirge over Rome in chapter 18—one of the truly great moments in all of Scripture—it is accompanied by this final warning (v. 4):

*'Come out of her my people,²
so that you will not share in her sins,
so that you will not receive any of her plagues*

Thus the main themes are clear. The church and state are on a collision course of some magnitude over who runs the universe, and John fully recognizes that power and victory presently appear to belong to the state. But because of Rome's arrogance and oppression, God will bring her to ruin. Thus (still in ch. 18):

⁶*Give back to her as she has given;
pay her back double for what she has done.
Pour her a double portion from her own cup.*
⁷*Give her as much torment and grief
as the glory and luxury she gave herself.
In her heart she boasts,
'I sit enthroned as queen; I am not a widow,
and I will never mourn.'* [Isa 47:7, 8]
⁸*Therefore in one day her plagues will overtake her:
death, mourning and famine.
She will be consumed by fire,
for mighty is the Lord God who judges her.*

With her will be all the petty kings, seamen, and merchants who have courted her (vv. 9–19). And at the heart of everything is the cult of the emperor, who had begun by now to be “worshiped” as “Lord and Savior”!

Thus John first of all *warns* the church that suffering and death lie ahead. Indeed, he has the prophetic insight to recognize that it will get worse, far worse, before it ever gets better; and his primary concern for the churches is that they do not cave in under the coming pogrom they are about to experience. Thus the various texts that serve as warnings:

*If anyone worships the beast and its image and receives its mark
on their forehead or on their hand, they, too will drink of the wine
of God's fury, which has been poured full strength into the cup of
his wrath. (14:9–10)*

*Come out of her, my people, so that you will not share in her sins,
so that you will not receive any of her plagues. (18:4)*

But the prophetic word of this book is also one of encouragement, as John repeatedly announces that God, not the Empire, is in control of history; that the church will triumph even through death; that God will finally bring justice and pour out his wrath on the persecutor; and that at the end God will bring eternal rest to the faithful.

A final note in this regard: it is imperative that the reader note the clear distinction John makes between two crucial words (and thus ideas): *thlipsis* (tribulation) and *orgē* (wrath). Tribulation, including suffering and death, is clearly part of what the church was *already* enduring; John's primary prophetic word is that noted above, that such tribulation will get far worse before it ever gets better, that such suffering and death are going to come in even greater measure before the End itself. Misunderstanding the meaning of this word accounts for most of the poor reading of this document. But John's second prophetic word sets the former in divine perspective; God's *wrath* (i.e., his judgments) will finally be poured out on those responsible for the suffering—and on all others who join in the rebellion against God and the Lamb, a view that is wholly consonant with the rest of the New Testament.³

THE REVELATION: WHO WROTE IT?

The authorship of the Apocalypse is complicated by its relationship with the Fourth Gospel and the three epistles that bear the name of John, even though all of these, as with the three Synoptic Gospels, actually come to us without naming the author. By way of contrast, the author of this book identifies himself simply as “John.” At issue for later readers is, which John? The primary answer to this is, a John well known to his readers, a person who obviously held a place of some importance among them—which may be attributed either to age or position, or as is most likely, to both. At this point, as with the Gospels, we are thrown back on what has been said by other early Christians, all of whom held the author of the Fourth Gospel and the three Johannine Epistles to be the Apostle John (the author calls himself “the elder” in 1 and 2 John). The majority of these early writers also considered him to have been the author of the Revelation; those few who thought otherwise did so for spurious reasons—they believed that the Apostle John wrote the

3. As 2 Thess 1:3–10 also makes clear.

Gospel and three Epistles, but they disliked the Revelation and so found reasons to deny it to him.

Although this matter will never be settled to everyone's satisfaction, the position assumed in this commentary is that the John who identifies himself in 1:4 simply as "John" is in fact the apostle we meet in the Synoptic Gospels. Furthermore, along with the majority of believers through all the early Christian centuries, the assumption made here is that he is the same John who authored the Gospel and the three letters attributed to him. The primary reason one might think otherwise is that while the Greek of this document is basically (even overwhelmingly, from my perspective) like that of the Fourth Gospel, it has just enough small differences from the other four documents to cause some to have doubts. Although these differences are noteworthy, and must be dealt with, they are scarcely of the same nature as the differences between the three Pastoral Epistles and the other ten letters in the Pauline corpus. It may therefore be said with some degree of assurance that the real reason some early church fathers rejected authorship of this book by the Apostle John is that noted above—they thoroughly disliked its content (mostly because they simply did not understand it) and therefore were glad to distance the Apocalypse from the apostle.

What makes one finally move in the direction of apostolic authorship is the twofold reality, first, that this very unusual document was preserved in the early church as something apostolic, and second, that even though it has several linguistic and grammatical differences from the Gospel and Epistles that bear John's name, these differences are no more severe than those between Galatians and Romans, both of which almost all living scholars assume to be Pauline. And with regard to the Revelation, one could argue further that the small differences between it and the Gospel of John can easily be attributed to John's exile on Patmos, where he probably had to write on his own without an amanuensis. In any case, the strongest historical argument in favor of apostolic authorship is the very preservation of the document by the early church at all. For a document as different from the rest of the New Testament writings as this one to have been preserved in such a way as to eventually be included in the canon of New Testament writings suggests that the preservation was done by those who revered the Apostle John, and kept it and copied it basically for that reason.

THE REVELATION: WHEN WAS IT WRITTEN?

In many ways this should be the easiest to answer of the several questions of introduction, since almost everything in the book suggests a period somewhere around the turn of the second Christian century: the conditions of the churches in chapters 2 and 3; the fact that there has already been a martyrdom; and most of all, the clear and unrelenting tension between church and state that dominates the book, which did not occur in Asia Minor until this time. Granted that Nero had ordered the death of believers in Rome at an earlier time (using them as living torches for his infamous garden parties), but what is going on this book is much more universal and is about to affect the churches located in Asia Minor. The only piece of evidence that would suggest an earlier date is the matter of the “counting” of the emperors in chapter 17; but this is hardly enough on which to base the dating of the entire document, since, as is pointed out in the commentary, this is a highly dubious matter in terms of precision. In any case, a late first- or early second-century date is assumed throughout this commentary, and is the perspective from which all of its data are presented and understood.

SOME CONCLUDING WORDS ABOUT INTERPRETATION

In my classes over the years when teaching this great book, I make a final plea in the opening lecture regarding *the necessity of exegesis* as the proper way—indeed the *only* way—that leads to understanding. It may seem strange that one should have to make this plea at all for the reading or studying of a biblical book, but it has been necessary because many of my students have had to shed some lamentable readings they have brought to the text. The unfortunate reality is that almost all of the popular stuff written on the Revelation, which tends to be well known by many of these students, has scarcely a shred of exegetical basis to it. Such interpreters usually begin with a previously worked out eschatological scheme that they bring to the text, a scheme into which they then spend an extraordinary amount of energy trying to make everything in the text fit, and which they then attempt to defend, but with very little success.

So rule number one is that which the reader should bring to all the biblical documents, especially the Epistles, namely, that the interpreter's

first task is to seek John's—and therewith the Holy Spirit's—*original intent* as much as that is possible. The primary meaning of any text, including apocalyptic texts, is that which John himself intended, which in turn must be something the original readers would have been capable of understanding. And this is so even if those readers may not always have done so, as the Apostle Paul bears painful witness.⁴ Indeed, the original readers clearly had the advantage over us at this point. One may readily grant that because our book is *prophetic* in part, one should be open to the possibility, as with much biblical prophecy, that at points there may be a further, second meaning. But one can only know that *after*—not before—the event or situation occurs to which this further meaning pertains.

Furthermore, one must be careful in this case about using the concept of “the analogy of Scripture” (= Scripture should be interpreted in light of other Scripture). This is indeed a valid principle; but in the case of John's Apocalypse the other Scripture is almost always other eschatological passages, which themselves are often interpreted poorly. One must always be aware that John does what other apocalyptists did: he reinterpreted earlier images so that they have *new* meaning, precisely because in John's case he is also speaking as a Christian prophet.

That leads then to some final suggestions about the interpretation of apocalyptic images, which in fact are of several kinds. Some images are constant—in the same way that an American political cartoon with an elephant and a donkey *always* refer to the Republican and Democratic parties. Thus, for example, when John speaks of beasts coming out of the sea or the land, he is always pointing to political empires. Some images are fluid, and do not mean for their later readers what they meant in their sources. And still other images are specific, while some are general. Therefore, interpreting the images in a first-century apocalyptic work is the most difficult of one's tasks. But the key to this task in the case of John's Revelation is to hold fast to the images he himself interprets, since these must serve as the starting points for all others. Here is a listing of the ones John himself gives us:

1:17–18 The One like a son of man = Christ, who alone “was dead, and is . . . alive for ever and ever”

4. See 1 Cor 5:9–11.

Introduction

- 1:20 The seven golden lampstands = the seven churches to whom John is writing
- 1:20 The seven stars = seven angels (or messengers) of the seven churches
- 7:14 The numberless multitude = those who have come out of great tribulation and have washed their garments in the blood of the Lamb (= the redeemed people of God worldwide)
- 12:9 The great dragon = Satan
- 17:9 The seven heads of the beast = seven hills on which the woman sits (a clear allusion to the city of Rome, famous for its “sitting on seven hills”); but it also becomes a fluid image and thus = seven kings
- 17:18 The great harlot = the great city (on seven hills), and therefore Rome

It is especially important at this point to urge the reader to see the visions as wholes, and not allegorically to press all the details to have special meaning. After all, John is trying to say something by way of whole visions, and some details are simply either for dramatic effect (as in 6:12–14) or to add to the picture as a whole so that one cannot miss John’s own point.

Finally, with little doubt the most difficult hermeneutical issue for readers this late in time is to deal with the close tie John presents us between the temporal events he foresees and the eschatological context in which he places the whole picture. Modern readers must note well that for many of the events “prophesied” here, we are now “between the time” of the two events. That is, some of the temporal events here prophesied have already occurred, while we still await the final eschatological fulfillment.

Finally, as noted in the preface, the translation used throughout is the updated NIV that is to be published in 2011, to which I have prior access as a member of the translating committee, and which is used here by permission of the publishers.

REVELATION 1

The Introduction

The opening chapter of John's Revelation does what a good introduction to any book is expected to do: lay out the major players and the plot, while giving a few hints as to what will unfold along the way. John's introduction, which includes all of chapter 1, does exactly that, although at this point the plot is more difficult to discern than are the players. At the same time this opening chapter introduces some of the "apocalyptic furniture" that will become an essential part of the story. This is especially true of the "son of man" (v. 13)—imagery taken from Daniel 10—and of the churches themselves who appear as seven golden lampstands. But these are mild images in comparison with many that will follow, which are very often bizarre, as for example in 13:1, where we are introduced to the understandable image of "a beast," including the fact that it has heads and horns; however, a beast with "seven heads" and "ten horns" we do not know, and for the most part have considerable difficulty "seeing" even with the imagination.

What is striking about this introductory chapter, therefore, is how little one here encounters the kinds of imagery that the reader will meet later on with full force. Indeed, if one were to read only this chapter, plus the next two sections (chs. 2–3 and 4–5), one could feel quite at home, since most of its imagery falls into categories or images that are either understandable or at least manageable on the basis of one's prior knowledge of the Old Testament. In which case the occasional apocalyptic image is not especially startling. But all of that changes at chapter 6, and will continue so through chapter 17, with a single recurrence in the great battle of 19:11–21. Otherwise, from 18:1 to the end the imagery is very much like that of the Prophets, where "real" (as distinct from "bizarre") images become the general rule to the end of the book. All of this to say that ordinary readers, who have had no acquaintance at all with apocalyptic, should not presently sense they are stepping into

a whole new world. That will come eventually, but is somewhat rare at the beginning.

THE REVELATION AS APOCALYPSE AND PROPHECY (1:1–3)

¹The revelation from Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, ²who testifies to everything he saw—that is, the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ. ³Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and keep what is written in it, because the time is near.

John introduces his book with the word that is responsible for its name, *Apokalypsis*, which in Greek means simply “revelation.”¹ But in these opening sentences the reader is also faced with some of the idiosyncrasies of John’s style, which at times leaves the reader guessing as to John’s own intent. Thus he begins here with three Greek nouns, without modifiers or definite article. So did John intend “the revelation” or “a revelation”; and did he intend “revelation of Jesus Christ,” with Christ as the object of the revelation, or as the NIV has it, **the revelation from Jesus Christ**, with Christ as its source? The reason for going the latter route is to be found in the clause that follows. The significance of this small point lies with the rest of the book, since from here on Christ is the one who now gives the revelation that John here says **God gave him [Christ] to show his servants**. The term “servants” in this case is to be understood as a general, but especially meaningful, term for all believers; they are those who serve both God and others.

The content of what “God gave him to show his servants has to do with **what must soon take place**, a clause that anticipates the content of the rest of the book. Unfortunately, this brief clause has also served as the source of an considerable number of speculations about the end-times. But as the narrative that will soon unfold makes relatively clear, this phrase has less to do with the End as such, and mostly to do with the somber events awaiting the churches of John’s day. Himself an exile on Patmos, what John had come to see clearly as awaiting a new genera-

1. The Greek word itself, of course, has made its way into English as “apocalypse,” which by definition for most people means “any widespread destruction or disaster” (the fifth entry in the Random House *American College Dictionary*).

tion of believer's was the church's coming collision with the Empire over who should rightly be proclaimed as "Lord and Savior"—the Roman emperors or the humble Galilean whom they had crucified, but who their followers asserted had been raised from the dead.

But the question of whose servants these are, God's or Christ's, is not immediately clear in the Greek text, although the rest of the sentence seems to make it decisive that the "his" in every case has God as its antecedent. The NIV translators have tried to clarify the issue by making a new sentence out of John's second clause. Thus, **he made it known by sending his angel to his servant John**, where the initial "he" can refer only to God. At the outset, therefore, one learns that God "made" this revelation "known" to John by way of one of "his angels," one of the heavenly beings who throughout the book "shows" John these things, while John in turn **testifies** (= bears witness) to all that he has been shown, which John at this point puts in the active: **to everything he saw**.

The surprising moment comes at the end of this opening sentence, where the reader is told that what John "saw" was **the word of God and the testimony of Jesus**, a phrase that is as ambiguous in Greek as it is in English.² On the basis of its further occurrences in the book, the first phrase almost certainly means "the word *from* God" (= the word God spoke), which in this case, and in most instances throughout, primarily comes to John visually. But the second phrase is especially uncertain, since in what follows it can refer to either the testimony that *Jesus himself had borne* through his life, death, and resurrection or to the testimony that John had borne *about Jesus* that had brought about John's exile on Patmos. While either of these is a possible meaning in terms of the narrative that follows, both the abbreviated version that occurs in 6:9 ("the word of God and the testimony they had borne") and the present emphasis—which is not on the "life of Christ" per se but on John's witness to that life through this book—suggest that the intent here has to do with John's own witness that came to him from Christ himself by way of his angel.

In the final sentence John further describes this word/testimony as **the words of this prophecy**, language which, because of its primary meaning in English as "the foretelling or prediction of what is to come," can be misleading when used in the New Testament. To be sure, there is

2. This phrase recurs in 1:9, and is repeated in reverse order in 20:4.

a future aspect to this “prophecy,” but it is primarily a word spoken into the present situation of the seven churches; and its primary urgency is not about the *final* future event (recorded in chs. 20–22), but the *near* future for John and his readers. What makes John a truly Christian prophet is that from his position at the end of the first Christian century he clearly recognizes that the church and state are on a deadly collision course, wherein the church will suffer in the near future, but will know Christ’s triumph at the end (the “real” future). Thus at the outset John uses apocalyptic language that is intended to merge what is seen with what is spoken. That is, for him this was a “seen” word; but to communicate it to the church it had to become a written word, “the testimony” that Jesus Christ gave by way of one vision following another.

The concluding benediction is on both **the one who reads aloud** [in a culture where only about 15 percent of the people could read or write] **the words of this prophecy** and on **those who hear and keep what is written in it**—John’s version of being both “hearers and doers of the Word.” This reading/hearing phenomenon is made urgent by the final clause, **because the time is near**, which has created a different kind of urgency for later readers. But what John almost certainly intended is that the pending difficulties that the recipients of this Revelation were about to experience already stood at the door for *them*—as the unfolding of subsequent second- and third-century history actually bore out.

THE JOHANNINE PRESCRIPT (1:4–8)

⁴*John,*

To the seven churches in the province of Asia:

Grace and peace to you from him who is, and who was, and who is to come, and from the seven spirits³ before his throne, ⁵and from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.

To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, ⁶and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father—to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen.

⁷*“Look, he is coming with the clouds,”⁴*

3. That is, *the sevenfold Spirit*.

4. Daniel 7:13.

and "every eye will see him,
even those who pierced him";
and all peoples on earth "will mourn because of him."⁵
So shall it be! Amen.

⁸"I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, "who is,
and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty."

John follows his first introduction, which informed his readers that what follows is an *apocalypsis* from Jesus Christ, with a second, *formal* introduction that has all the earmarks of a first-century letter (vv. 4–5a). However, this is then joined by several features that mark off this Apocalypse as something unique in the history of literature: first (vv. 5b–6), a benediction with an appropriate "amen" at the end; second (v. 7), an invitation to the reader to be looking for Christ's coming, using well-known language from Daniel, Zechariah, and Genesis, which also concludes with an "amen"; and finally (v. 8), an announcement from "the Lord God," who is identified twice with language that emphasizes God's being the eternal God, thus the only God there is.

To get there John begins with the standard greeting of a first-century Greco-Roman letter: author, to the recipient, greetings. Since he has already identified himself (in v. 1), he now begins with the simple identifier **John**. The addressees are also put simply: **to the seven churches in the province of Asia**, who will be identified as to the specifics in verse 11. The salutation itself is very Pauline, and probably reflects his influence on the church at this early period. John has also kept the Pauline word order, "grace to you and peace," which, as elsewhere in the New Testament, is changed in translation to a more normal English order, **grace and peace to you**. "Grace" in this context refers to all the benefits that come from God to his people, while "peace" reflects the standard Jewish greeting, *shalom*. Thus the one benefit ("grace") comes *from* God, his goodness bestowed on his people; the other ("peace") is the resulting benefit that God's people experience in their relationships with one another—and thus is not here a reference to the internal peace of a "well-arranged heart."

At this point the salutation takes on a decidedly Trinitarian character, which is unique to this document in the New Testament, both in appearance as such (especially in their order of appearance) and the

5. Zechariah 12:10.

fact that only Christ is specifically named. Two matters are significant about John's order. First, by his sandwiching "the seven spirits" between the Father and the Son, John makes it clear that he intends this to be a *symbolic* reference to the Holy Spirit. The order itself makes any other interpretation so highly improbable as to be nearly impossible. Second, John places Christ in the final position deliberately because of our Lord's significance to the Revelation itself, which is made clear by the doxology that follows (vv. 5b–6). At the same time, each designation has its own significance.

John first identifies the "grace and peace" as coming from God the Father: **him who is, and who was, and who is to come**, a designation that will occur twice more in the book (1:8; 4:8). In 11:17 and 16:5 God is designated simply as "the One who is and who was," because both of these later references have to do with God coming in judgment. The designation itself is a deliberate play on the divine name found in Exodus 3:14, where with a play on the verb "to be" God reveals himself to Moses as "I am who I am" (or perhaps "I will be who I will be"). In John's narrative this becomes simply a means of identification; it will be elaborated further in verse 8.

The present Johannine designation of the Holy Spirit, **the seven spirits** [or "sevenfold Spirit"] **before his throne**, will occur three more times in the Revelation (3:1; 4:5; 5:6). It is used by John only when the perspective is that of heaven. When he refers to the Spirit's activity on earth John uses more traditional language, notably as the one responsible for his visions (see esp. 1:10; 4:2; 17:3; 21:10) and as the bearer of the prophetic word that is being spoken to the churches (as at the conclusion of the seven "letters" in chs. 2 and 3: "... what the Spirit says to the churches"; see also 14:13b and 19:10). The background to John's present usage lies (typically) with two passages from the Old Testament: Isaiah 11:2, where the Spirit of God is prophesied to rest on the Davidic Messiah, who is designated by six characteristics (in three doublets), which in the Septuagint became a sevenfold designation for the Spirit (Spirit of God, Spirit of wisdom, Spirit of understanding, etc.); and Zechariah 4:2–6, where Zechariah sees a golden lampstand with seven lamps on it and with two olive trees on either side (for a continuous supply of oil), which is explicitly interpreted by the prophet in terms of the Spirit. John now blends these two Old Testament moments as his symbolic way of speaking about the one Holy Spirit. These turn out to

be the first of some two hundred echoes of, or references to, John's and his readers' Bible, which we now know as the "Old Testament."

In especially Christian fashion John also includes the exalted Son of God as the source of the "grace and peace" he wishes for them. Thus he adds **and from Jesus Christ**, who is then identified by three further phrases, each of which is especially pertinent to the "Revelation" that follows. And just as the designations for God the Father and the Spirit are derived from the Old Testament, so are these for Christ—in this case from the very important Psalm 89, which begins (vv. 1–37) as a song of rapturous delight in the Davidic kingship but ends (vv. 38–51) as a bitter lament over its present demise (from the perspective of Ethan the Ezrahite).

First, Christ is **the faithful witness**, language derived from (but not reflecting the context of) Psalm 89:37, where "the moon" is called "the faithful witness in the sky." That language is now transferred to Christ. The word translated "witness" (*martyrus*), which eventually came to mean "martyr," is here a forensic term, and thus a live metaphor for John, reflecting Christ's having stood trial and then being sentenced to death. Indeed, this language will occur again only in 2:10 and 13, where it clearly refers to those who have borne witness "unto death." Thus "Antipas, my faithful witness, . . . was put to death in your city" (2:13). In turn these linguistic realities are what caused the Greek word to make its way into English not as a word for "witness" but as a reference to someone who is put to death by others "on behalf of any belief, principle, or cause."⁶

But, second, Christ is also **the firstborn from the dead**, language that echoes Psalm 89:27 ("I will appoint him to be my firstborn"), a passage that reflects the psalmist's confidence in the continuation of the Davidic kingship. Here is language that carried meaning for John's own readers but could get lost on contemporary ones, since it is based on the reality of primogeniture in these cultures, where the firstborn son was the primary heir, and thus had both position and privilege. The significance of this designation is to be found in Exodus 4:22, where Yahweh says to Pharaoh, "Israel is my firstborn son"—even though historically he was in fact second. Eventually this language was applied to David and his heirs (see esp. Ps 2:2 and 7, where the Davidic king

6. From the Random House *American College Dictionary*.

is addressed, “you are my Son”). For John, of course, Christ is not just God’s “firstborn” in terms of position, but is especially “the firstborn *from the dead*,” who thus through his own resurrection is the guarantor of the final resurrection of all who belong to him.

Third, and still echoing Psalm 89:27 (“the most exalted of the kings of the earth”), Christ is designated **the ruler of the kings of the earth**. Given the present difficulties of the church at the hands of the Empire, one can scarcely miss the essentially prophetic nature of this final appellation. For John’s own readers it may look as though Rome were the ultimate power on the earth, since she not only ruled the greater portion of the so-called known world, but will be recognized later in the book as having dominion over the various petty “kings.” These latter John regularly designates as “the kings of the earth”; they are the local provincial rulers, similar to those mentioned by Luke at the beginning of his narrative about John the Baptist and Jesus (3:1: “Pontius Pilate . . . governor of Judea, Herod the tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Traconitis, and Lysanius tetrarch of Abilene”). But not so, says John—they are not earth’s true rulers; rather, the One who was slain by the Romans had in fact been raised from the dead by God the Father, and he has thus assumed the role of “*ruler of the kings of the earth*,” whether they currently acknowledge it or not. Indeed, later on in 17:14 and 19:16 Christ will be called “King of kings, and Lord of lords.” The present designation is therefore John’s way of reminding his readers that the “king of kings” is not the Roman emperor; rather, he is the One who was crucified by an earlier emperor, but, having been raised from the dead, has attained his rightful place as “ruler of the kings of the earth.” As such the risen Christ is in fact ruler over all those who have set themselves in opposition to God’s rule.

The very thought of this threefold acclamation about Christ—that God’s “faithful witness” is also “the first born from the dead” and has thus assumed his role as “the ruler of the kings of the earth”—causes John to burst into doxology. But typical of Johannine theology, the doxology is not offered to God the Father, but to Christ himself!—the first of many such remarkable moments in this book. This in turn sets the stage for the especially “high Christology” that marks the Johannine corpus as a whole. Thus, and now especially for the sake of his readers, John acclaims Christ in two ways, both of which are intended to turn the focus onto his readers, many of whom are already undergoing

severe persecution. Christ, himself “the faithful witness,” is above all **him who loves us and has freed⁷ us from our sins by his blood**. It is of considerable interest, therefore, that John reminds the early believers in Asia Minor that, even though many are headed for persecution and martyrdom, they are nonetheless “free people” in Christ.

One should note in particular the present tense (“loves us”) followed by the past tense (“freed us from our sins”). It is of some interest that later scribes were disturbed by this apparent grammatical oddity and thus changed it to “who *loved* us and has freed us.” But these later scribes have missed John by several furlongs! For John’s readers, many of whom were already experiencing persecution, the first truth about Christ is that he (currently) “loves us” with a present love that gains its significance and power from the fact that he is the One who (already) “has freed us from our sins by his blood.”

All of this continues to be expressed in Exodus (now New Exodus) language. God’s own “firstborn” people, Israel, who became so by means of God’s sovereign election, have now been reconstituted through Christ and the Holy Spirit. But that is not all; the same Christ who “loves us and has freed us from our sins” is also the one who **has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father**. This somewhat ambiguous acclamation, using language borrowed directly from Exodus 19:6, probably means first of all that God’s newly formed people are a new kingdom, replacing the former Davidic kingdom. Redeemed by Christ’s sacrifice on their/our behalf, people like the recipients of this Revelation—and us—have been freed not from Egypt but from the power of sin itself, reconstituted to be God’s own newly formed people. At the same time they/we are to serve as his “priests” on behalf of others, especially those who continue to be slaves to sin and thus to the power of Satan.

This reminder sets John off in praise and acclamation, but he does so in a way that could seem quite ambiguous to the later reader since in English it is not at all clear as to whom the “to him” refers in the concluding acclamation, **to him be glory and power for ever and ever!** In order to remove the ambiguity the NIV has (rightly) put a dash before

7. Greek λύσαντι, which is read by all the early and most important witnesses, as well as by half of the later majority; perhaps as a mistake of hearing, the other half of the later witnesses have λούσαντι (“washed”), which had the misfortune of being present in the manuscript that stood behind the KJV.

the “to him,” while the NJB reads “to him, then,” making sure the reader recognizes that the pronoun “him” here refers to Christ, not to God the Father. That this is John’s own intent is made certain by his use of the personal pronoun (“to him”) rather than the relative pronoun (“to whom”), which could only refer to the Father. The significance of this for the later reader is the especially high Christology that is *assumed* in this doxology, which is directed from beginning to end to Christ himself, the one “who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood.”

Furthermore, the praise that is due him (Christ) is that regularly offered to God the Father: “glory and power.” “Glory” is one of those biblical words that is so common that many, if not most, readers simply go on to what comes next. But if “glory” is sometimes an elusive word, difficult to pin down with precision, it is the word used in the Old Testament primarily to offer praise to the eternal God. At the very outset of the Apocalypse, John sets it out as the primary word of doxology now afforded to Christ. And such “glory” attributed to God is frequently accompanied by recognition and acclamation of his “power”; thus David sings of Yahweh, “Yours, LORD, is the greatness and *the power* and *the glory* and the majesty and the splendor” (1 Chr 29:11). For John the acclamation of such “glory and power” is now directed toward the Son, “the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.” What else, then, could John do but conclude with a resounding **Amen!**, which means something like “so it is and shall forever be.”

What happens next is even more surprising. One might well assume the “amen” at the end of verse 6 is to mark the end of the salutation as such, which in a sense it was undoubtedly intended to do. But before John moves on to identify himself and his readers, he bursts into acclamation. First (v. 7), John celebrates the coming of Christ, with special emphasis directed toward those who do not know him; and second (v. 8), he sets all of this out by way of divine affirmation. In so doing, he in the first instance echoes several moments from the Old Testament Prophets; then, second, he pronounces God the Father’s own stamp of approval on what John is about to record for the sake of his reader and hearers.

Thus John turns from doxology (vv. 5–6) to acclamation. Citing first a well-known passage from Daniel 7:13 and then reworking a passage from Zechariah (12:10) that had come to be understood as messi-

anic, John acclaims Christ's second coming up front in his Apocalypse. But his immediate interest is not on the salvation-of-God's-people aspect of that coming, but on its affect on those who do *not* know him. Thus in the language of Daniel he first announces Christ's coming: **Look, he is coming with the clouds**, language that suggests both his coming from the heavenly realm and doing so with great power. Then picking up from Zechariah, John adds, **and every eye will see him**. His reason for citing the Zechariah passage is found in the next line, having to do with the believers' enemies, especially the Romans who were ultimately responsible for the crucifixion itself. That is, even though Jesus had been betrayed by his own people, he had in fact been turned over to the Romans for crucifixion, as one more messianic pretender. Thus John goes on with the Zechariah passage: among those who will see him are **even those who pierced him**, an indirect allusion to Rome's implication in the crucifixion that could scarcely have been missed by John's original readers.

John then concludes the citation from Zechariah by adding his own, much broader, application to the prophetic text. What in Zechariah was a prophetic word about the mourning *in Jerusalem* over the one who had been slain is made *universal* in John: **all peoples on earth "will mourn because of him."** It is not altogether clear what was intended by this extension of Zechariah's prophecy, but most likely it is in anticipation of what it will be like for the Romans, who were responsible for the crucifixion, as well as for all others, when Christ appears again at what the later church has come to call his "second coming." Thus this citation stands in direct contrast to the doxology in verses 5b–6. The coming of the one whose death "freed us from our sins" will at the same time bring great mourning to those responsible for it—a reality that is so certain, and thus anticipated, that John bursts out with the double acclamation, "Yes! Amen!," which the NIV rendered, **So shall it be! Amen!**

The final word, however, is not John's, but God's. Thus this remarkable introduction to the letters and visions that follow is punctuated by a divine word from **the Lord God**. First, God announces himself as the One who embraces all that language could possibly express, **the Alpha and Omega** (in English, "the A to Z"), and thus everything in between. Whatever human language could possibly express regarding God and all reality, the God who is speaking to John and thus standing behind this Apocalypse is the eternal, all-embracing God, who stands