

The Book of Revelation: Introduction

1. The Form of the Book of Revelation

At first impression the book of Revelation resembles a letter to be read by an audience (1:3-4; 22:18). After a brief introduction, the readers are greeted (1:4) and the author concludes with a blessing (22:21). It does, however, become apparent that the author sets aside the epistolary form of his composition as he progresses to the central sections of the work, for the main body of the book resembles a homily.

During his exile on the island of Patmos, the author received a vision and he was instructed to convey the content of these visions to seven churches in Asia Minor. The author takes advantage of this opportunity to analyse the spiritual decline of some of these churches, and he rebukes them for turning away from the Christian faith and coming under the influence of pagan false teachers (Rev. 2:3). However, a note of consolation is more prominent in the book, and he directs his message to all who listen (2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22). In the central sections the author offers a long series of visions which appear predominantly in groups of seven. Some of these visions deal with the State's opposition to the Church, and he regards this as a clear indication of the imminent End. He declares that the Messiah has come to the world, and he graphically portrays the punishment that will be inflicted on those who remain under the influence of the Antichrist. The Roman empire will be destroyed, and Christ will reign in glory with the martyrs for a thousand years in a new Jerusalem and a new earth will be established; then the final victory over the enemies of Christ will be won, and the powers of darkness will be conquered for ever. This, briefly, is the message of consolation that the author offers to those who live during this period of persecution.

Nevertheless, the value of Revelation as a Christian document has not always been accepted, particularly with regard to its claim to be included in the NT canon. One reason for this scepticism is the difficulty with which one can interpret the enigmatic symbols that are scattered throughout the work. But the main reason, it seems, is that it contains several elements that appear to be contrary to the Gospel preached by Jesus: the saints cry out for revenge (18:20); the birds are invited to gather and eat the flesh of kings and mighty men (19:17-18), and with regard to those who worship the beast, it is prophesied that 'the smoke of their torment goes up for ever and ever' (14:11). It is no wonder that some come to the conclusion that it is not worthy to be included with other NT works; D.H. Lawrence described it as 'the Judas of the NT' (*Apocalypse*, 14).

But the Christian message of the book cannot be denied: Jesus himself takes centre stage, and his salvific work and final victory are emphasized. It does not include all the various aspects of the Christian gospel, but certain themes are expressed more

clearly here than elsewhere in the NT: the importance of faithfulness to God and the significance of the sufferings of those who are persecuted because of this faithfulness; the conviction that God controls the whole course of history, and that his final victory over the powers of darkness is secured; the reality of the invisible, heavenly world where perfect worship to God is offered and where everyone can partake of eternal life.

2. Who wrote the Book of Revelation?

At the beginning of the book, the author introduces himself as 'John, the servant of Jesus Christ' (1:1) and refers to himself three further times as 'John' (1:4, 9; 22:8). He takes for granted that his readers will know him without giving of further details, and it becomes evident that he is well-informed about the background and spiritual condition of the seven churches to whom he writes (cf. 2:25, 13, 19, 21; 3:10). It can also be deduced that he was a Jewish Christian who was well-versed in apocalyptic traditions of his time, and was extremely familiar with the Hebrew version of the OT; it is frequently proposed that, though writing in Greek, John's first language was Hebrew.

But who was this author? According to those early Church fathers who make references to the book, its author was John the apostle (John the son of Zebedee). The note of authority that permeates the book is then to be explained on the basis of the apostolic authority of its author. Some even go so far as to suggest that the fury of his message is completely in accordance with the character of the one who is known in the Gospel of Mark as one 'of the sons of thunder' (Boanerges: 3:17). Very few scholars today accept this traditional view concerning the authorship of Revelation, for which the following reasons can be offered:

i) Not once in Revelation does the author give any indication that he is an apostle. He does not appeal to his apostolic authority, nor does he state that he was an eyewitness to Jesus' ministry. To the contrary, he refers to the apostles in a way which implies that he was not counted in their midst (21:14: 'And the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb').

ii) If the composition of the book of Revelation is dated at the end of the first century AD, then John the Apostle cannot be regarded as its author, for he, according to tradition (Papias), was martyred by the Jews before the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. This tradition has, however, been shown to be late and unreliable, and that more store should be placed upon another tradition which states that John survived to the end of the first century and lived in Ephesus (Irenaeus). But even if the validity of this second tradition is accepted, the apostle would be at least eighty years old when Revelation was written.

iii) If one accepts that John the apostle is the author or the authority behind the Fourth Gospel, it would be impossible to regard him also as the author of Revelation. There are major differences between them in language, style and content. The author of the Fourth Gospel writes freely in Greek, but Revelation is full of clumsy idioms, unusual constructions and Semitic idioms. Some attempts have been made to explain these linguistic differences between the Gospel of John and Revelation: it has been suggested that Revelation was written twenty years before the Gospel, and that the author, in the meantime, had made his home in Asia Minor where he succeeded in improving his style and perfecting his Greek grammar. Another suggestion is that the author deliberately adopted a unique and idiosyncratic language and style in order to effectively present the colourful symbols and the enigmatic images that are found scattered throughout the work. The main problem with all these proposals is that they overlook the fact that the differences between Revelation and the Fourth Gospel cannot be explained simply in terms of language, for they are also distinct from one another in content and theology. Many key Johannine terms are absent from Revelation: e.g. light, truth, love. Such considerations make it impossible, according to most commentators, to regard the author of the Fourth Gospel as having composed Revelation.

It has alternatively been suggested that the apostle John did *not* write Revelation, but that the actual author wrote under the pseudonym 'John' so that his readers would believe that it was actually composed by John the apostle; this would inevitably put a stamp of authority on his composition. A number of apocalyptic writers adopt this custom, namely attributing their works to important figures from the past (e.g. Enoch, Ezra, Baruch). However, this theory has not been widely accepted for Revelation. If the author did intend using the name 'John' as a pseudonym, and if he wanted to make clear that the John in question was none other than John the Apostle, he would not simply have referred to himself as a 'prophet' and as a 'servant' of Jesus Christ (1:1, 3; 22:9). It is more likely, therefore, that another John wrote the book of Revelation, and that the Church fathers simply assumed that he was John the Apostle.

Who was this John? He seems to have been well-known to a wide circle of believers towards the end of the first century, and that they regarded him as an authoritative figure. Some commentators have, therefore, sought to identify the author with prominent figures who bore the name John, including John the presbyter, John Mark, and even John the Baptist. Of these three, the most likely is John the presbyter, for we know, on the basis of Papias' testimony, that he lived in Ephesus towards the beginning of the second century, and this would be in accordance with the likely location of the author and of the date of his composition.

It seems that all one can say with certainty is that the author was a Jewish Christian prophet whose name was John. The differences between Revelation and the Fourth

Gospel make it extremely unlikely that the same author was responsible for the two, but there is sufficient common themes between them to suggest some kind of relationship (in both Christ is described as the Logos (1:1-18; Rev. 19:13) and as 'the Lamb of God' (1:29; Rev. 5:6); both focus upon such terms as life (Jesus gives the water of life: John 4:10; 7:38; Rev. 21:6; 22:17), death, hunger and thirst). In all likelihood, therefore, they are the products of two authors, but two authors who belonged to the same theological 'school' in Asia Minor. It has even be proposed that the author of Revelation was a disciple of John the Apostle, the authority behind the Fourth Gospel (C.K.Barrett).

3. When was Revelation written?

A number of commentators during the twentieth century share the view that Revelation was written towards the end of the first century AD. This dating is supported by traditions of the Early Church, for Irenaeus specifically states that Revelation was written 'during the end of the reign of Domitian' (i.e. between 81-96 CE). With regard to the contents of the book, it is frequently notes that the following aspects indicate a late dating:

i) The Situation of the Churches as Portrayed in Rev. 2-3. It is often proposed that the situation of the churches reflected in Rev. 2-3 favours a later date: a) A great deterioration in the spiritual condition of some of the churches to which the author refers (e.g. Ephesus, Sardis, and Laodicea). A decline of this kind could only have taken place over a number of years, a long time after Paul had established churches in these centres. b) According to Polycarp, the church in Smyrna was not established until AD 60-64, but Rev. 2:8-11 suggests that it had been existence for many years. c) There is some evidence that the city of Laodicea was destroyed by an earthquake in AD 60-61 (Tacitus, *Annales* 14:27); but by the time of the composition of Revelation, it had once again been established as a prosperous city (3:17). These factors, when considered together, point to a later date.

ii) Revelation seems to have been written during a period of persecution, when immense tension existed between the Church and the State. The Roman emperor is depicted as a beast who makes 'war on the saints and conquers them' (13:7). In 17:6 John sees the harlot who is Babylon-Rome drunk on the blood of the saints and the blood of the witnesses of Jesus. In 20:4, participation in the thousand-year reign is promised to the martyrs who have been beheaded because of their testimony for Jesus. Indeed some indications of persecution were already evident in Asia Minor: a man called Antipas, a member of the church in Pergamum, had been killed (2:13), and the author himself had been exiled to the island of Patmos because of his Christian beliefs (1:9). Some of the members of the Church in Smyrna were also in danger of being imprisoned, and even killed because of their faith (2:10), and the members of the church in Philadelphia are warned about 'the hour of trial which is coming on the whole world' (3:10). It must be admitted that the author never refers

directly to Domitian as the Roman emperor of the period, but the references to Christian persecution are completely in accordance with what is known from other documents about the situation of the Christians during his reign (e.g., Cassius Dio). It has been noted that there is very little evidence of a general persecution of Christians by Domitian in Asia Minor, and that the persecution carried out by Nero was far more extreme; but the author is in fact drawing attention to the potential persecution that the Christians might have to face, and that it does not necessarily follow that all his predictions came true.

iii) The Imperial Cult. The Book of Revelation was written during a period when the Roman emperor demanded that he be worshipped by his subjects (13:4, 12, 15-16; 14:9, 11; 16:2; 19:20; 20:4). Even during the pre-Christian period it was quite common for the Roman emperors to be the object of worship (e.g. Julius Caesar and Caligula), but it was during the reign of Domitian that a concerted effort was made to expand and develop the imperial cult and make it the official policy of the Empire for the first time. Domitian expected his subjects to address him as 'Our Lord and our God' (*dominus et deus noster* : Suetonius, *Domitian*, 13); he also set up images and statues of himself in various important centres, including Ephesus (built a new imperial temple).

iv) *Nero Redivivus* A late date for Revelation is also implied by the use made in the book of the popular legend concerning Nero's return. Nero committed suicide in AD 68, but the legend developed that he would return to the world again to continue his oppressive reign. It seems that at least two forms of the legend were being circulated. According to the earlier version, Nero did not die, but had succeeded in escaping to Parthia in the east and was hiding there, waiting for the opportunity to return with his soldiers and leading the Parthians in a great battle against the Roman empire. At a later stage, a different version of the legend developed: Nero had died and would be raised from the dead, appearing in the form of a beast arising from the bottomless pit. It has been suggested that the earlier form of the version is reflected in Rev. 17:11-18 (17:8: 'the beast was and is not, and is to come'), and that an echo of the later version can be detected in Rev. 13:11-17 (13:3: the mortal wound in the head of the beast that was healed). Since legends of this kind could not have developed immediately after Nero's death, it is proposed that one cannot date Revelation until later.

Some commentators do favour an earlier date for the Book of Revelation, and it has been proposed that it should be dated during or shortly after the reign of Nero (AD 54-68); this is the view of J.A.T. Robinson, *Redating the New Testament*, 221-53. The following counter-arguments support an earlier dating:

i) Against the view that spiritual decline points to a late date, it can be noted that this could also happen to first generation Christians. I and II Thessalonians demonstrate

the difficulties in belief and behaviour experienced by first generation Christians (see also Galatians - turning so quickly to another Gospel).

ii) The Christian Church has certainly undergone intense persecution. The question is: when did such persecution take place? The persecution of Roman Christians by Nero was just as fierce - massacres of early Christians.

iii) How is Christianity related to the imperial cult? It is shown that there is no evidence of the imperial cult in Rev. 2-3 - the admonition and encouragements can be explained as stemming from the harassment of local Jews, action of local magistrates etc. The evidence for the fact that Christians were required to pay homage to Caesar comes from the reign of Trajan (AD 98-117). But emperor worship had in fact flourished in Asia Minor since the reign of Augustus. Even Nero tried to play the role of Augustus (large statue of Nero set up in the Temple of Mars).

iv) Must one offer a late date for the Nero Redivivus myth? Rumours of Nero's reappearance started to develop a year after his death (Tacitus, *Histories*, 2:8). Note also the description in 17:9-11 of the seven kings, five of whom have already fallen, one is now reigning and the other has yet to come. The beast who was and is not is the eighth, and yet one of the seven. With which emperor does the list begin? It is suggested that one should begin with Augustus, since Julius was never made emperor (period of Augustus was the golden age). It is also proposed that one can overlook the three general kings (Galba, Otho, Vitellius) who only reigned between June 68 and December 69. If so the list is as follows: Augustus, Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius, Nero, Vespasian, Titus, Domitian. Thus five emperors from Augustus to Nero have reigned, the one who is is Vespasian, Titus is still to come (but will only reign for two years). If so, one can date Revelation during the reign of Vespasian (AD 69 onwards). It was written shortly before the fall of Jerusalem, during the Jewish war.