

CONCORDIA POPULAR COMMENTARY

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# REVELATION

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LOUIS A. BRIGHTON



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# EDITORS' PREFACE

What may a reader expect from the Concordia Popular Commentary?

This commentary series brings faithful Christian Bible scholarship to the people. Based on the Concordia Commentary series, its goals are similar: to help Christians understand and talk about God's Word with greater clarity, understanding, and faithfulness to the divine intent of the text.

The commentaries in this popular commentary series are designed for Christians that have an intermediate-level familiarity with Scripture and with the teachings of historic Christianity, especially those of the Lutheran Church. These volumes offer the insights of the scholarly Concordia Commentary series without the need to know foreign languages like Greek, Hebrew, and Aramaic. The central points from the scholarly series remain the same. Some differences include the removal of foreign-language textual notes. Footnote references and extensive interaction with certain technical, academic sources also have been removed. If the reader wishes to consult a list of sources, he or she is encouraged to look at the bibliography in the corresponding Concordia Commentary volume.

Jesus Christ is the content of the scriptural testimony. The Lord himself has said, "The Scriptures ... testify to me" (Jn 5:39). The message of the Scriptures is the Good News of God's work to reconcile the world to himself through the life, death, resurrection, ascension, and everlasting session of Jesus Christ at the right hand of God the Father. Under the guidance of the same Spirit who inspired the writing of the Scriptures, these commentaries seek to find in every passage of every canonical book "that which promotes Christ" (as Martin Luther's hermeneutic is often described). They are Christ-centered, "Christological" commentaries.

Even as the God of the Gospel came into this world in Jesus Christ (the Word in human flesh), the scriptural Gospel has been given to and through the people of God, for the benefit of all humanity. God did not intend his Scriptures to have a life separated from the church. He gave them through servants of his choosing: prophets, sages, evangelists, and apostles. He gave them to the church and through the church for admonition and comfort, for preaching and teaching. The living context of Scripture is always the church, where the Lord's ministry of preaching, baptizing, forgiving sins, teaching, and celebrating the Lord's Supper continues. This series remains aware of the close union of Scripture and church, of Word and Sacraments, a result of God taking up human flesh in Christ.

This Gospel Word of God creates a unity among all those in whom it works the obedience of faith and who confess the truth of God revealed in it. This is the unity of the one holy Christian and apostolic church, which extends through world history. The church is to be found wherever the marks of the church are present: the Gospel in the Word and the Sacraments. These have been proclaimed, confessed, and celebrated in many different cultures and are in no way limited or especially attached to any single culture or people. These commentaries seek to promote concord, in the best sense of the terms, to be confessional, ecumenical, and “catholic” (universally Christian).

All of those convictions and characteristics describe the theological heritage of Martin Luther and of the confessors who subscribe to the *Book of Concord* (1580)—those who have come to be known as Lutherans. The editors and authors forthrightly confess their subscription to the doctrinal exposition of Scripture in the *Book of Concord*. As the publishing arm of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, Concordia Publishing House is bound to doctrinal agreement with the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions and seeks to herald the true Christian doctrine to the ends of the earth.

As they unfold the scriptural testimony to Jesus Christ, these commentaries talk about Law and Gospel. These are the overarching doctrines of the Bible. Understanding them in their proper distinction and relationship to one another is a key for understanding the self-revelation of God and his plan of salvation in Jesus Christ. God’s Law condemns our sin, and his Gospel forgives our sin. However, Law and Gospel do not always appear simply labeled as such in Scripture. The language in Scripture is multicolored, with many and rich hues. A Bible passage may express Law and Gospel by the themes of the fallen creation and the new creation in Christ; darkness and light; death and life; wandering and the promised land; exile and return; ignorance and wisdom; demon possession and the kingdom of God; sickness and healing; being lost and then being found; guilt and righteousness; flesh and Spirit; fear and joy; hunger and feast; or Babylon and the new Jerusalem. But the common element is God’s gracious work of restoring fallen humanity through the Gospel of his Son. This stress on the Gospel proclamation makes these commentaries, in the proper sense, evangelical.

Scripture is God’s vehicle for communicating the Gospel. The editors and authors accept without reservation that the canonical books of the Old and New Testaments are, in their entirety, the inspired, infallible, and inerrant Word of God. The triune God is the ultimate author of the Bible, and the Holy Spirit breathed forth every word in the original Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek through

the holy authors in a supernatural process of divine inspiration. This is much more profound than the common use of “inspired” to describe a person who is moved by a poignant event in life, a great idea, a brilliant speaker, and so on. God is the one who inspired the authors of Scripture. He worked through those men and achieved his goal in every respect, so that the Scriptures are God’s Word, without blemish, error, or falsehood.

Yet in the mysterious process by which the Scriptures were divinely inspired (e.g., 2 Tim 3:16; 2 Pet 1:21), God made use of the human faculties, knowledge, interests, and styles of the biblical writers, whose individual books surely are marked by distinctive features. At the same time, the canon of Scripture has its own inner unity, and each passage must be understood in harmony with the larger context of the whole. This commentary series pays heed to the smallest of textual details because of its acceptance of plenary and verbal inspiration.

Authors in this series interpret each text in accord with the analogy of faith, following the principle that Scripture interprets Scripture. Passages that are clearer, such as when Jesus explains a parable, guide the interpretation of passages that are not as transparent, such as the parable itself. One always looks first at the clear passages for the meaning and intent of the Lord. One then looks to related passages that have similar themes and language. Obscure passages should never be interpreted in a way that conflicts with well-understood passages. Doctrine is established by the plain sense of clear passages. Literal passages include Mt 28:19–20 and the Lord’s Words instituting the Lord’s Supper in Mt 26, Mk 14, Lk 22, and 1 Cor 11. Even though “this is my body” may not be captured by human reason, nevertheless, the passage has Jesus, the elements, and the congregation of disciples. That is as real as the pastor, the elements, and today’s congregation.

Scripture passages do not exist in isolation. One can find the literal sense of a difficult passage in a clearer parallel text, a passage where prophecy is fulfilled, or the accumulated evidence concerning a topic in Scripture. The Bible is replete with passages covering all aspects of human life from before birth to after death, from the house of worship to the outhouse. No one can find a situation so unique or so bad into which a loving, forgiving God will not enter. God really means “all nations.” God wants to save you, and his Word speaks to where you are in life.

Sometimes one can find both a literal meaning and an additional, spiritual meaning called the “mystical sense.” This spiritual meaning always rests on and connects with the literal sense, as orthodox Lutheran theologians like Johann Gerhard describe. There may indeed be ways of applying Scripture to oneself, to cultural changes, and to political events. For example, a Christian identifies the sin of the prodigal son with his own and therefore hears the forgiveness of the gracious, loving father as God’s forgiveness to him. The parable is more than a mere story. It plays a vital role in the application of Law and Gospel. Figures of

speech, allegory, morality, and heavenly revelation all connect with this spiritual sense. Yet this sense can be abused, a caution that Lutheran biblical interpretation has always sounded.

Such application may be very helpful, for example, in cross-cultural communication. After the fall of Rome and the huge upheaval of migrant nations with different languages, the Church relied heavily on allegory to help Germanic and Slavic peoples to identify with the literal meaning of Scripture using ideas familiar to them. Allegory unfortunately became the dominant method of interpretation and got separated from the literal sense. People began to read all kinds of meaning into Scripture, which is contrary to God's intent.

In many passages one can see a moral sense where the literal meaning of a passage also establishes a universal moral principle revealed by God to curb the unrighteous, mirror brightly our sin, and guide our steps. Additionally, one may encounter a heavenly sense in some passages that speaks not only to how God literally deals with us here and now, but also to heavenly realities that pass beyond human understanding and to our eternal home with God. All these other senses, as Gerhard describes in Topic II, On the Interpretation of Scripture, in his 1610 *Loci Theologici* and in Topic IV, On Christ, in the 1625 *Exegesis*, rest on the fundamental, literal sense.

The authors and editors stand in the exegetical tradition of Martin Luther and the other Lutheran reformers, who in turn stand in continuity with faithful theologians of the early and medieval church. All remain rooted in the hermeneutics of the Scriptures themselves (evident, for example, by how the New Testament interprets the Old). This method, practiced also by many non-Lutherans, includes (1) interpreting Scripture with Scripture in harmony with the whole of Christian doctrine revealed in the Word; (2) giving utmost attention to the grammar of the original language of the text; (3) seeking to discern the intended meaning of the text, the "plain" or "literal" sense as it connects to different literary genres and figures of speech; (4) drawing on linguistics, archaeology, literature, philosophy, history, and other fields as they help one understand the text; (5) considering the history of the church's interpretation; (6) applying the text as authoritative also for today's interpreter, and (7) above all, seeing the present application and fulfillment of the text in terms of Jesus Christ and his corporate church; upholding the Word, Baptism, and the Supper as the means through which Christ imparts salvation today; and affirming the inauguration, already now, of the eternal benefits of that salvation that is yet to come.

# AUTHOR'S PREFACE

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The particular study of Revelation has been a lifelong vocation and pursuit. It began early in my pastoral ministry, in the 1950s in London, England, while ministering to a beloved adopted mother in Christ. On her deathbed she asked me to read to her the words of Rev 7:9–17. As I did so from the King James Version, she recited them along with me from memory. At the conclusion of saying together these beautiful words, she said that tonight or tomorrow she would be with those blessed saints in heaven, because “I also have washed myself in the blood of the Lamb.” I had read those words before, but I had never focused my attention and faith on them. Nor had I given any careful attention to Revelation in my personal study of the Bible. But that aged saint of God, who closed her eyes in death by looking at her Savior through these words in Revelation, motivated me to begin a lifelong study of this last book of the Bible. For as these words of Revelation 7 were a fitting conclusion of comfort for this blessed saint as she waited for her Lord to come, they now became for me a beginning of an understanding that Revelation is the conclusion of the entire Bible. Thus began my earnest study of it.

Throughout the years, many people have been a part of my study of Revelation through guidance, encouragement, and prayers. I can mention only a few here by name, though there are many more. Those who have provided guidance in formal study in academia include Drs. Martin H. Franzmann, William F. Arndt, and Paul M. Bretscher, professors of exegetical theology at Concordia Seminary in St. Louis, Missouri, and Dr. Robert F. O’Toole, S.J., professor of New Testament in the School of Theological Studies at Saint Louis University. Those who have furnished encouragement and prayers include my beloved wife of over fifty years, Mary Belle, and colleagues in ministry in the parish such as Rev. E. George Pearce and Rev. Ralph F. Fischer, and colleagues in academic life such as Dr. L. Dean Hempelmann, and especially the students at Concordia Seminary, who, for over twenty-five years in the classroom, were an inspiration and a prayerful encouragement to continue in the awesome task of the study of Revelation and of applying its message to the pastoral ministry. It is to these students in particular that I dedicate this humble effort of a commentary on Revelation.

During the many years of study and preparation and all through the writing of this commentary, it has been my prayer that if, by the grace of God, this undertaking should be completed, it would be for the praise of God and for the continued witness to the glory of the exalted Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God. Now at its conclusion, my prayerful hope is that through this effort all the

readers will experience what I received by way of that sainted lady as she waited for her Lord Christ: a purpose for the study of this last book of the Bible and a love of its message. For Revelation is the last word from Jesus Christ until he comes at the End to receive all who put their hope in him as their Savior and Lord.

# PRINCIPAL ABBREVIATIONS

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## BOOKS OF THE BIBLE

Gen	2 Ki	Is	Nah	Rom	Titus
Ex	1 Chr	Jer	Hab	1 Cor	Philemon
Lev	2 Chr	Lam	Zeph	2 Cor	Heb
Num	Ezra	Ezek	Hag	Gal	James
Deut	Neh	Dan	Zech	Eph	1 Pet
Josh	Esth	Hos	Mal	Phil	2 Pet
Judg	Job	Joel	Mt	Col	1 Jn
Ruth	Ps (pl. Pss)	Amos	Mk	1 Thess	2 Jn
1 Sam	Prov	Obad	Lk	2 Thess	3 Jn
2 Sam	Eccl	Jonah	Jn	1 Tim	Jude
1 Ki	Song	Micah	Acts	2 Tim	Rev

## BOOKS OF THE APOCRYPHA

1 Esdras	Judith	Sirach	Add Dan	Manasseh
2 Esdras	Add Esth	Bar	Sus	1 Macc
Tobit	Wisdom	Ep Jer	Bel	2 Macc

## OTHER ABBREVIATIONS

ET English translation (Shows differences in verse numbers between the Greek text and common English translations.)

# INTRODUCTION

## THE SIGNIFICANCE OF REVELATION

### THE LAST BOOK OF THE BIBLE

Even if the book of Revelation was not written last, the church was led to place it at the end of the canon to show it as the completion of God's revelation. *Nothing further would be revealed* by God until the second coming of Jesus Christ. Revelation is thus the culmination of the entire story of salvation contained in the Bible, for it draws all of revelation, both prophetic and apostolic, to its final goal: the exalted reign of Jesus Christ as King of kings and Lord of lords (19:11–16) and the fulfillment of the promise of the new heaven and earth (21:1).

As the last book of the Bible and the completion of God's revelation to his church, the book of Revelation is the lens through which the entire Scripture is to be viewed. *Revelation reveals and confirms that Christ was prophetically promised and that his incarnation, death, and resurrection happened so that God's creation could be restored to its original glory and righteousness.* In addition, as the last book, Revelation serves as a *final confirmation* of the divine truth and origin of God's spoken and written Word. This points to the *urgency* of the last times, in which all things will be brought to an end—an urgency which reminds the Christian to hold fast to the faith (2:10) and which encourages the church to complete her mission (10:11).

### THE CHRISTOLOGICAL TESTIMONY OF REVELATION

All of the Scriptures testify to Christ (Jn 5:39). The thesis and chief emphasis of this commentary's exposition is that the book of Revelation is a profound theological work whose heart and center is *Christology*.

The Christology of Revelation is surely based on the saving work of Christ. The saving work of Christ is implicit throughout Revelation as it focuses on the exalted reign of Christ, which exaltation resulted from his death and resurrection. Because of his death and resurrection and since his ascension, the Lord Christ, in his state of exaltation, is Lord over all. Revelation everywhere assumes that the meritorious work of Christ (his humiliation and vicarious atonement) has already taken place, and it assumes that the reader knows and trusts that work. While the four gospels narrate the incarnation, humiliation, and resurrection of Jesus, Revelation pictures the exaltation of Christ and what this exalted reign of Christ means for the church. Where the gospels end at the resurrection and ascension of Christ, Revelation picks up and continues the story from the ascension to the second coming of the Lord—and into eternity. Revelation also demonstrates (as does the Acts of the Apostles) how the church

carries on the mission of Christ in the world, for it was *the ascended and exalted Lord* who worked by the Spirit for and through the apostles (Acts 2:47).

The Christology of Revelation is rich and broad in its scope. Throughout the book Jesus Christ is presented as the exalted Son of Man (Revelation 1), the Lamb of God (Revelation 5), the Lord of the church (Revelation 2–3; 22), the Judge of the world (Revelation 19), the everlasting God (22:12–13), the Word of God (19:13), and the “source” of the creation of God, the new heaven and earth (3:14; cf. 21:1–22:5). Revelation presents a rich lode, the mining of which extends and deepens the Christology of the NT, and in particular that of John’s gospel.

### **REVELATION: A CELEBRATION OF THE SAINTS**

This revelation of the Lamb, slain and exalted, evokes from the saints in heaven (often joined by the angels) and the saints on earth a great hymn of praise to God and the Lamb. The great acclamation begins to swell in Revelation 4 and 5, “Worthy is the Lamb who was slain to receive [all] the power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and blessing” (5:12). Such heavenly praise and worship is first given to God the Father (4:11), then to both God the Father and God the Son, the Lamb (5:13).

This celebrating worship is all the more striking when it is viewed in contrast to the terrible suffering and warfare that God’s people on earth endure. In fact, it seems that the more the church on earth suffers, the more confidently and joyously do God’s people sing in faith and hope of Jesus Christ (15:1–4). Throughout Revelation, interwoven with all the tribulations depicted, there is heard the hymn of victory. This celebration begins before the throne of God and before the Lamb in chapters 4 and 5 and continues throughout the prophecy, reaching its triumphant crescendo at the second coming of Jesus Christ (19:1–8). Surely part of the purpose and uplifting effect of Revelation is to move the Christian to voice the prayer, “Come now, Lord Jesus” (22:20), and to join all the saints in this celebration and worship of Jesus Christ.

## **THE CHARACTER OF REVELATION**

### **REVELATION, A PROPHETIC APOCALYPSE**

The name of the book comes from its first verse. The Greek word usually translated “revelation” has also been transliterated into English as “apocalypse,” from which comes the name of a certain genre of literature, “apocalyptic literature.” Having roots in the prophetic books of the OT, apocalyptic literature flourished (in both Jewish and Christian contexts) from around 200 BC to AD 300. It is generally agreed that apocalyptic is a kind of literature in which divine secrets are revealed, usually by heavenly angelic figures, to a human recipient in a historical setting. There is also general agreement as to the chief characteristics of apocalyptic literature, among which are the following. Apocalyptic deals mostly with *eschatology*, the end times. It often uses *symbolic language* to convey its message. Its view of life in this world (under God’s ultimate sovereignty)

pictures the human race and its history in a *warfare between good and evil* in which there is no neutrality. Most often the message is received by the author *through angelic, heavenly figures* who appeared in *visions*.

In the OT, Jacob (Genesis 28), Joseph (Genesis 40–41), Moses (Exodus 24) and the later prophets (e.g., Isaiah 6) were among those given to see heavenly and/or future things. Especially the visions described in Isaiah 24–27; Ezekiel 1–3; 38–39; Joel; Daniel 7–12; and Zechariah exhibit some of the characteristics prominent in the genre of apocalyptic literature. Important Jewish apocalypses outside the OT are 1 Enoch, the Book of Jubilees, 4 Ezra, the Assumption of Moses, 2 Baruch, the Apocalypse of Abraham, and the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs. Among Christian apocalypses are the Ascension of Isaiah (appended to the Jewish-Christian Martyrdom of Isaiah), the Shepherd of Hermas (not totally apocalyptic), the Apocalypse of Peter, and the Apocalypse of Paul. This body of literature is important for interpreting Revelation, because Revelation is composed in the apocalyptic literary genre and shares much common imagery and thought with these other works.

Revelation can be viewed in the tradition of apocalyptic literature and compared to other apocalypses—OT, Jewish, or Christian. But there are characteristics of Revelation that also set it apart. Most obviously, it is *a true revelation of the true God*. The author identifies himself quite clearly and does not hide under the assumed identity of a previously known person. He names himself John both at the beginning and at the end of his work (1:1, 4, 9; 22:8), and he takes for granted that his hearers know who he is (1:9–11). Secondly, the book is *Christocentric*, not just theocentric. The chief figure in Revelation, around whom everything revolves and from whom everything originates, is Jesus Christ. While the person of Christ acts under the authority of God the Father and frequently uses angels to mediate the revelation, it is quite clear that he dominates the entire prophetic message from beginning to end (1:1; 22:20). Third, Revelation pictures the people of God on earth playing an important role as they represent God and his Christ in the battle between righteousness and evil.

Above all, Revelation is *prophetic* in intention. The author of Revelation is conscious of his role as a prophet, for he calls his work a “prophecy” (1:3; 22:7, 10, 18, 19). He does so because he views his work, and his role in that work, in the OT prophetic tradition (22:6, 18–19). His purpose is not primarily to reveal secrets to God’s people, but rather to call them to repentance and faith, and to worship—to the blessedness of faithful service in the confidence of God’s love and care. The special emphases of Revelation within the apocalyptic tradition can be summed up in these words: “Blessed is the one who reads and [blessed are] those who hear the words of this prophecy and who keep the things written in it, for the time is near” (1:3; see also 22:12–21).

## THE PURPOSE OF REVELATION

John would have his readers take to heart the words of the prophecy, for the time is near (1:3). The time is near for the fulfillment of what is described, because the Lord Christ is coming quickly (22:6–7). The purpose of the message of Revelation is therefore best summed up in this word: *preparation*. The hearer and reader are *to be ready* for what is to come to pass. It is a readiness that comes about through hearing the message. Such preparation consists of baptismal sealing (7:2–3), of being washed in the blood of the Lamb (1:5; 7:9, 13–14; 19:13; 22:14) and through such cleansing to stand ready for the coming of Christ (22:12). *As the Christian stands prepared for the coming Lord, he is encouraged in the hope of his faith (2:10) and is inspired for the mission that Christ has given to his church on earth (10:11).*

Revelation ends with the promise that the Lord Jesus is coming quickly, and with John's prayerful response, "Amen, come now, Lord Jesus" (22:20).. *Thus the explicit goal of Revelation is to lift up to God this prayer. The Spirit (through the message of Revelation) leads God's people to voice this prayer now and until it is answered.* This is the prayer that not only sums up all for which the church prays (see 6:9–11) but also testifies to the longing of the Christian heart to be in the presence of God's holiness and glory in heaven.

As the Spirit led Simeon to pray for departure into the presence of God after he had seen the Lord's Christ (Lk 2:28–32), so the Spirit now moves the believer to pray in response to all that he has witnessed through the biblical revelation of God—which revelation is now concluded in the last book of the Bible. Simeon, in the presence of the Word Incarnate, prayed the *Nunc Dimittis*, and was moved by the Spirit to witness to others about the Christ (Lk 2:33–35). So likewise the hearer of Revelation is given the full biblical revelation from above; hence, he prays this prayer, "Amen, come now, Lord Jesus" (Rev 22:20), and he is moved by the Spirit to witness.

In short, *the more the Christian is confident by faith—strengthened through Word and Sacrament—of going to heaven because of the merits of Christ, the more the Spirit moves the believer to desire to enter heaven. And the more the Christian desires the glory of God in heaven, the more the Spirit moves him to witness through this longing hope of faith.* This too is part of the purpose of Revelation: to comfort and encourage the worshipping Christian to pray this prayer of longing and to witness to the world.

## THE MESSAGE OF REVELATION

The message of Revelation reveals two ongoing phenomena: the terrifying sufferings and horror on earth, and the reign of Jesus Christ as Lord in his heavenly exalted glory. As these two phenomena are described, God's people on earth are encouraged to cling in hopeful faith to the eternal heavenly glory that beckons them in Christ. In turn they also are strengthened and encouraged for the work of Christ's mission on earth. These tribulations and sufferings

demonstrate God's wrath and judgment for the purpose of motivating the godless to repentance (16:1, 8–11). God's own people also experience these same sufferings and plagues, for the dragon, Satan, uses these sufferings and plagues in his attempt to destroy the church and her witness (12:13–13:18).

Thus an anomaly is set up. While mankind's sin and rebellion against God prompt all the tribulations and sufferings (6:1–11), the dragon uses them and adds to them as he tries to destroy the Gospel witness of the church (11:7–10). In his permissive will, God lets the dragon do this, so that all these sufferings work together to show his anger and judgment, which aim to bring the human race to repentance before it is too late. For the Christian the sufferings serve both as a reminder of God's judgment against all sin, but especially as opportunities to witness to the sufferings and death of Christ.

While much of the prophetic message of Revelation reflects a negative view of the human race and its history, interspersed throughout the book are beautiful pictures of God's glory in heaven and Christ's exalted glory, and of the saints before God's heavenly throne. In fact, the Bible's most beautiful pictures of heaven are in Revelation. Against the backdrop of all the doom and darkness and horror portrayed in Revelation, these visions of the heavenly glory stand out all the more in bold relief. Revelation uses the visions of doom and horror to show that all human history is heading to a certain and terrifying end in the judgment of God. Despite all human efforts and ambitions, human life here on earth in this present age will *not* improve into a happy state. Mankind can do nothing to avert this coming doom, the punishment of God.

Into this description of despair, which leads only to the abyss of hell (Revelation 17–18; 20:7–10), there are interjected the glorious pictures of God's hope and plan for the human race, the peace and righteousness of Christ which have come to believers already now and which will be consummated in the resurrection and the new heaven and earth (20:11–15; 21:1). Therefore the visions of heaven inspire Christians *to gaze steadily in faith at Christ and the glory that awaits them and to witness to the victory of Christ*. Indeed, sufferings can even facilitate witnessing to the Gospel (15:2–4). Meanwhile, through it all the Christian continually prays, "Amen, come now, Lord Jesus" (22:20) confident of the Lord's promise, "Yes, I am coming quickly" (22:20; see also 6:9–11).

Thus *the overarching and dominating theme of Revelation is the unveiling of Christ in his exalted glory as the reigning Lord. Before the eyes of the assembled worshiping Christians, the divine presence and the glory of the Savior and Lord is revealed*. The Lord Christ, because of his exalted enthronement at the right of God, by right of his death and resurrection (5:1–14), now rules everything for the sake of his church on earth. This is the faith and comfort of the church: her Lord rules over all history, all events, over sin and evil, the devil, suffering and death and hell. He governs everything so that the church can carry out the

mission given to her by God (10:1–11:19). When that mission is completed, then the Lord Christ will come to claim his bride (19:5–16).

### THE STRUCTURE OF REVELATION

Revelation is made up of three parts: an introduction (1:1–3:22), the prophetic message proper (4:1–22:5), and an epilogue (22:6–21).

The introduction consists of a prologue (1:1–8), a description of John's commissioning to write the book (1:9–20), and the seven letters to the seven churches (2:1–3:22). The seven letters are not a part of the prophetic message per se but rather serve to prepare the hearer for reception of the message by calling the churches to repentance.

The second part, the prophetic message, is by far the largest section of Revelation (4:1–22:5). The prophetic message is introduced by a vision of God's throne and glory in heaven, together with angels and the saints of God, and of the exaltation of the victorious Christ, depicted as a Lamb (4:1–5:14). *This vision of God's heavenly glory and of the exaltation of the Lamb not only introduces the prophetic message of Revelation but also dominates and controls it.* This vision establishes this truth in the context of which *everything* is to be seen and heard: Jesus Christ, the Lamb who was slain, is alive and reigns! *The victory has been won! Salvation has been accomplished!* Believers in heaven and on earth can join in the triumphal song. Everything in the book that follows is normed by the reassurance of this opening vision.

The prophecy itself contains three visions of events taking place on earth. Each vision covers the same time period: from the first advent of Christ (specifically, his ascension) up to his second coming at the end of this present world. Moreover, each vision has seven scenes.

The first sevenfold vision (6:1–8:5) is introduced by the opening of the seven seals of the scroll which Christ the Lamb had received in the heavenly vision of God's glory (5:6–7). The opening of the seals introduces the scenes of this vision. The first five scenes, the four horsemen and the martyred souls beneath God's altar (6:1–11), symbolize events happening concurrently from the ascension of Christ up to the End, and they refer to the sufferings that humankind perpetrates upon itself—from which also Christians suffer. The opening of the sixth seal pictures the End, with the destruction of the present universe and the terror that this instills (6:12–17). Before the seventh seal is opened, there is an interlude in which John sees God's people on earth (pictured as the 144,000) sealed for divine protection. They are the church militant (7:1–8). In this interlude John next sees the saints who are in heaven because of the blood of the Lamb, now at peace; they are the church triumphant (7:9–17). The opening of the seventh seal leads the hearer into the second sevenfold vision.

The second sevenfold vision is introduced by seven angels with trumpets. As each angel in turn blows a trumpet, a scene appears. The first four scenes display natural disasters which plague the human race all during the time

period from the ascension of Jesus up to the End (8:6–13). The fifth trumpet-angel introduces the terrifying scene of demons from the abyss who afflict unbelieving mankind (9:1–12). The sixth scene shows the gathering of an evil host that will be unleashed on humanity just before the End (9:13–21). This is the first of three glimpses that John sees of what is called Armageddon in 16:16 and the battle of Gog and Magog in 20:8. As in the first sevenfold vision, there is an interlude between the sixth and seventh scenes. In this interlude (10:1–11:14) John sees a mighty angel from heaven commissioning him (and the church) to proclaim the message of God to all peoples (10:1–11), and then, by way of the two witnesses (11:1–14), John sees the church carrying out this mission. Then the seventh trumpet-angel introduces the last scene in this second vision. Like the sixth scene of the first sevenfold vision, this seventh scene displays again the end of this world, but this time not the world's destruction, but rather the joy that the End brings to God's people (11:15–19).

Before the third sevenfold vision of events on earth is ushered in, there is presented a vision of the cosmic war between God and the dragon (12:1–14:20). *This cosmic vision is the heart of Revelation, for it reveals the cause of all the tribulations and sufferings on earth and the final triumph of Christ's church.* The vision is made up of the symbols of the woman with Child and the dragon (12:1–18), the beasts of the dragon (13:1–18), and the defeat of the dragon and the beasts, together with the end of this world (14:1–20). When the Child of the woman is taken to heaven, the dragon (Satan) and his angels are cast out of heaven. Unable to destroy the woman (the church), the dragon conjures up the two beasts, which war against the woman throughout the time period from the ascension up to the present world's end. The cosmic vision concludes then with the defeat of the evil forces of the dragon and with the victory song of the 144,000 at the End, which this time is pictured as a great harvest.

The third and final sevenfold vision of events on earth is introduced by the seven censer-angels (15:1–16:21). As each angel pours out his censer on the earth, a scene is presented. The first five scenes refer to God's anger poured out on the human race in the form of various plagues (15:1–16:11). When John sees the sixth scene, introduced by the sixth censer-angel, he receives a second view of the last battle before the End, the battle now called Armageddon (16:12–16). The seventh scene again brings John to the End (16:17–21).

The remainder of the prophetic message is a lengthy conclusion which describes the end of this world in greater detail and the new heaven and earth (17:1–22:5). Chapters 17 and 18 describe the evil forces of the dragon (Babylon—the harlot and the beast) in graphic detail, and then their judgment and destruction. Chapter 19 depicts the second coming of Jesus Christ and the celebration of God's saints. Revelation 20 details the binding, overthrow, and final judgment of Satan by means of the depiction of the millennium and the battle of Gog and Magog—the last battle—together with reference to the two

resurrections and the judgment of the human race. The prophecy climaxes with a description of the new heaven and earth and with the heavenly city Jerusalem (21:1–22:5).

Revelation then concludes with the epilogue (22:6–21). See further the outline which forms the table of contents.

## THE AUTHOR AND WRITING OF REVELATION

### THE AUTHOR

The author calls himself “John” (1:1, 4, 9; 22:8), but he nowhere indicates *which* John he might be. In the NT there are three well-known persons named John: John the Baptist, John Mark, and the apostle John, who was the son of Zebedee and the brother of James. Conceivably the author of Revelation could be any of the first three, or even another John not mentioned in the NT. The author assumed that his hearers would know who he was.

The traditional view from the church fathers of the second and third centuries is that the author is John the son of Zebedee, one of the twelve disciples. Irenaeus, a Syrian father who was bishop of Lyons, testifies in his Greek work *Against Heresies* that John the Lord’s disciple was the author of Revelation. He furthermore testifies that it was near the end of the reign of the Roman emperor Domitian that Revelation was written. Irenaeus most likely received this information from Polycarp, at whose feet he sat as a young man. Polycarp (ca. 60–ca. 155) was bishop of Smyrna and had sat at the feet of John in Ephesus. Thus Irenaeus himself may stand in the Johannine tradition. Clement of Alexandria (ca. 150–ca. 215) says that after the death of Domitian, “John the apostle” went back to Ephesus after his exile on Patmos. An earlier father who testifies to the Johannine authorship of Revelation is Justin Martyr (ca. 100–ca. 165), who, before moving on to Rome, taught for a time in Ephesus.

In the first two centuries the only possible witness against the Johannine authorship of Revelation is Papias (ca. 60–ca. 130), bishop of Hierapolis in Asia Minor. According to Irenaeus, Papias was a hearer of John and a companion of Polycarp. In a quotation preserved by Eusebius, Papias appears to speak of two distinct persons named John. However, it cannot be determined whether Papias was referring to two different Johns or twice to the same John. Even if one should conclude that Papias was referring to two different Johns, both of considerable stature and both residing at Ephesus (which is highly unlikely), this could not be used against the apostolic Johannine authorship of either the gospel or Revelation, for authorship is not the subject Papias is addressing in this excerpt.

It is not until the third century AD that there appears clear evidence of any father speaking against apostolic Johannine authorship. According to Eusebius, Caius (early third century), who was said to have been a Roman presbyter, rejected the Johannine authorship of Revelation, attributing it instead

to Cerinthus, a Gnostic heretic (late first century). A more important witness against apostolic Johannine authorship is Dionysius (died ca. 264), bishop of Alexandria and a pupil of Origen. He believed that Revelation was written by a John, but not the apostle. He came to this conclusion primarily because of the difference between the literary styles of John's gospel and Revelation, though he accepted Revelation as inspired and canonical.

Later fathers who either rejected or had doubts about the Johannine authorship of Revelation are Cyril of Jerusalem (ca. 315–ca. 386), Gregory of Nazianzus (ca. 329–ca. 389), Chrysostom (ca. 347–407), and Theodoret (ca. 393–ca. 458). These later fathers all seemed to have been influenced by Dionysius. While some fathers of the third and fourth centuries followed Dionysius in doubting or rejecting the Johannine authorship of Revelation, most did not. Tertullian (ca. 160–ca. 225), Hippolytus of Rome (ca. 170–ca. 235), and Origen (ca. 185–ca. 254) accepted the apostolic Johannine authorship without question. The great fathers of the fourth century such as Athanasius, Jerome, and Augustine also accepted the apostolic Johannine authorship of this last book of the Bible.

The problem that Dionysius raised, that of the difference between the literary styles of John's gospel and of Revelation, will be addressed in the following section. That section will also offer a final conclusion about the authorship of Revelation.

### THE WRITING OF REVELATION

It can be said with some certainty that the book of Revelation was not planned in the same sense that John must have planned his gospel. John wrote the gospel after long thought and maturity in his apostolic witness to Jesus Christ, but there was no way that he could have anticipated the visions he experienced and recorded in Revelation. It happened, under inspiration, through a visionary experience similar to those that came upon Paul (2 Cor 12:1–4) and Stephen (Acts 7:55–56). John experienced and wrote Revelation while he was “in the Spirit” (Rev 1:10; 4:2). As he was in the Spirit, he evidently not only saw the visions but also was caught up into them so as to experience them more immediately as well (see 4:1–2). This is beyond our ability to analyze. Perhaps even John himself, like Paul (2 Cor 12:1–4), could not tell whether he was in the body or out of the body when he saw and heard what he relates. What matters is that he was “in the Spirit,” and he truly was given this Revelation by God. The finished product is a gift of God through his servant John, God's final word until the Lord's return at the End (Rev 1:3; 22:20).

As part of their investigation of the question of authorship, some scholars have compared the language and literary styles of John's gospel to those of Revelation. This comparison is inconclusive, however. Whatever decision one makes about the authorship of these two documents, some problems remain. If one concludes because of the dissimilarities in language and style that John and

Revelation must have been composed by two different authors, then how does one account for their pointed similarities? If, on the other hand, one concludes because of the similarities that both are products of the same author, then how does one account for the pointed dissimilarities? Certainly the many similarities point to some connection between the authorship of these two books.

One of the most noticeable dissimilarities in language is the increased presence in the Greek text of Revelation of grammatical irregularities and Semiticisms. Careful analysis of the Greek text reveals that it is not translation Greek. Rather the author wrote and thought in a Greek that was influenced by Semitic idioms and expression. It appears that he *wrote* in Greek while he was *thinking* in his original and native language, most likely Aramaic. *Unless he took the time to translate (in his mind) from the Semitic idiom to the Greek before he spoke or wrote, his Greek would be more Semitic, but if he first took the time to translate the Semitic idiom mentally into Greek, then his Greek would be less Semitic.*

The difference between the *extent* of the Semiticisms in John's gospel and Revelation is due to the fact that the gospel is a carefully planned theological *narrative*, while Revelation is a composition that may have been written *more quickly and with great urgency*. One can imagine that the author worked deliberately in the composition of his gospel, not only for clarity of thought and expression but also to screen out many of his natural Semitic idioms—though even the Greek of the gospel is more Semitic than Hellenistic literary Greek. When the same author came to write Revelation he did not, for whatever reason, screen out as carefully the Semitic idioms.

Was this because of his state of mind—highly emotional, even mystic? Or was it because of a concern to write quickly in order not to lose anything of what he had seen and experienced? Perhaps both are true. What is clear is that the author did *not* always translate in his mind from his native Semitic way of thinking into standard Greek idiom before he wrote the Greek text of Revelation. One might assume that he did not write several drafts, as might have been the case with his gospel. He left his written Revelation in the language in which he first described what he had seen—composed from the immediate impressions that were made on his mind by the visions and experiences he encountered. The quantity and kind of Semiticisms in Revelation, then, account for much of the difference between the language of John's gospel and Revelation. But one can detect the same mind, with similar Semitic influence, behind the Greek of both the gospel and Revelation.

On the other hand, certain grammatical anomalies in Revelation are not attributable to the author's Semitic way of thinking. Rather, they are intentional. The author, when he stops to think, knows standard, conventional Koine Greek grammar. But as a skilled artist he sometimes employs unconventional or anomalous grammar in order to make a point, either for emphasis or for

theological impact. As one works with the Greek text and begins to notice that many of the grammatical irregularities are repeated in Revelation, it becomes clear that with them the author is *creating literary thought patterns that aid him in giving full expression and meaning to the subject matter at hand*. This author is a highly skilled, literary craftsman. He does not think or express himself as one following ordinary logic or common rhetoric. Rather, he thinks and expresses himself visually in inspired, artistic patterns of thought. Humanly speaking, while one could not imagine John writing Romans, one could also not conjecture that Paul could have written Revelation. In each case, the Holy Spirit moved a particular individual in a certain historical context to produce a unique writing.

Thus the chief dissimilarities in language and literary style between the gospel according to St. John and Revelation can be explained without resorting to the assumption that there were two different authors. All the evidence, when weighed, points to John the apostle and son of Zebedee as the author of Revelation—as well as of the gospel. Since there is no compelling evidence to the contrary, and there is persuasive supporting evidence, this commentary is written on the premise that the John mentioned in Rev 1:1, 4, 9; 22:8 is the John who was one of the twelve apostles and who was the brother of James.

### **JOHN THE AUTHOR: THE MAN FOR THE TIME AND PLACE**

The character and personality and reputation of John play an important role in his authorship of Revelation—and also of his gospel. According to Athanasius, John was known as “the theologian” of the apostolic church. In the gospel he is referred to as the disciple “whom Jesus loved” (e.g., Jn 13:23; 20:2), the one who lay against Jesus’ bosom in the Upper Room (Jn 13:23), and as “the other disciple” (Jn 20:2). Of this disciple Jesus says tantalizingly, “If I wish him to remain until I come . . .” (Jn 21:22; cf. 21:20). This disciple then acquired the reputation that he would not die until the Lord’s second coming, although he himself protested that Jesus had not promised that (Jn 21:23). Finally, in the gospel the author says that he was an eyewitness of Jesus’ death and resurrection, and that his witness is the truth (Jn 19:34–35; 21:24).

In Revelation the author uses his name, John, to identify himself (1:1, 4, 9; 22:8). In 22:8 he emphasizes that it was he, John, who heard and saw the things that are written in Revelation. There is a similar attestation in the gospel concerning the author and the validity of what he visually witnessed (19:35; 21:24). In 1 Jn 1:1–4 this same author again makes the claim that his testimony is that of an eyewitness of Jesus Christ. In 2 and 3 John he introduces himself as “the elder” (2 Jn 1; 3 Jn 1). By his use of the article (“the”) he shows that he takes for granted that everyone knows who he is and that they will without question accept his authority because of his relationship to Christ (cf. also 1 Jn 5:13; 2 Jn 9; 3 Jn 9–10). In Revelation he refers to his writing as a “prophecy” (1:3; 22:7, 10, 18, 19), that is, a prophetic work in line with the ministry and writings of the

OT and NT prophets of God. *He thus understands that his apostolic witness to the ministry of Jesus Christ—his incarnation, death, resurrection, and exalted heavenly glory—is in harmony with and in succession to the prophetic ministry of old.*

In the latter part of the first century, when (to our present knowledge) John was the last remaining apostolic witness and voice yet on earth, he was known as *the* elder of the church, *the* theologian and teacher of the church. Certainly it can be said of him that the church could not neglect the word that was spoken by the Lord and witnessed by those who heard it (Heb 2:1–4). As the first century AD came to an end, John was the sole apostolic voice witnessing to what Jesus had done and said. He was the last living link between the church at the turn of the first century AD and the people among whom Jesus lived during his earthly ministry.

According to Irenaeus, John lived into the reign of the Roman emperor Trajan, who ruled from 98 to 117. This means that John not only witnessed the earthly life of Jesus Christ but also the life and ministry of the church up to the early part of the second century. For example, he was still living in Ephesus when Clement, the bishop of Rome, wrote an epistle to the church in Corinth (ca. AD 95) known today as 1 Clement. He died near the time that Ignatius was martyred under Trajan. In more than one of the letters of Ignatius, which are reckoned among the most famous documents of the early church, Ignatius seems to show that he knew Revelation. John lived through some seventy years of the formative history of the church before his own witness was finished!

What had John witnessed? It appears that the author of the gospel and Revelation was introduced to Jesus at Jesus' baptism by John the Baptist (Jn 1:35–42; Acts 1:21–22). Prior to meeting Jesus, John was a fisherman, together with his brother James and their father Zebedee. But after having been called by Jesus he became one of the twelve apostles (Mk 1:19–20). John, together with his brother James, and Peter, made up the inner circle and as such witnessed the raising of Jairus' daughter (Mk 5:37), the transfiguration of the Lord (Mk 9:2), and the agony of Jesus at Gethsemane (Mk 14:33). Most likely John witnessed most, and perhaps all of the miracles of Jesus and heard his public and private teachings (Jn 21:25). John is usually thought of as reserved, but he was not afraid to push himself forward, even when he should not have (Mt 20:20–21). He may have been the youngest of the Twelve, or at least among the younger disciples; he ran faster than Peter (Jn 20:4), and he is mentioned after his brother James (Mk 1:19). Given Jesus' fondness for the lowly, including children, it may have been partly in light of John's younger status that Jesus loved him and perhaps sheltered him (Jn 13:23). At any rate his youth did not prevent him from becoming one of the leaders of the Twelve (cf. Jer 1:5–7).

But what stands out most prominently about John is that *he was the only disciple to witness the entire passion of Jesus Christ.* With Peter he witnessed the

trial of Jesus before the Jewish court (Jn 18:15–16). But after Peter left (Mt 26:75; Lk 22:62), through the trials of Pilate and Herod and on to Golgotha, John was the only disciple to witness the entire suffering, crucifixion, and death of Jesus. It was to John that Jesus entrusted the care of his mother (Jn 19:26–27). John saw the shameful treatment and bitter earthly end as Jesus died (Jn 19:31–37). And John saw with his own eyes the resurrected Lord and believed in his resurrection. This was crucial for his later witness to the truth.

John ends his gospel by relating not the ascension of Jesus but the commissioning of Peter and the foretelling of Peter's death, to which is attached Jesus' affirmation of the *possibility* that John could remain alive until the Lord's return (Jn 21:20–23). Whether the early Christians believed that John *would* remain alive until the return of Jesus, or whether they entertained the idea only as a *possibility* dependent on the Lord's will (Jn 21:23), certainly John's long life on this earth would have heightened the hope of the Lord's return within John's lifetime. His extended life also can be seen as a confirmation of the *possibility* about which Jesus spoke.

By ending his gospel with the foretelling of Peter's ministry and death, and the foretelling of the enduring witness of the beloved disciple, John prepares his readers to be introduced to the mission of the church under the apostolic ministry. This ministry would proclaim the words and actions of Jesus and would be sealed by suffering and death. This ministry would be confirmed by the ongoing eyewitness of the apostolic tradition, of which John was a part and also of which he would be the last (cf. Heb 2:1–4; 1 Jn 1:1–4). This ministry of the apostles, as exemplified by John, would continue until their proclamation concerning Christ was authoritatively established and codified for the church, that is, *their personal apostolic ministry would continue until their apostolic Word was set down in writing, so that it and it alone would remain authoritative for the church until the Lord's return*. The long apostolic ministry of John played an important role in the establishment of that authoritative apostolic legacy.

What all did John witness? After witnessing the Lord's ascension and the promise of his return (Acts 1:6–11) and receiving the fulfillment of Jesus' promise to send the Spirit (Acts 2:1–4), John became one of the leaders of the church in Jerusalem, together with Peter and James the brother of Jesus (Acts 12:17; Gal 2:9). How long John's ministry lasted in Jerusalem is not known. Church fathers testify that John was in Ephesus before and after his exile on the island of Patmos. It can be surmised that he became the bishop at Ephesus before the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70. The lack of precise knowledge as regards the date of his move to Ephesus notwithstanding, it seems that he was the pastor and bishop of the church there for many years. (That church had been founded by Paul together with Apollos, Aquila, and Priscilla [Acts 18:24–19:1].) During his long ministry at Ephesus, John witnessed the growth of the church throughout much

of the Roman Empire. Certainly it can be said that before his death he saw the church well established, despite severe sufferings and persecutions.

While at Ephesus, and for many years, John was *the* theologian of the church, *the* elder and apostolic spokesman. His long apostolic witness and ministry was an affirmation of the oral tradition of Christ's words and actions. John did not die until after the apostolic tradition concerning the words, deeds, and message of Christ had been established in written form. John lived long enough for the writings of the NT not only to have been written but also to be in circulation. When his apostolic witness was no longer necessary to vouch for the authenticity of the apostolic tradition (now in literary form), the Lord Christ called his servant John to himself. While there is no direct evidence that John helped determine the NT canon, he was alive through the whole process of the writing and the circulation of those documents that came to be recognized as authoritative for the church. *In his wisdom, God left this servant of Christ alive to vouch for the veracity and faithfulness of those writings that would be accepted by the church. After that oral apostolic tradition was set in written form and after it was no longer necessary for a living voice to confirm that apostolic tradition, the prophecy was fulfilled, "If I wish him to remain until I come..." (Jn 21:22). Jesus came to his church in the written Scriptures and would continue to come to his people through the reading of those Scriptures.*

After John's death the church would not consider including in the canon a previously unknown writing lately brought to light, for there was no longer a living apostolic voice to vouch for its authenticity—though the church would for some time leave open the possibility of receiving or rejecting a writing that had been known during John's lifetime.

### THE ACCEPTANCE OF REVELATION

It might appear surprising that the early church received Revelation as authoritative and canonical, apparently with little question, for over a century. Whether or not it was used and understood as much as the other writings of the NT is not clear, but it was certainly accepted by the church. It would be difficult to understand today how it could have been accepted unless it was known to have been written by a recognized, authoritative teacher of the church. Perhaps even the young John could not have had the theological stature to motivate the church to accept a writing such as Revelation! But from a mature John, who was recognized as *the* elder and theologian, it would be received. When doubts arose in the third century about the canonicity of Revelation, it was because some thought that John the apostle perhaps was not the author. But where there was no doubt of the apostolic Johannine authorship, it was accepted.

### THE GOSPEL AND REVELATION: LITERARY COMPLEMENTS

One might ask, Why did not John include an account of Jesus' transfiguration in his gospel? After all, of the four gospel authors, he is the only one who actually witnessed it. This, together with the fact that John's gospel also does

not have an account of or even a reference to Christ's ascension, may be *telling marks* in the gospel, directing John's readers to look to Revelation. In 1:9–20 there is a description of Jesus in his transfigured glory after he had come into it at his ascension. John on the mount of transfiguration saw a preview of this glory. Now in Revelation he sees this glory once again, *but after the Lord Christ had fully and permanently entered it.*

Could the fact that John in Revelation gives to the reader a description of Christ in his transfigured glory be the reason why he does not have an account of the transfiguration in his gospel? The same may be said for the absence of any account of the ascension in his gospel, since there is in Revelation 5 a beautiful description of Jesus' ascension, but as seen and understood from heaven's viewpoint. If this might be the explanation for the absence of any report of these important events in John's gospel, *then perhaps John wrote the gospel after Revelation.* The scenario might be this: first John experienced and wrote Revelation and then, after meditating on it, he undertook to write a gospel *as an introduction for Revelation.*

Whether the above conjecture is true or not, there is a strong probability that after he had written both the gospel and Revelation, John saw that *they went together and thus were two parts of one work.* Luke planned beforehand that his gospel and Acts were to be received as one work in two parts (Lk 1:1–4; Acts 1:1–5), but perhaps John did not begin with such a plan in mind. Yet after both his gospel and Revelation were finished, they stood out as one grand account of Christ's humiliation and exaltation, for the gospel leads into and finds its goal in Revelation, and Revelation has its foundation in the gospel. Revelation thus is not to be read and understood in isolation, but rather in relationship with John's gospel. What is seen and interpreted in Revelation is anchored in the incarnation of the Word (Jn 1:1, 14; Rev 19:13). Whatever is seen and interpreted in the gospel points to the exalted reign of Christ as depicted in Revelation. They are complementary.

### LITERARY STYLE

The literary style of the author of Revelation is more that of an artist than of a technical writer (cf. 12:1–2). He thinks and writes in visual patterns rather than in logical axioms. His artistry is even evident in his use of grammar and syntax. For example, he is fond of parallelism (see 21:23), especially antithetical statements, where he first states the positive and then the negative (3:3; 10:4). All these oddities and irregularities, whether due to the author's Semitic background or to his own peculiar use of language, are used in a skilled, disciplined fashion which contributes to his artistic way of presenting the inspired message.

The literary artistry of the author finds expression in his use of the symbolic pictures which make up so much of his prophetic message. The experience of the author, and perhaps more importantly the content of his message from God, evidently demanded such images. For the hearer and reader of Revelation,

this type of literary presentation poses certain questions. What do the various symbols mean? What do they represent? Once those questions have been answered for John's original historical context, we still must ask, What significance do they have for the reader and the church today?

Symbolic imagery is usually patterned after some known entity. Something served the creator of the symbol as a model. It could be a historical person, a historical event, or a noted geographical place. Once the symbol is created, it then is used by the author to suggest and evoke a meaning without any explicit explanation of it. The symbol, as used by the writer, no longer refers to the model after which it was patterned. Rather, it refers to something different or new. If the model can be identified, this can help to determine how the model was used by the author and so can help the reader arrive at a correct interpretation of the symbol. However, when one discovers and examines the model, he may fall prey to the danger of thinking that the symbol *refers* to the model. The interpreter should not equate the symbol with its model. The model is *only a pointer to clues* which will help the reader to discover the application of the symbol. The symbol is a metaphor, and so its meaning is metaphorical, not literal.

When an author creates a symbol as an image or metaphor for something that is common to human life and experience, the reader may be able to draw on that which is recognizable and known from his own experience in order to interpret the symbol. But when a symbol employs elements that are not drawn from common human experience and are not from human knowledge or nature, then the reader may conclude that the symbol is being used to picture something of the supernatural. An example of this is the dragon of Revelation 12. A dragon is not a real, natural creature known from common human experience. Rather, it is drawn from human imagination. The referent in Revelation 12 is Satan, a supernatural being.

In addition to literary symbols that are modeled after created things (the Lamb) or after the imagination (the dragon and beasts), other nonphysical realities from the realm of human thought—such as numbers—can be made to serve as symbols. Examples in Revelation are the numbers four, seven, ten, twelve, twenty-four, one thousand, and one hundred forty-four thousand.

Much of the symbolic imagery in Revelation is taken from the OT. The OT often uses symbols as a method of teaching especially in the later prophets. The body of this commentary will show how knowledge of the OT plays an important role in interpreting Revelation. Jewish writings of the Intertestamental period are also a rich source for the symbolism in Revelation. Another possible source of symbolic imagery is the mythological milieu of the Greco-Roman world. John at times seems to use this milieu—but for his own theological purposes.

Finally, the literary style of Revelation includes John's artistic appropriation of the OT, not only as a source for symbolism, but even more importantly as the basis for much of his theological insights and literary expressions. John's use of the OT can be subtle. On the one hand, he never formally introduces an OT quotation with a citation formula. Yet no writer in the apostolic age, including the NT authors, makes more use of the writings of the OT. John constantly uses OT imagery, phrases, thought patterns, and theological motifs. The OT furnishes the vocabulary, mode of expression, and theological mind-set with which Revelation was written.

John's quotations from and allusions to the OT are primarily from the Septuagint. This Greek translation of the Hebrew OT was John's Bible. It gave to John his theological vocabulary in the Greek language. He uses it as a skilled artist, for it is the palette which he employs to depict the images he saw in his vision. Often John will use the words and phrases and thought patterns of the Septuagint as an artist would inlay small pieces of various colored glass or tile to form a mosaic. For example, in 1:12–16, where John describes the appearance of the exalted Christ as the Son of Man, he uses Daniel 7 and 10 as his sources. He takes the words and phrases of Daniel and uses them to form his mosaic of the exalted Son of Man in Revelation 1. While Daniel serves as his source, the finished picture of Christ in Revelation 1 transcends that of the Son of Man in Daniel 7 and 10. John's portrait of the Son of Man is similar to that of Daniel, yet distinctly his own rendering. At various places throughout Revelation he demonstrates his literary artistry in other innovative uses of the OT. In this type of creativity he is paramount among the authors of the NT.

## **THE TRANSMISSION AND INTERPRETATION OF REVELATION**

### **THE GREEK TEXT OF REVELATION**

The earliest manuscript of Revelation is a papyrus fragment of 1:13–20 now located in Cairo in the French Institute of Oriental Archaeology and dated probably to the second century AD. It is too brief to be of much significance for establishing the text of Revelation. Its importance lies rather in the fact that it is dated so close to the autograph of Revelation. There are six known Greek papyri manuscripts of Revelation, five of which are only small fragments. The sixth is by far the most important papyrus manuscript of Revelation. It is in the Chester Beatty Library collection in Dublin. It is dated in the third century and is of great use in helping to establish the text of Revelation. However, even this important witness is fragmentary, containing only 9:10–17:2 with some gaps.

There are eleven known uncial manuscripts of Revelation, dating from the fourth to the tenth centuries. Only four contain the whole of Revelation. In addition there are around 275 cursive/minusculer manuscripts dating from the

tenth to the fifteenth centuries, the most important of which is codex 1 of the twelfth century.

### INTERPRETING REVELATION

Throughout the history of the church, Revelation has been interpreted in many different ways. In the final analysis, the variety of methods can be reduced to two basic ways of interpreting and understanding the book. One places the book on a linear scale, a straight line, so that each item related in the book follows or succeeds that which was related before, and the events unfold in an orderly, chronological way. This method is sometimes called the *millenarian* method. The other method is cyclic, today more commonly called the *recapitulation* approach. This method understands the prophecy of the book to be repetitive, so that the events are described several times, with each description covering the same time period.

Throughout most of the history of the church these two methods of interpreting Revelation have coexisted, but often with one, then the other dominating. While the linear or millenarian method is popular today, increasingly the recapitulation method is coming again into its own. At first glance, the linear way of understanding Revelation might seem more rational and plausible, but the repetition of many of the events makes it difficult to view the book as linear. For example, the end of this present world is depicted several times, though in different ways, throughout the book (6:12–17; 11:15–19; 14:14–20; 16:17–21; and 19:1–21). The repetition of events such as this suggests that Revelation cannot be interpreted on a linear, chronological scale. The visions of the seven seals (6:1–17; 8:1–5), the seven trumpet-angels (Revelation 8:6–9:21; 11:15–19), and the seven angels with censers (15:1–16:21) are all parallel and cover the same time period, namely, events on earth from Christ's ascension to his parousia. This suggests that the proper method of interpretation is that of the cyclic or recapitulation approach. It is with this method of interpreting and understanding the structure of Revelation that the present commentary is written.





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# COMMENTARY

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## REVELATION 1:1–3:22

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# INTRODUCTION

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1:1–8 Prologue

1:9–20 Commissioning of John:  
Vision of the Son of Man

*Excursus*      *Son of Man*

2:1–3:22 Letters of Preparation to  
the Seven Churches

*Excursus*      *The Seven Letters of  
Preparation (2:1–3:22)*

2:1–7            To the Angel of Ephesus

2:8–11          To the Angel of Smyrna

2:12–17        To the Angel of Pergamum

2:18–29        To the Angel of Thyatira

3:1–6            To the Angel of Sardis

3:7–13          To the Angel of  
Philadelphia

3:14–22        To the Angel of Laodicea



## REVELATION 1:1–8

# PROLOGUE

### TRANSLATION

- 1 <sup>1</sup>The revelatory-unveiling of Jesus Christ which God gave to him to show to his slaves what things are necessary to come about quickly, and he [Christ] communicated in visible signs these things as he sent them through his angel to his slave John, <sup>2</sup>who witnessed to the word of God and to the witness [testimony] of Jesus Christ, what things he saw. <sup>3</sup>Blessed is the one who reads and [blessed are] those who hear the words of this prophecy and who keep the things written in it, for the time is near. <sup>4</sup>John, to the seven churches which are in Asia: Grace to you and peace from the One Who Is and Who Was and Who Is Coming, and from the seven Spirits that are before his throne, <sup>5</sup>and from Jesus Christ, the witness, the faithful one, the firstborn of the dead and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To him who loves us and set us free from our sins by his blood, <sup>6</sup>and he made us to be a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be [all] the glory and the dominion forever and ever, amen. <sup>7</sup>Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all the tribes of the earth will mourn over him. Yes, amen!
- <sup>8</sup>“I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says Yahweh, the [only] God, the One Who Is and Who Was and Who Is Coming, the Almighty.

## COMMENTARY

THE TITLE: REVELATION/  
APOCALYPSE OF JOHN

Titles were not a part of the original texts of books of the NT, and so they were not considered an important and unchangeable part of the texts. In antiquity a title would be a strip or tag attached on the back of a roll; the title was also written inside the roll at the end of the text. Before such tags were attached, the first words of the document itself would have indicated its contents. The earliest manuscripts of Revelation have the title “apocalypse/revelation of John,” taken from 1:1. As time went on, this title was sometimes expanded, such as “apocalypse/revelation of John the theologian and evangelist.”

## THE TITLE AND ITS EXPLANATION (1:1–3)

Within the original text, the first words, “the revelatory-unveiling of Jesus Christ,” serve as a title for the whole book. The rest of the introduction (1:1–3) then serves as a brief commentary on the title.

The revelation is given to God’s people (“his slaves”) so that they might know what is to happen “quickly”—soon, immediately (1:1). The revelation comes from God to Jesus Christ, who in turn gives it to John through an angel, identified as “his angel” (1:1)—an angel of Jesus. In the epilogue, it is said that God through “his angel” gave the revelation to his people (“his slaves”) concerning things that would happen “soon” (22:6). In 22:16, Jesus says that he was the one who gave the witness of this revelation to the churches, and he gave this witness by means of “my angel.”

*There is, then, a clear sequence of mediation through which John and his audience received the revelation: God, Jesus Christ, his angel, John, and the seven churches.* The source of the revelation is God. The mediator of the revelation is Jesus Christ, who uses an angel to give it to John and the churches. Angels play an important role throughout the book of Revelation. They help in the mediation by leading or attending John through the visions, with the interpretation of the visions, in aiding John to focus on what is important in a particular vision, and by answering John’s questions concerning something within a vision (5:2).

While the mediating agents of the revelation are Jesus Christ and his angel(s), the perceptible means by which John receives it are visions and/or visionary experiences. This is indicated by two verbs in 1:1, both done by Christ: “to show” and “communicated in visible signs.” John also describes his reception in 1:2 with the verb “saw.” At the very beginning John is alerted to the fact that the primary means of his perception of the revelation will be visions (1:1), and he tells the reader(s) and hearer(s) that he will describe for them what “he saw” (1:2). However, the audible word will also be used, as indicated by “word,” “who hear,” and “words” (1:2–3). Though visions will be used to convey the

revelation to John, they only serve as visual aids in the revelation. The communication from John to the reader(s) and hearer(s) takes place through words. Of primary importance in the revelation is the word, the meaning and witness of the prophetic message which is portrayed by the visions (e.g., 7:13–17). *Thus the prophetic message of Revelation is the Word of God given in and with visual form.*

*The revelatory message is called a “prophecy”* (1:3). Revelation is the only book in the NT which is referred to in this way. Whether or not John consciously thought of his work as the climax of the prophetic writings of the OT, he certainly viewed his work as belonging to that prophetic tradition. He understands that the church, as it witnesses the message of Christ, is the heir and fulfillment of the OT prophetic message (see Revelation 11). The witness of Jesus in the message of Revelation is also equated with the Spirit of prophecy (19:10), and in the epilogue the message is again referred to several times as a prophecy (22:7, 10, 18, 19). The fact that John understood his Revelation to be a prophecy suggests that he believed this writing would be the last message of God to his people before the End (cf. “prophecy” in 22:18) and that he was the last prophet of the salvation story which had begun with the promise of old and now was concluded in the revelatory-unveiling of Jesus Christ (1:3; 10:7; 15:8; 22:6–7, 10–12).

Finally, these verses speak a blessing upon “the one who reads [aloud] and those who hear ... and who keep” this prophetic message (1:3). The blessing is not here defined, but when the six other instances in Revelation of a pronounced blessing (14:13; 16:15; 19:9; 20:6; 22:7, 14) are examined, it becomes clear that the blessing bestowed is the *participation in the heavenly banquet of the bride and the Lamb* (19:9). It is a blessing which is also now received by *the washing of the Christians’ robes* (22:14) *in the blood of the Lamb* (7:13–14) and is a *participation now in the first resurrection* (20:6). At both the beginning and the end of the prophecy this blessing is spoken upon the hearers (1:3; 22:7). It is also the present gift of God to the faithful recipients of the Gospel as it comes in the word of Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection and in Holy Baptism and the Lord’s Supper. Thus it is spoken over the Christians assembled for corporate worship, where the Holy Scriptures are read aloud to the assembly and the Sacraments instituted by the Lord Jesus are cherished and followed.

## DIVINE CONFIRMATION OF THE MESSAGE (1:4–6)

These verses give a trinitarian stamp of approval by which God himself confirms the validity of the message of Revelation. It is given in the form of a greeting benediction in which John speaks the blessing of God’s grace and peace to his recipients, the seven churches.

The trinitarian formula is presented in the words “the One Who Is and Who Was and Who Is Coming, and from the seven Spirits ... and from Jesus

Christ” (1:4–5). In these words John names the triune God: Father, Spirit, and Jesus Christ. At first glance it would appear that already in the first phrase, “the One Who Is and Who Was and Who Is Coming,” there is a representation of the triune God. However, it is better to hear 1:4–5 as naming three distinct persons: (1) “the One Who Is and Who Was and Who Is Coming”; (2) the seven Spirits; and (3) Jesus Christ. Each refers to one of the persons of the Trinity.

First, the revelation comes from God the Father. “The One Who Is” leads one to the holy name of God in Exodus 3. In the context of 1:4–6 “the One Who Is” then refers to God the Father.

John, in his own way, uses “the One Who Is and Who Was and Who Is Coming” for the holy name in Exodus 3. He takes “the One Who Is” from Ex 3:14 and then expands it by adding “and Who Was and Who Is Coming.” By so doing he states that the ever present One is continually present now, as he was in the past and as he always will be in the future. *The entire three-part phrase, then, is really a rendition of “I Am” in Ex 3:14, which is God’s own explanation for his holy name, Yahweh (Ex 3:13–16).*

John emphasizes “the One Who Is and Who Was and Who Is Coming” by having it in a grammatically unusual form, in the nominative after the preposition “from” instead of in the genitive that normally follows that preposition. Whether John did this consciously in deference to the holy name, because to have used an oblique case would have necessitated a vocalized change of that name, can only be surmised. Certainly John, because of his Jewish background, would be aware of Jewish practices in deference toward the holy name. But more likely, if not also in addition, John wanted to make and emphasize a theological truth: that the Father is the first among equals. The Father, while equal in essence with the Spirit and Jesus Christ, is nevertheless the primus of the three persons (cf. 1 Cor 15:28; Jn 14:16–17, 26). In deference to the holy name, that is, in deference to God the Father, through worship of Jesus Christ by means of the Spirit, John keeps this Greek rendering of the holy name in a grammatically unusual form.

Wherever this Greek form of the holy name (“the One Who Is”) appears in Revelation, John keeps to this theological principle, namely, that the Father is the first among equals; he also keeps to this principle throughout the book whenever the heavenly court worships God and the Lamb (in that order; e.g., 4:8–11; 5:9–14). The One Who Is” appears a total of five times in Revelation, *all in reference to the Father*. In 1:4 and 1:8 the elements of the three-part title “the One Who Is and Who Was and Who Is Coming” appear in the same order, but in 4:8 “the One Who Was” comes first and then “and Who Is and Who Is Coming.” In 11:17 and 16:5 only “the One Who Is and Who Was” is present. In each case where there is a difference, the author is making a theological statement—each will be treated in the commentary on the respective verses. Here in

1:4 this Greek rendering of the holy name points to the fact that the message of Revelation comes first of all from God the Father.

Second, the prophetic message of Revelation comes from “the seven Spirits” (1:4). Because of the number seven, commentators have wondered whether these are seven angels, corresponding to the seven archangels in Jewish tradition (see 1 Enoch 19:1; 20:1–7, where seven archangels are listed and named), or corresponding to the seven angels of the seven churches (and thus also to the seven angels with the trumpets [Rev 8:6–11:19] and censers [Revelation 15–16]). Against this identification is the fact that “the seven Spirits” (1:4) are on the same level of authority as God the Father and Jesus Christ. If these “Spirits” were angels, they would never be accorded the same status as God and Jesus Christ in Christian theology. (In Revelation angels are never worshiped, only God; cf. 19:10; 22:8–9.) Rather, these “seven Spirits” are a reference to the Holy Spirit.

In biblical thought, the number seven symbolizes God. It is the sum of the number three, which symbolizes God himself (cf. Gen 18:1–2; Is 6:3), and the number four, which symbolizes creation (cf., e.g., Ezek 37:9; 1 Chr 9:24). Seven thus symbolizes the God of creation. Because God rested on the seventh day (Gen 2:2–3), the number is also used to picture or refer to perfection, completion, and holiness, especially in reference to God’s activities and creative works.

The seven lamps and seven eyes in Zech 3:9–4:10 represent the Spirit of God, by which God sees the whole earth. In Is 11:1–2 the sevenfold gifts of the Spirit from God will rest upon the Branch of Jesse, the Messiah. *The seven Spirits of Rev 1:4, therefore, represent the Holy Spirit. . Throughout Revelation the number seven represents God’s presence by his Spirit.* Thus the church, when represented in Revelation by the seven churches (Revelation 2–3), is pictured as always under the Spirit of God. The heavenly hosts worship God by the presence of the seven Spirits before God’s throne (4:5). The Lamb of God, with the seven horns and eyes (5:6), is he on whom the sevenfold Spirit rests (Is 11:1–2). And the exalted Christ, as the Son of Man, stands in the midst of the seven golden lampstands, which represent the church under the lordship of Christ by the Spirit (1:13).

Third, in addition to the Father and the Spirit (1:4), the revelation comes “from Jesus Christ,” identified as the conqueror of death and as “the ruler of the kings of the earth” (1:5). Jesus Christ, the witness to the truth of God, was faithful in his messianic mission and went to his death. But he is the firstborn of the dead, raised on the third day. Thus, he is described as the one who set God’s people free from their sins and as a result made them a kingdom for God, as well as priests to serve in the kingdom (the royal priesthood of all believers). The doxology voiced at the end of 1:6, while directly applied to Christ, is through him directed to God the Father by the Spirit.

Why is Jesus Christ spoken of last, after the Father and the Spirit? It is because of his saving work, by which he has redeemed God's people so that they can now worship God as his royal priests. This worship is directed through Christ to the Father and is inspired by the Spirit.

This is the only book in the Bible which has such a trinitarian stamp of approval (1:4–6), at least in this explicit form, by which the source and authority of God is placed upon a human's writing. Because Revelation is the culmination of all scriptural revelation, this seal of approval is also placed, by inference, on the entire Scripture, both the OT and the NT. This may also indicate that there will not be another word of God spoken until the Lord Christ comes at the End. God's people must listen, for "the time is near" (1:3)—the time of judgment, but in particular the time of blessing in the presence of the exalted Christ.

## THE LORD'S RETURN (1:7–8)

The prologue concludes with a reference to the returning Lord: "Behold, he is coming with the clouds" (1:7). Jesus' words to Caiaphas were, "You will see the Son of Man ... coming on the clouds of heaven" (Mt 26:64; cf. 1 Thess 4:17). This suggests that the thought "the time is near" (Rev 1:3) refers to the coming of the Lord Christ at the End. The epilogue also leads to this interpretation (22:6–7, 12, 20).

The whole human race will witness his coming. No one will be exempt from this confrontation with Jesus Christ, not "even those who pierced him" (1:7). While this is not a direct quote of Zech 12:10, it brings to mind that prophecy that the Lord will pour out his Spirit of grace on the house of David, and, says Yahweh, "They will look upon me whom they have pierced." The reference to this verse brings to light again Christ's death (cf. Rev 1:5); note that John alone among the four evangelists recounts the piercing of Jesus on the cross (Jn 19:33–37; cf. 1 Jn 5:6). And this piercing will cause people to beat their breasts and wail over him. Here in Rev 1:7 John states that "all the tribes of the earth will mourn over him." While "those who pierced him" most probably refers to God's manifest enemies, "the tribes" who wail and mourn over him probably refers to God's own repentant people (Zech 12:12–14 suggests such an interpretation; see also Lk 2:35; 23:27; Jn 20:11). The fact that the Lord Christ at his second coming will be recognized as *the one who was pierced* is a witness and confirmation of the truth that *by his death and resurrection* he alone is the Savior and Judge of the human race (see Jn 19:33–35; 1 Jn 5:6–12).

The last verse of the prologue (Rev 1:8), while strange when compared to ordinary literary style, is characteristic of the style of both the prologue and epilogue of Revelation (22:7, 12). The divine voice (first person singular) breaks in to confirm the authority of God the Father as the prime source and originator of the revelatory-unveiling of Jesus Christ. It is the voice of God himself, by which he confirms the exalted status of his Son, Jesus Christ, as the Lord and Judge of all history, the human race and the world.

There is no consensus as to the identity of the speaker of 1:8. Some commentators take the speaker to be Jesus Christ, others God the Father. To take the voice to be that of Jesus Christ would break up the literary symmetry of the prologue, which begins with God the Father as the giver of the revelation and ends with the Father as the authenticator of it. While Jesus Christ is the subject and object of the message, only God the Father, who originates and gives it to Jesus, can also then be the one who authenticates it (cf. Mt 3:17). By these words God himself testifies to the position that his Son has earned and merited. The revelation of his Son's exalted position is now to commence and unfold in the prophetic message of Revelation. There is no greater witness, and the affirmation of the divine authority of the book calls for no less a witness (Jn 5:36–37; 8:18).

The title “the Alpha and the Omega” (1:8), the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet, expresses the eternity of God. In rabbinic theology the first and last letters of the Hebrew alphabet represented totality and entirety, and in particular they represented the Shekinah, that is, God's visible presence for the benefit of his people, as at the burning bush (Exodus 3). That rabbinic theology draws on OT passages such as Is 41:4; 43:10; 44:6; 48:12. The title “the Alpha and the Omega” appears again in 21:6, where it also is applied to God the Father, and in 22:13, where it is applied to Jesus Christ. Christ is the revealed glory of God (Jn 1:14, 18), the one through whom God graciously appears to his people. He is the eternal one who has entered human history and time. “The Alpha and the Omega” is one of the titles which God the Father and Jesus share in Revelation. In this case it is shared because the Son of God is eternal in the same absolute sense as is the Father.

God the Father speaks directly only in 1:8 and 21:5. God is further identified in 1:8 by “the One Who Is and Who Was and Who Is Coming” (first mentioned in 1:4), but now he is also called “the Almighty.” While in Revelation God shares with Jesus Christ the title “the Alpha and the Omega,” the titles “the One Who Is and Who Was and Who Is Coming” and “the Almighty” in Revelation are reserved for the Father alone. This is done so as to preserve the prime position of God the Father while at the same time displaying the equality of the Father and the Son.

Thus the Father's speaking of this word (1:8) here is analogous to the word at the transfiguration (with the added understanding here about the role of the Spirit from Jn 15:26–27; 16:13–15). At the transfiguration the Father confirms the Son, whom he has sent and on whom the Spirit rests: “This is my beloved Son; hear him” (Mk 9:7). Here in Rev 1:8 the Father confesses that this Spirit-given (Jn 15:26–27; 16:13–15) prophecy about the sent, crucified, and exalted Son (whose exaltation is the chief focus of the revelation) has its origin in himself, the Father, and so has his authority behind it.