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26. The Book of Revelation

FEW WRITINGS IN all of literature have been so obsessively read with such generally disastrous results as the Book of Revelation (= the Apocalypse). Its history of interpretation is largely a story of tragic misinterpretation, resulting from a fundamental misapprehension of the work's literary form and purpose. Insofar as its arcane symbols have fed the treasury of prayer and poetry, its influence has been benign. More often, these same symbols have nurtured delusionary systems, both private and public, to the destruction of their fashioners and to the discredit of the writing.

Misunderstandings appear to be invited by the text itself, for it claims to offer a "revelation from Jesus Christ" which makes known to the readers "what is going to happen shortly" (1:1). No wonder it has often been taken as a divinely certified blueprint for the future. Already in the second century, Papias found in passages like Rev. 20:4-6 a promise of a literal earthly thousand-year (millennial) reign of the saints preceding the end of time:

They came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years. The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended. This is the first resurrection. Over such the second death has no power, but they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and they shall reign with him a thousand years (20:4-6; cf. Eusebius *Ecclesiastical History* III.39.12).

Papias was among the first of many "millenarians"—including Irenaeus, the Montanists, Joachim of Fiore, and some radical reformers of the sixteenth century—who found in Revelation a guide to the restored heaven and earth (21:1-2). People in every age could also find in these pages—with the text's own whispered injunctions to read between the lines (13:18; 17:9)—the identity of *their* "beast" (13:18). Rulers and usurpers from Nero to Saddam Hussein have unwittingly borne the epithet "666." Moreover, Revelation (in passages such as 21:1-8), when read in conjunction with the idealized picture of the primitive church in Acts 4:32-37, seemed to offer a basis for utopian, egalitarian projects that sought by human effort to bring about the vision of a heavenly Jerusalem. The ideal is born again in every age, including our own, when many Christians use Revelation as the essential guidebook to determine the time of an inevitable Armageddon (16:16). In short, the Book of Revelation is one of those rare compositions that speaks both to the deepest longings of the human heart for

health and well-being and to the obscure corners of the human heart that tend toward illness.

This history of interpretation has several constant emphases. Most important among these, the book is considered a literal prophecy of future events. Two aspects of this definition are significant: first, "prophecy" is taken in its narrowest sense to mean "prediction": the text's frame of reference is not the author's own historical period but the one contemporary to the reader. The reading of contemporary events is therefore an essential part of reading this text: how does the pattern of world affairs as known to the reader connect with the signs of the approaching end time as outlined in Revelation? Second, the symbolism of the writing is treated as though it were a prophetic cryptogram: the reader is concerned not with intertextual connections or allusions to the religious heritage of the writer but only with the ways in which textual symbols can be aligned—point by point—with aspects of the reader's present situation. This process of interpretation has shown itself to be incapable of being disconfirmed by experience. If the reading of contemporary events turns out to be erroneous—if in fact the end does not come—it is never the nature of the text or of the interpretive process that is blamed; the calculations were merely off. Rather than telling people something about *how* Christian existence might be lived in the face of evil and apparent hopelessness, the text becomes something akin to a train schedule.

The problem here is that exegesis is swallowed up in hermeneutics. The conviction that God's Word speaks directly to every age has not been accompanied by the appreciation that it does so as mediated through its initial historical expression. The contemporary significance of any NT writing does not derive from the fact that it was written expressly for our age but from the conviction that a truth spoken to the first age of Christians can and does remain a truth for every age of believers. Failure to appreciate the historical fashioning and function of Revelation has bred great mischief. The remembrance of things past in this case means freedom from a prison of literalism and openness to the fresh message that the text can offer out of its historical context.

Above all for the Book of Revelation, therefore, the perspective provided by historical-critical analysis enables us to grasp the literary conventions within which the book's meaning is formed and expressed. From it, we learn to read the Book of Revelation as a writing in the apocalyptic genre, and discover how the frame of that genre is itself reshaped by the experience of a crucified and raised Messiah.

Revelation and Apocalyptic

Since there is a fairly extensive discussion of apocalyptic in an earlier section of this book (chap. 2), I will here review only some salient points of that outlook and literature. It arose as a form of literary prophecy within Judaism in response to an erosion

of values from within and an attack on those values from without. It found classic expression in the Book of Daniel (chaps. 7–12) written during the Maccabean period, and it proliferated in a large number of pseudonymous writings both Jewish and Christian. To those wavering in their convictions it counseled fidelity; to those holding firm in obedience to God it encouraged endurance; to those who were losing their life through martyrdom it promised reward; and to those persecuting the faithful it pronounced judgment. Apocalyptic offered the oppressed and persecuted comfort by providing an interpretation of history. Writing in the name of a prophet or sage of the past, a contemporary writer assumed the mantle of prophecy and with it the authority of antiquity in the analysis of the writer's contemporary situation. Thus, present circumstances were retrojected into a prophecy that appeared to the reader to come from the past.

Apocalyptic is essentially a revelational literature. In the spirit, a prophet ascends to heaven, or has portentous dreams, or is transported to nether regions, so that the prophet can see both the present transcendental reality and its future historical realization, then communicate these to others by means of recording the revelations. Such visions of the future and the predictions they breed always have a fictive quality. We have seen as well that apocalyptic uses a standard range of symbols, with a heavy emphasis on numerology, cosmic catastrophes, and fabulous beasts.

The Book of Revelation obviously shares many of the same characteristics. It is, first, a self-consciously *written* composition: "Blessed is whoever reads . . . hears . . . what is *written* [1:3] . . . [and] keeps the words of prophecy of this *book* . . . [22:7]" (cf. 2:1, 8, 12, 18; 3:1, 7, 14; 22:9). The writing is also *visionary* in nature. A "revelation" is, in the apocalyptic tradition, generally something to be beheld. We see this already at the beginning of the writing: John is told, "Write what you see in a book" (1:10). The visions recorded in the book, however, are not the raw experience of mystical states but their literary distillation. The text can be called an "apocalypse [or, revelation] of Jesus Christ" (*apocalypsis Iēsou Christou*; 1:1), with the phrase "of Jesus Christ" understood both in the sense that the revelation comes from him, and is about him. John is told, "Come up hither and I will show you what must take place after this" (4:1), and as he passes through the open door of heaven, he "sees" and "hears" both what now is happening "there" and what will happen on earth. The most characteristically apocalyptic expression in this writing is "I saw" (1:2, 12, 17; 4:1; 5:1-2, 6, 11; 6:1-12; 7:1-2, 9; 8:2, 13; 9:1, 17; 10:1, 5; 13:1-2, 11; 14:1, 6, 14; 15:1, 2, 5; 16:13; 17:3-18; 18:1; 19:11, 17, 19; 20:1, 4, 11-12; 21:1, 2, 22).

Revelation shares with other apocalyptic writings a standard set of symbols. Numbers are important, for they combine an aura of precision with mystery. The number seven is most prominent: lampstands and stars standing for angels and churches (1:20), spirits of God (1:4; 3:1; 4:5), seals (5:1), horns and eyes of the lamb (5:6), trumpets (8:2), thunders (10:3), heads of the dragon (12:3) and of the beast (13:1), bowls (15:7), plagues (15:1), kings (17:9), and thousands killed (11:13). The number four

occurs with the living creatures (4:6-8), horsemen (6:1-8), and the angels at the corners of the earth (7:1). In the biblical tradition, multiples of the number twelve gain an obvious significance by association with the tribes/patriarchs of Israel. So we find that the heavenly Jerusalem has twelve gates and foundation stones, corresponding to twelve apostles and angels (21:12-14); that the tree of life gives twelve fruits (22:2); that the woman clothed with the sun has a crown with twelve stars (12:1); that there are in heaven twenty-four elders and twenty-four thrones (4:4); and that the number of the elect is one hundred forty-four thousand, which equals twelve thousand from each of Israel's twelve tribes (7:4; 14:1-5). The point of all these numbers, of course, is that there is no point to them: they are not precise calculations by the writer. Rather, numbers lend a sacred character to certain realities and the replicated patterns of numbers indicate the existence of a God-ordered cosmos unfolding through a God-ordained plan, a critical element of the apocalyptic framework.

Revelation also has a well-stocked apocalyptic menagerie. On one side there is the "four living creatures" (4:6-8), the "Lamb who was slain yet lives" (5:6), the four horses (6:1-8), the eagle (8:13; 12:14), locusts like cavalry (9:3-11), and the white horse (19:11-16). On the opposite side there is the red dragon (12:3; also known as the ancient serpent, cf. 12:9), a "beast out of the sea" (13:1-2; this beast combines the qualities of leopard, bear, and lion), another "beast out of the earth" (13:11), and the scarlet beast (17:3, 7-12).

There is also no lack of cosmic phenomena. There are heavens that open (4:1), earthquakes, eclipses, dissolutions (6:12-17), angelic guards who hold the four corners of the earth like a carpet and prevent the winds (7:1), thunder, earthquake, lightning (8:5), a series of plagues (8:7-12), and a woman clothed with the sun and with a crown of stars (12:1). The feel of this imagery is perhaps best illustrated by Rev. 10:1-3:

Then I saw another mighty angel coming down from heaven, wrapped in a cloud, with a rainbow over his head, and his face was like the sun, and his legs like pillars of fire. He had a little scroll open in his hand. And he set his right foot on the sea, and his left foot on the land, and called out with a loud voice, like a lion roaring; when he called out the seven thunders sounded.

These fantastic images can, possibly, be teased into some coherent picture, but the exercise would be quite beside the point. No particular number, beast, or star is significant in and of itself; it is the cumulative effect that creates the sense of mystery and transcendence essential for the dramatic impact of the revelation.

Revelation is like other apocalyptic works in this respect as well: despite its elaborate symbolism, it presents a rather straightforward interpretation of history. Appearances to the contrary, God is in charge of the world. Even though God's people suffer tribulations and evil appears to be triumphant (12:7—13:8), God will intervene decisively on behalf of the oppressed (14:14—20:15), bringing history to its goal: the com-

munion of God with humans (21:1—22:5). Moreover, this climax to history is to come “quickly” (1:1; 2:16; 3:11; 11:14; 22:6, 7, 12, 20).

The function of this emphasis is exhortatory: since the outcome is certain and soon, those suffering are given the strength to hold on till the end. The text tells the reader at critical moments, “Here is a call to the endurance and faith of the saints” (13:10; again in 14:12). The final vision of the heavenly Jerusalem descending to earth is accompanied by this assurance: “Whoever conquers shall have this heritage” (21:7). Those who remain steadfast are “victorious” (see 2:7, 11, 17, 26; 3:5, 12, 21), and by their suffering they share in a victory over evil and death (15:2) that was first won by the Lamb who was slain yet now still lives (5:6; 17:14). Thus, as in classical apocalyptic, the motivation of the writer is to secure obedience and faithfulness from a people in the midst of crisis.

In three important ways, however, Revelation also breaks the mold of the “ordinary” apocalypse and secures its unique place among such writings. First, it is a work of great artistry. One need only read snippets of *1 Enoch* to appreciate this point. There is nothing accidental or haphazard in the composition of Revelation: however obscure it appears to the reader, one of the fascinating qualities of the book is the sense of an active and subtle intelligence at work. Even its almost barbarous Greek seems to be deliberate, an evocation of the “sacred” and “biblical” world. Although Revelation contains no direct citation from the OT, it is an elaborate reworking of scriptural texts so seamless and creative that the reworking genuinely results in its own “language”; a work steeped in the diction, terminology, rhythm, motifs, and ethos of the classic OT prophets. Revelation makes particularly heavy use of the classical prophetic texts, such as Amos and Isaiah, and even more of Revelation’s predecessors in apocalyptic—Zechariah, Daniel, and most of all, Ezekiel. From Ezekiel we recognize the heavenly throne chariot, the living creatures, the sea of glass, the sealing of the thousands, the eating of the scroll, the living waters through Jerusalem, and the measuring of the temple. All of this Revelation brings alive in a new and powerful synthesis.

Second, Revelation has elements that resemble the writings stemming from Jewish Merkabah (chariot) mysticism. Such Hekhalot literature (named for the “halls” in the heavenly places visited by the seer) itself derived from the esoteric interpretation of Ezekiel, so the connections are not altogether surprising: the ascent to the “throne chariot” and the description of the “heavenly halls.” Thus, the ascent of the seer to the heavenly places (4:1) in Revelation is standard. But the furnishings of the heavenly court are particularly interesting: the throne with someone seated on it (4:2), the rainbow of gems (4:3), the living creatures (4:6), the sea of glass (4:6), the torches of fire (4:5), the attendant and praising angels (4:6-9), the fiery glassy sea (15:2), the lake of fire (19:20), and the courts of the heavenly city paved with gems (21:15-21). Above all, Revelation resembles the Hekhalot writings with its sacred hymns sung by the angels (4:11), elders (11:16), and saints (15:2-4). Interspersed throughout the visions, they give those visions a quality of liturgy and prayer (see 4:9-11; 5:9-12; 7:10-12; 11:15b,

17-18; 16:5b-7; 19:1-4). The hymns also function, in the style of Greek drama, to give an authorized commentary on the proceedings.

Third, Revelation transcends the apocalyptic genre because of the Christian experience of Jesus. Like all the writings of the NT, its expectations concerning the future are shaped by its acute awareness of God's present power demonstrated by the resurrection of Jesus and the gift of the Spirit. So we find not an anonymous or pseudonymous writing but one written by a contemporary individual well-known to the readers, who tells them of his experience of the risen Lord at a specific time and place (1:9-10). Moreover, John does not engage only in the fictional predictive prophecy of apocalyptic. In the letters to the seven churches of Asia Minor, he addresses what is happening among them now, pronouncing blessings and curses in true prophetic style (2:1—3:22). Thus, classical prophecy is here combined with, rather than merely subsumed by, the apocalyptic mode of communication. The Christ of the church is present to the believers in their present, so the judgment in the community now is as important for the writer as the judgment to come.

Most of all, the conviction that Jesus has risen from the dead as Lord transforms the symbols of apocalyptic. We read not only a revelation *about* Jesus but one that comes *from* him (1:1). His is the voice that speaks through the prophet in the letters. The Son of man is not simply one who will come as judge (14:14) but one who lives now (1:13): "I am the living one; I died and I am alive forevermore" (1:18). Jesus stands before the throne of God as the Lamb who was slain but is now alive (5:6; 7:10). He sits on the white horse bearing the title "Faithful and True" (19:11); his garments are, like the servant's, dipped in blood (Isa. 63:3), and he is called the "Word of God" (19:13). He is "King of kings and Lord of lords" (19:16). He is the bridegroom of the new Jerusalem (21:9) as well as her "temple" (21:22) and "lamp" (21:23).

For Revelation, therefore, the triumph of God over evil and death is not only a future expectation; it has already been realized *in heaven*. Jesus' resurrection is the pledge of God's cosmic victory over evil. The hope of the saints does not rely simply on the promise of God made in the distant past. It is based on the present power of God—manifest in the resurrection of Jesus—and on the proleptic realization of those hopes by the saints who have now joined him in heaven: already the church shares in the resurrection victory through those who have gone ahead. As the visions reveal to the readers, then, the essential victory has already been won. The outcome is not in doubt; the visions of the future simply spell out the inevitable consequences of the triumph already accomplished by Jesus. In the Book of Revelation, as elsewhere in the NT, the characteristic Christian experience of the "already" and the "not yet" transforms the symbols of apocalyptic itself.

Revelation and the Johannine Literature

For a writing preoccupied with the heavenly places, Revelation is firmly rooted in the world of human experience. The seven churches of Asia to which John writes (1:4) are located in well-known cities: Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea. The letters contain small touches that may reflect knowledge of local conditions and traditions. The churches in Philadelphia and Smyrna also received letters from Ignatius of Antioch early in the second century, and Ephesus was the destination of letters written by both Paul and Ignatius. Laodicea is also mentioned in Paul's epistle sent to the Colossian community (Col. 4:13-16).

In the seven "spirit letters" that follow his opening vision (1:9-19), John—the writer and seer—addresses the conditions of these churches. He names allies (like Antipas, the faithful witness; 2:13) and opponents (like Jezebel, the prophetess; 2:20-23). Some opponents are designated as "false apostles" (2:2) and another group is called the "Nicolaitans" (2:6, 15). The latter advocated a liberal policy regarding eating idol meat (2:6, 14, 20), a practice reprehensible to the writer (cf. 1 Cor. 8:1-13). John also refers to "false Jews" (3:9), the "synagogue of Satan" (2:9), "Satan's throne" (2:13), and "the deep things of Satan" (2:24). The allusive nature of these identifications suggests that those so designated were already well known to the readers. The opposition is more elaborately disguised in the visions, but the harlot—"Babylon the great, the mother of whores"—who brings destruction on the saints (17:4-6), clearly is intended to represent the Roman Empire (cf. 17:9-14).

The major question that arises is whether these concrete references suffice to place Revelation within the Johannine world familiar to us from the epistles and the Gospel. The debate in early Christianity over whether the "elder" of the Johannine epistles was to be identified with the "beloved disciple" who wrote the Fourth Gospel carried over into the discussion of the authorship of Revelation. There was never a unanimous consensus on this issue in the early church; the "elder" and the "beloved disciple" were often viewed as separate people. Thus, Papias thought that the writer of Revelation was the "elder" (see Eusebius *Ecclesiastical History* III.39.5-14). But Polycrates, the late second-century bishop of Ephesus, traced the ancient tradition of the Asian churches associated with Revelation back to Philip and John, the beloved disciple (Eusebius *Ecclesiastical History* V.24.2-5).

In either case, some scholars have great difficulty imagining this writing's outlook as existing side by side with that of the letters and the Gospel. They can find a place for it only by placing it very early or very late in a chronological development. Others think of Revelation as another product of the circle or school of Johannine Christianity. They attribute its differences less to the passage of time than to the transformations required by the apocalyptic genre—as opposed to the epistolary or narrative genre. Because of the lack of evidence, however, such connections are open to debate. As for the dating of the work, the clear data it presents of active and organized persecution makes a date toward the end of the first century the most likely.

Once it is granted that the apocalyptic genre drastically reshapes the view of the world, the deep harmony in outlook and symbolization between Revelation and the other Johannine writings is all the more impressive. Only a few points can be touched on here, beginning with the designations for Jesus. In the Fourth Gospel, the title "Lamb of God" was applied to him (1:29, 36). In Revelation, the title becomes the central image for the crucified and raised Messiah. He is the Lamb who was slain but now lives (5:6-8, 12-13; 6:1, 16; 7:9, 10, 14, 17; 12:11; 13:8, 11; 14:1, 4, 10; 15:3; 17:14; 19:7-9; 21:9, 14, 22, 23, 27; 22:1-3). He is also "Son of man" (1:13; 14:14; cf. John 1:51) and "Son of God" (2:18; cf. John 11:27; 20:31; 1 John 3:8). He is the "Word of God" (*logos tou theou*; 1:2, 9; 6:9; and, above all, 19:13; cf. John 1:1-14), and "king"/"King of kings" (1:5; 15:3; 19:16; cf. John 18:29—19:22). As in the other Johannine writings, Jesus is the "faithful witness" (1:5; 3:14; 19:11; cf. John 5:32; 8:14; 1 John 5:9), the one who "loved us and freed us from our sins by his blood" (1:5; cf. 1 John 1:7; 5:6-8; John 19:34), and "the one who comes" (1:4, 8; 2:5; 3:11; cf. John 1:9; 11:27; 1 John 4:2; 5:6; 2 John 7).

Even more striking are some designations associated solely, in the NT, with the Johannine writings. Jesus, for example, identifies himself by "I am" sayings (1:8, 17; 2:23; 21:6; 22:13, 16; cf. John 6:35; 8:12). He is also called "the beginning [*archē*] of God's creation" (3:14) as well as the "beginning and the end" (21:6; 22:13; cf. John 1:1-2; 1 John 1:1). Picking up on Jesus' characteristic speech in the Fourth Gospel, Revelation calls him simply the "Amen" (3:14; cf. John 1:51; 5:19). Jesus also refers to "my Father" (2:28; 3:5, 21; cf. John 5:17, 43; 14:2) and "my God" (3:2, 12; cf. John 20:17). In another distinctively Johannine phrase, Jesus says that just as he has received authority from the Father, he also gives it (2:26-28; cf. John 1:12; 17:2). And the Johannine metaphors of water, light, and life are—each in its own way—attached to Jesus in Revelation: Jesus is the one who will give the thirsty a drink from the fountain of the water of life (7:17; 21:6; 22:1, 17; cf. John 4:14; 7:37-39); from him comes life (2:10; 3:5; 11:11; 22:2, 14, 19; cf. John 1:4; 3:15); and he is the light of the new Jerusalem (21:24; 22:5; cf. John 8:12; 1 John 2:8). Thus, the language used to describe Jesus has real resonance and congruity with the images and expressions from the Fourth Gospel.

The conflicts and loyalties of this community are also symbolized in a manner similar to that in the other Johannine writings. The community's members stand in opposition to those they call "false Jews" (2:9; 3:9), members of the "synagogue of Satan" (2:9; 3:9). We remember how the Fourth Gospel placed Jesus in conflict with the Jews (see esp. John 8:12-58), and believers in conflict with the synagogue (John 9:22). As in the Johannine letters (1 John 3:7; 4:6; 2 John 7), the opponents here are "deceivers" (Rev. 2:20; 12:9; 13:14; 18:23; 19:20; 20:3, 8, 10) who speak with an ungodly spirit (Rev. 13:15; 16:13-14; 18:2; cf. 1 John 4:1-3, where the antichrist is characterized thus). Ultimately, the community's conflict is with Satan, as was the case with Jesus in the Fourth Gospel (Rev. 2:9, 13, 24; 3:9; 12:9, 12; 20:2, 7, 10; cf. John 6:70; 8:44; 13:2, 27). And like the beloved disciple and the believers of the letters, the community in the Book of Revelation is one of "witnesses" (1:2; 2:13; 6:9; 11:3, 10; 19:10; cf. John 19:35; 21:24; 1 John

1:2; 4:14; 5:9-12; 3 John 3, 12) who have, by their faith and love, become "conquerors" over evil and falsehood (Rev. 2:7, 11, 17, 26; 3:5, 12, 21; 21:7; cf. 1 John 2:13-14; 4:4; 5:4-5) just as Jesus has already conquered (Rev. 5:5; 17:14; cf. John 16:33).

The similarities of ostensible setting, context, self-designation, and description of Jesus are indeed striking. If not written by the same person or within the same school, it appears that the seer of Revelation was at least thoroughly familiar with either the Fourth Gospel and epistles or with the symbolic world reflected in those same writings.

Of course, at some point the Johannine symbolic world coalesces with the symbolic world of early Christianity more generally. We cannot say, for instance, that the Johannine symbolic world must be identified solely with the communities associated with the Johannine texts, nor that those same communities necessarily are the point of origin of the Johannine symbolic world itself. In the final analysis, early Christianity was a much more dynamic movement than this, with ideas and motifs constantly intersecting and intermingling. This dynamism is perhaps reflected nowhere else better than in Revelation, where the symbolic world so grounded in one segment of the NT corpus can be utilized in such similar ways in such an obviously different framework. If nothing else, this demonstrates that even a seemingly "renegade" NT writing like Revelation is ultimately grounded in the very heart and soul of early Christian tradition.

A Prophetic Community

Each of the NT writings gives us some sense of the writer's understanding of the church in its social structure and its relationship to Israel and the world. This understanding is conveyed in various ways, including images and titles for community leaders. We have already seen the church designated as temple (1 Cor. 3:16; Eph. 2:21), house of God (Heb. 3:2; 10:21; 1 Pet. 2:5; 4:17), and the saints (1 Cor. 1:2; Eph. 1:1; Heb. 13:24; 1 Pet. 1:15; Jude 3). Among the titles for leaders, we have met apostles, prophets (1 Cor. 12:28-30; Eph. 4:11-12; Rom. 12:6), teachers (Acts 13:1; 1 Cor. 12:28; Eph. 4:11; James 3:1), bishops (Acts 20:28; Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:7), elders (Acts 11:30; 15:2; 20:17; 1 Tim. 5:1-19; Titus 1:5; James 5:14; 1 Pet. 5:1), and deacons (Rom. 16:1; Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:8, 12).

When we look at the Johannine writings apart from Revelation, we are struck by the relative paucity of such designations. The term "apostle" occurs only once, in a nontechnical sense (John 13:16). The only "prophet" is Jesus (John 4:19; 6:14; 9:17), just as the only "teacher" is Jesus (John 1:38; 3:2; 11:28; 13:13-14; 20:16). There are no "bishops" or "deacons," and the only "elder" is the author of 2 and 3 John.

A similar reticence can be observed in Revelation. The term "apostle" is used three times. Twice it refers to contemporaries of the writer: it is used with reference to

people “who call themselves apostles but are not” (2:2; cf. Didache 11.3-12) and those who will rejoice at the fall of Babylon—the “saints, apostles, and prophets” (18:20). The third occurrence is in 21:14, where the walls of the new Jerusalem have twelve foundations, “and on them the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.” These few passages remind us that the symbolism of the Twelve is by no means confined to Luke-Acts, and that the apostles were regarded as playing a foundational role (cf. Eph. 2:20). Except for pretenders, however, the role of the apostle appears to be one relegated to the past.

The term “elder” is used by Revelation in a very restricted way. The seer is not identified by that title, nor is any other human figure on earth. The term “elder” is reserved for the twenty-four elders in heaven (4:4, 10; 5:5, 6, 8, 11, 14; 7:11, 13; 11:16; 14:3; 19:4). As for the designations “teacher,” “bishop,” and “deacon,” they do not occur at all.

In contrast, Revelation prefers the language of *prophecy* when speaking of the community. The title “prophet” is used eight times (10:7; 11:10, 18; 16:6; 18:20, 24; 22:6, 9), the verb “to prophesy” twice (10:11; 11:3), and the noun “prophecy” seven times (1:3; 11:6; 19:10; 22:7, 10, 18, 19). More important than the number of uses is the pattern. First, the language is used not only of specific leaders or holders of office but of the community as a whole. Second, the language intersects repeatedly with other favorite terms. Some of these connections deserve attention.

The author frequently uses the term “servant” (*doulos*) for believers (1:1; 2:20; 7:3; 13:16; 15:3; 19:2, 5, 18; 22:3, 6), and several times it is found in combination with the noun “prophet” (10:7; 11:18; 22:9 [cf. 19:10 where it occurs with verb “to prophesy”]). The language of “witness” or “testimony”—in various forms—is used of the community, carrying with it prophetic resonances throughout. The verb “to bear witness” or “to testify” (*martureō*) is used four times (1:2; 22:16, 18, 20), most interestingly in the combination with “prophecy”: “I testify to everyone who hears these words of prophecy” (22:18). The noun “witness” (*martus*)—as in “one who witnesses/attests/testifies”—is used of Jesus (1:5; 3:14), Antipas (2:13), the mysterious “two witnesses” (11:3), and the martyrs who died and “witnessed in their blood” (17:6). The noun “testimony” or “witness” (*marturia*)—as in the substance of “witnessing”—is used some eight times, and when it appears as *marturia Iēsou* it means both witness “to Jesus” and “by Jesus” (literally, “witness of Jesus” understood both objectively and subjectively; see 1:2, 9; 6:9; 11:7; 12:11, 17; 19:10; 20:4). The most fascinating occurrence again has the explicit connection to prophecy: “The witness [*marturia*] of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy [*prophēteias*]” (19:10).

The term “saints” or “holy ones” (*hagioi*) is another frequent designation. In the singular it refers to God (4:8; 6:10) or Jesus (3:7) as the Holy One. In the plural it refers to believers on earth and the elect in heaven who have triumphed over death (see 5:8; 8:3, 4; 13:7, 10; 14:12; 17:6; 18:20; 19:8; 20:6, 9; 22:21). As with the term “servant,” the author brings this term into combination with the language of prophecy: enemies “have shed the blood of saints and prophets” (16:6; cf. 11:18; 18:24).

These combinations suggest that the author of Revelation regards the church as a *prophetic community*. It is a community of saints and of servants, whose prophetic office is carried out by their bearing witness to Jesus; like the prophets of the OT, they testify to God's truth and judgment in an overtly hostile environment. We notice as well that these terms are applied alike to those struggling on earth, to those triumphant in heaven, and to Jesus; there is a continuity in the prophetic vocation in Revelation—a fellowship of prophetic witness. The prophetic image is further enhanced by the way language about the Spirit (*pneuma*) is used. As we have already seen, this simple equation can be drawn: "The witness of Jesus ["to Jesus"] is the *spirit* of prophecy" (19:10). And God can be called "the Lord . . . of the *spirits* of the prophets" (22:6). Further, it is both the Spirit and the Bride (the community) who call out to the Bridegroom (Christ), "Come" (22:17). Thus, the "Spirit of God" is intimately connected to the understanding of the believers as prophetic witnesses: the spirit is upon them and they are prophesying/testifying in the last days (cf. Joel 2:28-32; Acts 2:17-21).

The description of the representative figures of the church also employs the language of prophecy. First, there is the seer himself—he has written a "book of prophecy" (1:3; 22:18-19). When he addresses the seven churches, it is the "Spirit" who speaks through him (2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22; cf. 14:13), indicating that the prophetic revelation is from God (22:16). This is further confirmed by the fact that in his visions, he is carried away "in the Spirit" (1:10; 4:2; 17:3). After eating the scroll in imitation of the great OT prophet Ezekiel (10:9-10; cf. Ezek. 2:8-3:3), he is told, "You must again prophesy about many peoples and nations and tongues and kings" (10:11). Indeed, the seer and his community are explicitly singled out as "prophets" by the angel, their fellow "servant" (22:9). Thus, the seer is first and foremost a prophet, one who imitates, but also surpasses, the classic Israelite prophets of the OT.

The other representative figures of the community are the "two witnesses" (11:3-13). They appear during an interlude following the command of the angel to John that he should "prophesy again" (10:11). They are not named but are sufficiently known to the readers to be recognizable by the titles "olive trees" and "lampstands" (11:4). The terms "witnessing" and "prophesying" are used interchangeably of them. We read, "I will grant my two witnesses power to prophesy" (11:3), and find that "the days of their prophesying" (11:6) are the same as the period of "their witnessing" (11:7). Their works, furthermore, recall those of the prophets Elijah and Moses (11:6), and their end is like that of the witness/prophet Jesus. They are killed as he was "in the city where their Lord was crucified" (11:8). The one responsible for their death is the "beast that ascends from the bottomless pit and makes war on them" (11:7). This beast anticipates the "beast from the Sea" in 13:1, who also "makes war on the saints to conquer them" (13:7). Like Jesus also, the two witnesses/prophets rose from the dead, going "up to heaven in a cloud" (11:12). Commentators debate whether they are real, specific individuals within the community or representative of

the community as a whole. In any case, one can thus trace the succession: first Jesus, then the community that follows Jesus, and, finally, its representatives—are all prophets who bear witness to the revelation of God's righteous judgment in the world.

The prophetic imagery affects the picture of the community's opponents as well. In the letter to Thyatira, the rival leader "Jezebel"—not her real name but an allusion to the idol-worshiper and great opponent of the prophet Elijah (cf. 1 Kings 16:31)—is termed a "prophetess" (2:20), whose encouragement to her followers to eat idol meat amounts to teaching "the deep things of Satan" (2:20, 24). In the visions, the demonic opponents of the saints possess caricatured prophetic features. Just as Jesus is a "faithful witness" who is seen as a slain lamb, so the second beast—the one from the earth, the second representative of the dragon Satan (12:13—13:2)—is pictured as having "two horns like a lamb" but a voice "like a dragon" (13:11-18). This beast is later referred to as a "false prophet" (16:13-14):

I saw issuing from the mouth of the dragon and from the mouth of the beast and from the mouth of the false prophet, three foul spirits like frogs, for they are demonic spirits, performing signs.

We also read, "The beast was captured, and with it the false prophet who in its presence had worked the signs by which it deceived those who had received the mark of the beast" (19:20). And the final victory is achieved when "the devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulphur where the beast and the false prophet were" (20:10). Thus, both the human and grander demonic opponents of the earthly community and its heavenly counterpart are portrayed as mirrors of the Christian prophetic witness. As the Christian prophets speak "in and through the Spirit," these false prophets speak through foul demonic spirits. Much like the ancient "contest" between Moses and the magicians of Egypt (Exod. 7:8-25), the present is also a "contest" between the prophets of God bearing witness to the truth and the prophets of the Devil testifying to falsehood and deception.

The Witness of Jesus Is the Spirit of Prophecy

Christians continue and imitate the witness first presented by Jesus. He was the faithful and true witness (1:5; 3:14) who came into the world to "bear witness to the truth" (John 18:37). Because of his testimony, he was killed by a hostile world, and his witness was therefore sealed with his blood (1:5; 5:9; 7:14; 19:13). As in the other Johannine writings, Revelation views the Spirit's function as continuing the witness of Jesus in the world through the lives of Christians (cf. John 16:7-11). Insofar as Jesus continues to "speak" through the Spirit, his prophetic role continues even in this book, which is a

"revelation from Jesus Christ" (1:1) and a "witness by Jesus" (19:10). But as Christians continue to keep God's commandments, living in obedience to God by Jesus' faith, they also "witness to Jesus" (19:10) in the world.

Witness in Tribulation and Temptation: The Letters (2:1—3:22)

In the Book of Daniel the esoteric message of the visions (chaps. 7–12) is preceded by a series of folk tales that contain the same basic message in exoteric form (chaps. 1–6). So are the great visions of the Book of Revelation preceded by seven letters to the churches of Asia Minor, which prepare for the visions by addressing similar issues through straightforward exhortation.

In the letters, the voice of prophecy is open and direct. The prophet speaks in the name of Jesus and with his Spirit. Jesus is revealed in the opening vision as "standing in the midst of the lampstands" (1:13), which, we are told, "are the seven churches" (1:20). Here is the resurrected Lord present to the church through the Spirit. Such prophetic speech as we find here may reflect the liturgical practice of the primitive community (cf. 1 Cor. 12–14). We find in the prophetic utterances sayings that also appear in other NT writings (cf. Rev. 3:3 and 1 Thess. 5:2, Matt. 24:43; Rev. 3:20 and Matt. 24:33, James 5:9; see chap. 6, above).

The letters—or, more formally, decrees or edicts—follow a strict four-stage pattern:

(1) Each begins with the command to the seer that he should write to a specific church—"to the angel of the church at Ephesus, write" (2:1; cf. 2:8, 12, 18; 3:1, 7, 14). The addressee is actually the "angel" of the church, the heavenly counterpart to the individual communities (1:20). Moreover, each opening statement contains a reference to Jesus as the one who speaks.

(2) Jesus is then identified by a series of epithets: He is the one "who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands (2:1); "the first, the last, who died and came to life" (2:8; cf. 1:17; 22:13); the one "who has the sharp, two-edged sword" (2:12; cf. 1:16); the "Son of God" (2:18); the one who has the "seven spirits of God and the seven stars" (3:1; cf. 1:4; 5:6; 22:6); the "Holy One, the True One, who has the key of David" (3:7; cf. 5:5; 22:16); and the "Amen, the faithful and true witness, the Beginning of God's creation" (3:14). This assemblage of names and titles is strongly reminiscent of the process of "naming Jesus" in the opening sequence of the Fourth Gospel (John 1:29–51). The epithets, which are explicitly based on the opening vision (1:9–20), provide literary signals that connect the letters to the later visions of the book as well.

(3) There follows the statement "I know," which leads to the description of the churches' respective situations (2:2, 9, 13, 19; 3:1, 8, 15), containing commendation or judgment. For some of the communities, there is praise: they have patiently endured (2:2, 3, 19; 3:10); come through tribulation and poverty (2:9); held fast to the name (2:13); and have kept love, faith, and service (2:19). Other communities receive mostly

blame: they have abandoned love (2:4); fallen into idolatry and immorality (2:14-15, 20-22); and developed a tepid Christian practice (3:15).

(4) Every one of the communities receives an exhortation (2:5, 7, 10-11, 16-17, 25, 29; 3:3-4, 11, 18-19) and a promise (2:7, 11, 17, 26-28; 3:5, 12, 20-21), placed in the context of the repetition of the phrase: "let everyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches" (2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22).

Despite the rich symbolism, the message of the letters is straightforward: patiently endure and hold fast to the convictions and practice of the Christian life, being faithful to God in the face of the present trials. Despite their tribulation and poverty, the communities are to continue their witness. Moreover, they are to resist the temptation to idolatry and immorality. Just as in the stories of Daniel, there is nothing complicated in this exhortation. Jesus, as the resurrected Lord, is present with them in their experience; he knows what they suffer, and will reward them if they endure and punish them if they fall away. By maintaining their fidelity to Jesus, they continue to bear prophetic testimony in the world.

Witness in Persecution and Death: The Visions

Once the seer passes through the open door of heaven (4:1), he and the readers are swept into a world quite unlike any other. The visions of Revelation are dazzling in their imagery, even if not altogether coherent. I will not add here to the endless store of studies devoted to the structure, sequence, and symbolism of these visions. Beneath the complex sequences of seals, trumpets, bowls, and beasts, four fundamental convictions are expressed.

The first conviction is that "in heaven" the victory over evil and death has already been won by God and the Messiah. The idolatrous powers strutting the earth are illusory; there is but one power controlling history. Second, the apparent dominance of evil in human affairs is itself part of God's triumphant plan, and those who come through suffering and persecution faithfully receive the reward of eternal life with God. God is in control of the world, and evil is not running rampant; rather, everything is taking place according to God's design. Third, the history of humans has a goal even on earth: the time of the suffering of the saints will come to an end, the visible and effective rule of God among humans will be established, and the wicked will be judged. Fourth, those who share the witness of Christ on earth in the face of death will share as well in heaven his victory over death.

In the visions, we see that the witness of believers to Jesus can lead to the shedding of their blood (6:10; 7:14; 12:11; 16:6; 17:6; 18:24). More than the avoidance of idolatry and immorality may be demanded of the Christian; the giving of one's life itself may be necessary. And if it is, there is the knowledge that those who so die share in the witness of the one "who was slain but now lives" (5:6) and who ransomed humans by his blood (5:9). Indeed, the garments of the saints are "washed in the

blood of the Lamb" and made pure (7:14), indicating that those who imitate the death of Jesus are saved by his atoning death for them. Now we understand the logic of being a witness (*martus*), as it culminates in "martyrdom." There is also a reversal: just as the blood of Jesus and the saints is spilled now, so the blood of the wicked will soon be on the garments of Christ when he comes to judge with a vengeance (19:13; cf. Isa. 63:1-6).

That the Christians addressed by the visions faced real death cannot be doubted. The seer observes in heaven "under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God, and for the witness they had borne" (6:9); and in the battle against the dragon, "they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their own lives even unto death" (12:11). The beast from the earth—the false prophet—makes war on the saints, trying to conquer them (13:7); he marks everyone with his seal, making them slaves (13:16). The Christians, again, bear witness in these battles by laying down their lives in imitation of Jesus.

The persecution suffered by the saints is one sponsored by the great harlot Babylon (14:8; 17:1-18). Just as the Babylon of old waged war on God's people Israel, so too the new Babylon—the Roman Empire—is devoted to the destruction of God's people in Christ. Even though 18:2—19:8 is a hymn celebrating her great fall, for those whose lives are still within her grasp she remains a powerful and demonic presence: "In her was found the blood of the prophets and saints and of all who have been slain on the earth" (18:24).

Here there can be no positive evaluation of the governing powers such as we saw in Rom. 13:1-7 or 1 Pet. 2:13-17. The reason is simple: the state has usurped powers never intended for it, becoming a "beast" that demands ultimate allegiance; making idolatrous claims that cannot be acknowledged by Christians. It is in this context that one must understand the significance of Jesus being called "Lord of lords": Christians cannot accept the power of any institution as supreme because Christ reigns over all. At the same time, Revelation does not advocate a violent or armed rebellion against the iniquitous power of the state. It essentially promotes a passive resistance. While Christians do not organize a revolt against Rome, they also do not obey its idolatrous commands. They must keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus, even if it results in their death. The message underlying all the visions comes down, therefore, to precisely the same exhortation as in the Johannine letters: "Here is a call for the endurance of the saints, those who keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus" (14:12; cf. 13:10).

This prophetic church can bear such witness because of its conviction, rooted in the experience of the resurrection of Jesus, that this earthly life is not all there is, that there remains a heavenly reward for a life now given in prophetic witness to the truth of God's claim over the world. Indeed, such Christians are convinced that their very suffering and death help speed the realization of God's victory (12:10-11):

Now the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of the Messiah have come, for the accuser of our comrades has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God. And they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death.

The final and glorious vision in Revelation is, of course, that of the heavenly Jerusalem, coming down from above, together with the ringing affirmation from the throne (21:3):

Behold, the dwelling of God is with humans. [God] will dwell with them, and they shall be [God's] people, and God will be with them.

Here is the final reconciliation of earth and heaven—of God's life and creation—by which Revelation draws full circle back to Genesis 1–2. The end of time is a new creation of heaven and earth; a returning but also a transformation of God's original work. It cannot be accomplished by human effort, but can only come from the source of all reality, who declares, "Behold, I make all things new" (21:5). Only with this final restoration will evil truly be banished from the earth (21:8, 27). And despite the threat of eternal punishment for those who reject this gift, there is still the hope for a universal extension of this life. By the light of the Lamb even the nations shall walk (21:24), and "the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations" (22:2):

There shall no more be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it and the servants shall worship [God]. They shall see [God's] face and [God's] name shall be on their foreheads. And night shall be no more; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they shall reign for ever and ever (22:3–5).

In Jewish tradition, no one was allowed to see God's face nor speak the holy name. Here, however, the very "face" and "name" of God are manifested to the faithful prophets who have endured until the end. God's glory—revealed only partially and proleptically before—has finally come to dwell fully among humans as they reign with God in the new temple. This reign of the saints is described as an eternal act of worship: they have been called to be a "kingdom of priests" (1:6; 5:10; 20:6), whose final and best *witness* is to join the heavenly creatures in praising God. In Revelation, prayer is both a prophetic act and the most powerful political posture.

Study Questions

1. What do the terms "millenarian" and "apocalyptic" mean? In what senses is Revelation an apocalypse? How is it different?
2. What does Revelation share in common with the Gospel of John in terms of vocabulary, theme, and perspective?
3. How would you state the central message of the letters to the seven churches in your own words? How was this message particularly important in the first century? In what sense is it an enduring message?
4. What role does persecution play in Revelation? What do we know about the persecutions of the early church in the first century?

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