

THE THEOLOGY OF THE BOOK OF REVELATION

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Reading the Book of Revelation

WHAT KIND OF A BOOK IS REVELATION?

It is important to begin by asking this question, because our answer determines our expectations of the book, the kind of meaning we expect to find in it. One of the problems readers of the New Testament have with Revelation is that it seems an anomaly among the other New Testament books. They do not know how to read it. Misinterpretations of Revelation often begin by misconceiving the kind of book it is.

At least in the case of ancient books, the beginning of the work is usually the essential indication of the kind of book it is intended to be. The opening verses of Revelation seem to indicate that it belongs not to just one but to three kinds of literature. The first verse, which is virtually a title, speaks of the *revelation* of Jesus Christ, which God gave him and which reaches God's servants through a chain of revelation: God → Christ → angel → John (the writer) → the servants of God. The word 'revelation' or 'apocalypse' (*apokalypsis*) suggests that the book belongs to the genre of ancient Jewish and Christian literature which modern scholars call apocalypses, and even though we cannot in fact be sure that the word itself already had this technical sense when John used it there is a great deal in Revelation which resembles the other works we call apocalypses.

However, 1:3 describes Revelation as a *prophecy* intended to be read aloud in the context of Christian worship, and this claim to be a prophecy is confirmed by the epilogue to the book (cf. 22:6-7, which echoes 1:1-3, and especially 22:18-19). But

then 1:4–6 can leave no doubt that Revelation is intended to be a *letter*. Verses 4–5a follow the conventional form of letter-opening used by Paul and other early Christian leaders: statement of writer and addressees, followed by a greeting in the form: ‘Grace to you and peace from ...’ There are differences from Paul’s usual form, but the early Christian letter form is clear and is confirmed by the conclusion of the book (22:21), which is comparable with the conclusions of many of Paul’s letters. Thus Revelation seems to be an apocalyptic prophecy in the form of a circular letter to seven churches in the Roman province of Asia. This is explicit in 1:11: what is revealed to John (what he ‘sees’) he is to write and send to the seven churches which are here named. This command applies to all the visions and revelations which follow in the rest of the book. The habit of referring to chapters 2–3 as the seven ‘letters’ to the churches is misleading. These are not as such letters but prophetic messages to each church. It is really the whole book of Revelation which is one circular letter to the seven churches. The seven messages addressed individually to each church are introductions to the rest of the book which is addressed to all seven churches. Thus we must try to do justice to the three categories of literature – apocalypse, prophecy and letter – into which Revelation seems to fall. In considering each in turn it will be appropriate to begin with prophecy.

REVELATION AS CHRISTIAN PROPHECY

Virtually all we know about John, the author of Revelation, is that he was a Jewish Christian prophet. Evidently he was one of a circle of prophets in the churches of the province of Asia (22:6), and evidently he had at least one rival: the Thyatiran prophetess whom he considers a false prophet (2:20). Thus to understand his book we must situate it in the context of early Christian prophecy. John must normally have been active as a prophet in the churches to which he writes. The seven messages to the churches reveal detailed knowledge of each local situation, and 2:21 presumably refers to an earlier prophetic oracle of his, addressed to the prophetess he calls Jezebel at Thyatira.

John was no stranger to these churches but had exercised a prophetic ministry in them and knew them well.

Since Christian prophets normally prophesied in the context of Christian worship meetings, we must assume that this is what John usually did. The reading of this written prophecy in the worship service (1:3) was therefore a substitute for John's more usual presence and prophesying in person. Usually in the early churches prophets delivered oracles which were given to them by God in the worship meeting. They declared the revelation as they received it (cf. 1 Cor. 14:30; *Hermas*, *Mand.* 11:9). It took the form of a word of God spoken to the church, under the inspiration of the Spirit, in the name of God or the risen Christ, so that the 'I' of the oracle was the divine person addressing the church through the prophet (cf. *Odes Sol.* 42:6). But early Christian prophets seem also to have received visionary revelations which they conveyed to the church later in the form of a report of the vision (cf. Acts 10:9-11:18; *Hermas*, *Vis.* 1-4). In this case the vision was initially a private experience, even if it happened during the worship service, and was only subsequently reported to the church as prophecy. We can make a useful, though not absolute, distinction between these two types of prophecy: oracles, spoken in the name of God or Christ, and reports of visions, in which the prophets had received revelations in order subsequently to pass them on to others. The whole book of Revelation is a report of visionary revelation, but it also includes oracular prophecy within it. This occurs in the prologue (1:8) and the epilogue (22:12-13, 16, 20); the seven messages to the churches (2:1-3:22) are oracles written as Christ's word to the churches; and also throughout the book (e.g. 13:9-10; 14:13b; 16:15) there are prophetic oracles which interrupt the accounts of the visions.

Yet if Revelation resembles in a very general way the kind of prophecy John might have delivered orally in person, it is also a far more elaborate and studied composition than any extemporary prophecy could have been. Revelation is a literary work composed with astonishing care and skill. We should certainly not doubt that John had remarkable visionary experiences, but he has transmuted them through what must have been a

lengthy process of reflection and writing into a thoroughly literary creation which is designed not to reproduce the experience so much as to communicate the meaning of the revelation that had been given him. Certainly Revelation is a literary work designed for oral performance (1:3), but as a complex literary creation, dense with meaning and allusion, it must be qualitatively different from the spontaneous orality of most early Christian prophecy.

Therefore it may not have been just because he could not be with his churches in person that he wrote this prophecy. He wrote from Patmos (1:9), an inhabited island not far from Ephesus. It has most often been assumed that 1:9 indicates he was exiled there, whether in flight from persecution or legally banished to the island. This is possible, but it is also possible that he went to Patmos in order to receive the revelation ('on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus' could refer back to 1:2, where these terms describe what he 'saw'; but on the other hand, cf. 6:9; 20:4).

Although most early Christian prophecy was oral, not written, John had plenty of models for a written prophecy, both in the prophetic books of the Hebrew scriptures and in the later Jewish apocalypses. In its literary forms what he writes is indebted to both kinds of model. It is clear that John saw himself, not only as one of the Christian prophets, but also as standing in the tradition of Old Testament prophecy. For example, in 10:7 he hears that 'the mystery of God will be fulfilled, as he announced to his servants the prophets'. The reference (with allusion to Amos 3:7) is almost certainly to the Old Testament prophets. But then John goes on to record his own prophetic commissioning (10:8-11) in a form which is modelled on that of Ezekiel (Ezek. 2:9-3:3). His task is to proclaim the fulfilment of what God had revealed to the prophets of the past. The whole book is saturated with allusions to Old Testament prophecy, though there are no formal quotations. As a prophet himself, John need not quote his predecessors, but he takes up and reinterprets their prophecies, much as the later writers in the Old Testament prophetic tradition themselves took up and reinterpreted earlier proph-

cies. It is a remarkable fact, for example, that John's great oracle against Babylon (18:1-19:8) echoes every one of the oracles against Babylon in the Old Testament prophets, as well as the two major oracles against Tyre.¹ It seems that John not only writes in the tradition of the Old Testament prophets, but understands himself to be writing at the climax of the tradition, when all the eschatological oracles of the prophets are about to be finally fulfilled, and so he interprets and gathers them up in his own prophetic revelation. What makes him a Christian prophet is that he does so in the light of the fulfilment already of Old Testament prophetic expectation in the victory of the Lamb, the Messiah Jesus.

REVELATION AS AN APOCALYPSE

Biblical scholarship has long distinguished between Old Testament prophecy and the Jewish apocalypses, which include the Old Testament book of Daniel as well as such extra-canonical works as 1 Enoch, 4 Ezra and 2 Baruch. The extent and character of the continuity and the differences between prophecy and apocalyptic are highly debatable. But the distinction means that the relationship between Revelation and the Jewish apocalypses has also been debated. Often the issue has been posed in a misleading way, as though John himself would have made the kinds of distinction modern scholars have made between prophecy and apocalyptic. This is very unlikely. The book of Daniel, which was one of John's major Old Testament sources, he would certainly have regarded as a prophetic book. If he knew some of the post-biblical apocalypses, as he most probably did, he will have seen them as a form of prophecy. The forms and traditions which Revelation shares with other works we call apocalypses John will have used as vehicles of prophecy, in continuity with Old Testament prophecy.

We may still ask in what sense Revelation belongs to the

¹ Babylon: Isa. 13:1-14:23; 21:1-10; 47; Jer 25:12-38; 50-1. Tyre: Isa. 23; Ezek. 26-28. For this point, as with many other aspects of Revelation's use of the Old Testament, I am indebted to the important work of J. Fekkes III, 'Isaiah and Prophetic Traditions in the Book of Revelation: Visionary Antecedents and their Development' (Ph.D. thesis, University of Manchester, 1988).

genre of ancient religious literature we call the apocalypse. J. J. Collins defines the literary genre apocalypse in this way:

'Apocalypse' is a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial, insofar as it involves another, supernatural world.²

The reference to eschatological salvation would be disputed in some recent study of the apocalypses. Although the apocalypses have conventionally been thought to be about history and eschatology, this is not necessarily true of all of them. The heavenly secrets revealed to the seer in the extant Jewish apocalypses cover a rather wide range of topics and are not exclusively concerned with history and eschatology.³ John's apocalypse, however, is exclusively concerned with eschatology: with eschatological judgment and salvation, and with the impact of these on the present situation in which he writes. The heavenly revelation he receives concerns God's activity in history to achieve his eschatological purpose for the world. In other words, John's concerns are exclusively prophetic. He uses the apocalyptic genre as a vehicle of prophecy, as not all Jewish apocalypists did consistently. So it would be best to call John's work a prophetic apocalypse or apocalyptic prophecy. With that qualification, it obviously fits the definition of the genre apocalypse quoted above, and there should be no difficulty in recognizing its generic relationship to the Jewish apocalypses, while at the same time acknowledging its continuity with Old Testament prophecy.

There are many ways in which John's work belongs to the apocalyptic tradition. He uses specific literary forms and particular items of apocalyptic tradition that can also be traced in the Jewish apocalypses.⁴ But for our purposes, it is more impor-

² J. J. Collins, 'Introduction: Towards the Morphology of a Genre', *Semeia* 14 (1979), 9.

³ See especially C. Rowland, *The Open Heaven* (London: SPCK, 1982).

⁴ For examples of Jewish apocalyptic traditions in Revelation, see R. Bauckham, 'Resurrection as Giving Back the Dead: A Traditional Image of Resurrection in the Pseudepigrapha and the Apocalypse of John', forthcoming in J. H. Charlesworth and C. A. Evans, eds., *The Pseudepigrapha and the New Testament: Comparative*

tant to indicate two very broad ways in which Revelation stands in the tradition of Jewish apocalyptic literature.

In the first place, John's work is a prophetic apocalypse in that it communicates a disclosure of a transcendent perspective on this world. It is prophetic in the way it addresses a concrete historical situation – that of Christians in the Roman province of Asia towards the end of the first century AD – and brings to its readers a prophetic word of God, enabling them to discern the divine purpose in their situation and respond to their situation in a way appropriate to this purpose. This contextual communication of the divine purpose is typical of the biblical prophetic tradition. But John's work is also *apocalyptic*, because the way that it enables its readers to see their situation with prophetic insight into God's purpose is by disclosing the content of a vision in which John is taken, as it were, out of this world in order to see it differently. Here John's work belongs to the apocalyptic tradition of visionary disclosure, in which a seer is taken in vision to God's throne-room in heaven to learn the secrets of the divine purpose (cf., e.g., 1 Enoch 14–16; 46; 60:1–6; 71; 2 Enoch 20–1; Ap. Abr. 9–18).

John (and thereby his readers with him) is taken up into heaven in order to see the world from the heavenly perspective. He is given a glimpse behind the scenes of history so that he can see what is really going on in the events of his time and place. He is also transported in vision into the final future of the world, so that he can see the present from the perspective of what its final outcome must be, in God's ultimate purpose for human history. The effect of John's visions, one might say, is to expand his readers' world, both spatially (into heaven) and temporally (into the eschatological future), or, to put it another way, to open their world to divine transcendence. The bounds which Roman power and ideology set to the readers' world are broken open and that world is seen as open to the greater purpose of its transcendent Creator and Lord. It is not

that the here-and-now are left behind in an escape into heaven or the eschatological future, but that the here-and-now look quite different when they are opened to transcendence.

The world seen from this transcendent perspective, in apocalyptic vision, is a kind of new symbolic world into which John's readers are taken as his artistry creates it for them.⁵ But really it is not another world. It is John's readers' concrete, day-to-day world seen in heavenly and eschatological perspective. As such its function, as we shall notice in more detail later, is to counter the Roman imperial view of the world, which was the dominant ideological perception of their situation that John's readers naturally tended to share. Revelation counters that false view of reality by opening the world to divine transcendence. All that it shares with the apocalyptic literature by way of the motifs of visionary transportation to heaven, visions of God's throne-room in heaven, angelic mediators of revelation, symbolic visions of political powers, coming judgment and new creation – all this serves the purpose of revealing the world in which John's readers live in the perspective of the transcendent divine purpose.

A second important sense in which Revelation stands in the tradition of the Jewish apocalypses is that it shares the *question* which concerned so many of the latter: who is Lord over the world? Jewish apocalypses, insofar as they continued the concerns of the Old Testament prophetic tradition, were typically concerned with the apparent non-fulfilment of God's promises, through the prophets, for the judgment of evil, the salvation of the righteous, the achievement of God's righteous rule over his world. The righteous suffer, the wicked flourish: the world seems to be ruled by evil, not by God. Where is God's kingdom? The apocalyptists sought to maintain the faith of God's people in the one, all-powerful and righteous God, in the face of the harsh realities of evil in the world, especially the political evil of the oppression of God's faithful people by the great pagan empires. The answer to this problem was always, essentially, that, despite appearances, it is God who rules his

⁵ See D. L. Barr, 'The Apocalypse as a Symbolic Transformation of the World: A Literary Analysis', *Int.* 38 (1984), 39–50.

creation and the time is coming soon when he will overthrow the evil empires and establish his kingdom.⁶ John's apocalypse in important ways shares that central apocalyptic concern. He sees God's rule over the world apparently contradicted by the rule of the Roman Empire, which arrogates divine rule over the world to itself and to all appearances does so successfully. He faces the question: who then is really Lord of this world? He anticipates the eschatological crisis in which the issue will come to a head and be resolved in God's ultimate triumph over all evil and his establishment of his eternal kingdom. How John deals with these themes is significantly distinctive, as we shall see, but the distinctiveness emerges from his continuity with the concerns of the Jewish apocalyptic tradition.

DIFFERENCES FROM OTHER APOCALYPSES

At this point, having fully recognized that Revelation belongs to the literary genre of the apocalypse, we should notice two purely formal, literary ways in which it is distinctive when compared with other apocalypses. The first is rarely noticed. John's work is highly unusual in the sheer prolific extent of its visual imagery. It is true that symbolic visions are typical of the genre. But in other apocalypses other forms of revelation are often as important or more important. There are often long conversations between the seer and the heavenly revealer (God or his angel), in which information is conveyed in terms quite different from the visual symbols that dominate Revelation (cf., e.g., 4 Ezra 3-10; 2 Bar. 10-30). There are often long passages of narrative prophecy (e.g. Dan. 11:2-12:4), of which Revelation has very little (cf. 11:5-13; 20:7-10). The proportion of visual symbolism in Revelation is greater than in almost any comparable apocalypse. But there are further differences beside the proportion. Symbolic visions in the apocalypses commonly have to be interpreted by an angel who explains their meaning to the seer (e.g. 4 Ezra 10:38-54; 12:10-36; 13:21-56; 2 Bar. 56-74). Such interpretations are rare in

⁶ See, e.g., R. Bauckham, 'The Rise of Apocalyptic', *Them.* 3/2 (1978), 10-23; Rowland, *Open Heaven*, 126-35.

Revelation (7:13-14; 17:6-18), whose visual symbols are so described as to convey their own meaning. The symbols can thus retain a surplus of meaning which any translation into literal terms runs the risk of reducing.

Furthermore, the kind of symbolic vision which is typical of the apocalypses is relatively short and self-contained, comprising just one section of an apocalypse (e.g. Dan. 7; 8; 4 Ezra 10; 11-12; 13). The imagery of such a vision will be peculiar to it, not recurring in other parts of the apocalypse. Revelation, by contrast, is really (from 1:10 to 22:6) a single vision. The imagery is common to the whole. From time to time the scene shifts and fresh images may be introduced, but, once introduced, they may recur throughout the book. Thus John's vision creates a single symbolic universe in which its readers may live for the time it takes them to read (or hear) the book. Both the profusion of the visual imagery and the unity and continuity of the visionary sequence make Revelation distinctive among the apocalypses.

This is not to be explained simply by supposing that John had a remarkably powerful visual imagination. The power, the profusion and the consistency of the symbols have a literary-theological purpose. They create a symbolic world which readers can enter so fully that it affects them and changes their perception of the world. Most 'readers' were originally, of course, hearers. Revelation was designed for oral enactment in Christian worship services (cf. 1:3).⁷ Its effect would therefore be somewhat comparable to a dramatic performance, in which the audience enter the world of the drama for its duration and can have their perception of the world outside the drama powerfully shifted by their experience of the world of the drama. Many of the apocalypses could have something of this effect. But Revelation's peculiarly visual character and peculiar symbolic unity give it a particular potential for communicating in this way. It is an aspect of the book to which we shall return.

A second formal, literary difference between Revelation and

⁷ See D. L. Barr, 'The Apocalypse of John as Oral Enactment', *Int.* 40 (1986) 243-56.

the Jewish apocalypses is that, unlike the latter, Revelation is not pseudepigraphal. The writers of Jewish apocalypses did not write in their own names, but under the name of some ancient seer of the biblical tradition, such as Enoch, Abraham or Ezra. The explanation for this phenomenon is not easy to discern.⁸ It is unlikely that the authors of the apocalypses seriously intended to deceive, more probable that they wished to claim the authority of an ancient tradition, in which they felt themselves to stand, rather than an independent authority of their own. But pseudepigraphy had an important literary consequence. The authors of apocalypses had to set them fictionally in a situation in the distant past. Of course, they were writing for their own contemporaries and with their own situation in view, but they could not do so explicitly, except by representing the apocalyptic seer as foreseeing the distant future, the period at the end of the age in which the real author and his readers lived.

By contrast, John writes in his own name. He is certainly very conscious of writing within the tradition of the Old Testament prophets, but he is himself a prophet within that tradition. Since he stands at the culmination of the whole tradition, on the brink of the final eschatological fulfilment to which all prophecy had ultimately pointed, his authority is if anything greater than that of his predecessors. Of course, the authority really resides not in himself but in the revelation of Jesus Christ to which he bears prophetic witness (1:1-2). But his prophetic consciousness is such that, like Isaiah or Ezekiel, he feels no need of pseudonymity but writes in his own name (1:1, 4, 9; 22:8) and relates his own commissioning to prophesy (1:10-11, 19; 10:8-11).

It is instructive to compare 22:10 with the verses on which it is modelled, at the end of the book of Daniel, the canonical apocalypse to which John's prophecy is much indebted.⁹ The angel tells Daniel: 'keep the words secret and the book sealed

⁸ See, e.g., D. S. Russell, *The Method and Message of Jewish Apocalyptic* (London: SCM Press, 1964), 127-39; Rowland, *Open Heaven*, 240-5; D. G. Meade, *Pseudonymity and Canon* (WUNT 39; Tübingen: Mohr (Siebeck), 1986), chapter 4.

⁹ G. K. Beale, *The Use of Daniel in Jewish Apocalyptic Literature and in the Revelation of St John* (Lanham, New York and London: University of America Press, 1984).

until the time of the end . . . Go your way, Daniel, for the words are to remain secret and sealed until the time of the end' (Dan. 12:4, 9). Daniel's visions relate to a future distant from the time in which Daniel lived. His prophecy is to remain secret, hidden in a sealed book, until the time of the end when the people who live at that time will be able to understand it. John's angel gives strikingly different instructions: 'Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book, for the time is near' (22:10; cf. 1:3). John's prophecy is of immediate relevance to his contemporaries. It relates not to a distant future but to the situation John himself shares with his contemporaries in the seven churches of Asia. Hence he evokes this situation at the opening of his prophecy: 'I John, your brother who share with you in Jesus the persecution and the kingdom and the patient endurance . . .' (1:9). Hence he addresses, not just the seven messages of chapters 2-3, but the whole book to his contemporaries in the seven churches of Asia (1:4, 11). It is their situation which is the eschatological situation on which the end of history immediately impinges.

This explicit contemporaneity of John with his readers means that he can address their actual situation not only more explicitly but also with more concreteness and particularity than was possible for apocalyptists writing under an ancient pseudonym. This brings us back to the third literary genre to which Revelation belongs: the letter.

REVELATION AS A CIRCULAR LETTER

The whole book of Revelation is a circular letter addressed to seven specific churches: Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, Laodicea (1:11; cf. 1:4; 22:16). They are probably named in the order in which they would be visited by a messenger starting from Patmos and travelling on a circular route around the province of Asia. But many misreadings of Revelation, especially those which assume that much of the book was not addressed to its first-century readers and could only be understood by later generations, have resulted from neglecting the fact that it is a letter.

The special character of a letter as a literary genre is that it enables the writer to specify those to whom he or she is writing and to address their situation as specifically as he or she may wish. Writings in most other literary genres are in principle addressed to a much less clearly defined audience: anyone who might plausibly be expected to read the work. Letters may, of course, prove of interest and value to readers beyond the circle of the specified addressees. This is how some apostolic letters, such as Paul's, came to circulate to churches other than those to which they were originally sent and eventually became part of the New Testament canon. A letter-writer such as Paul might even *expect* his letter to be passed on to readers other than those he addresses (cf. Col. 4:16). But it remains the case that such readers are not actually addressed. The more specifically the content of the letter relates to the concerns and situation of its addressees, the more other readers have to read it as a letter not to themselves, but to other people. This need not diminish its value to readers other than the addressees. 1 Corinthians, for example, deals very specifically with problems in the church at Corinth at the time of writing, but it has proved valuable to very many other readers. Such readers read it appropriately when they take account of the fact that it was written to the Corinthian church. It can speak to them, but only when something of the context of its original addressees becomes part of the way it speaks to them.

A circular letter could not usually be as specific as a letter to a single group of addressees could be. One need only compare Paul's letters to specific churches with Ephesians (probably originally a circular letter to a number of churches) or 1 Peter, to realize the difference. In Revelation, however, John has employed an apparently original method of writing a circular letter which speaks as specifically as could be desired to each particular church. While most of his work is intended for all the churches indiscriminately, he introduces it with a series of seven specific messages from Christ to the seven churches (chapters 2-3). Each message is specifically relevant to the situation of the church addressed, which John knew well. These seven messages show us that the seven churches were

very different, facing different problems and reacting very differently to common problems. Christ speaks individually to each church. But the messages are not self-contained. Each is an introduction to the rest of the book.

That the seven messages are introductory to the rest of the book can be seen especially from the promises to the conquerors which complete each message: Christ makes a promise of eschatological salvation (specified in terms which usually have some special appropriateness to the church addressed) to 'the one who conquers' (2: 7, 11, 17, 26-8; 3:5, 12, 21). In each of the very different church situations, the call is to be victorious. But the meaning of victory is unexplained. What it is to conquer becomes clear only from the rest of the book, in which the conquerors appear and it is revealed what they conquer and in what their victory consists. Then the formula of the promises to the conquerors, used in each of the seven messages, reappears just once, in the vision of the new Jerusalem (21:7). Thus the call to conquer, addressed to the Christians in each of the seven churches in chapters 2-3, is a call to engage in the eschatological battle described in the central chapters of the book, in order to reach the eschatological destiny described at the end of the book. In a sense the whole book is about the way the Christians of the seven churches may, by being victorious within the specific situations of their own churches, enter the new Jerusalem. While the book as a whole explains what the war is about and how it must be won, the message to each church alerts that church to what is specific about its section of the battlefield.

So the seven messages provide seven different introductions to the rest of the book. John has designed a book which, very unusually, is intended to be read from seven explicitly different perspectives, though of course these are perspectives within a broader common situation which all seven churches share. Although Revelation after chapters 2-3 is not specific to the situation of any one church, it is specific to their common situation as Christian churches in the Roman Empire towards the end of the first century AD. The device of the seven messages enables John to engage appropriately with seven different

contexts in which his book would be read and also to integrate those contexts into the broader perspective of the rest of the book, in which John is concerned with the worldwide tyranny of Rome and, even more broadly, with the cosmic conflict of God and evil and the eschatological purpose of God for his whole creation. In this way he shows the Christians of each of the seven churches how the issues in their local context belong to, and must be understood in the light of, God's cosmic battle against evil and his eschatological purpose of establishing his kingdom.

The fact that John explicitly and carefully contextualizes his prophetic message in seven specific contexts makes it possible for us to resist a common generalization about Revelation: that it is a book written for the consolation and encouragement of Christians suffering persecution, in order to assure them that their oppressors will be judged and they will be vindicated in the end. The common, uncritical acceptance of this generalization probably has to do with the fact that it is a generalization often made about apocalyptic literature as a whole.¹⁰ We need not discuss here how far apocalyptic literature in general functions as consolation for the oppressed, because in the case of Revelation it is quite clear from the seven messages that encouragement in the face of oppression was only one of the needs of the seven churches. The messages show that John addresses a variety of situations which he perceives as very different. By no means all of his readers were poor and persecuted by an oppressive system: many were affluent and compromising with the oppressive system. The latter are offered not consolation and encouragement, but severe warnings and calls to repent. For these Christians, the judgments which are so vividly described in the rest of the book should appear not as judgments on their enemies so much as judgments they themselves were in danger of incurring, since worshipping the beast was not something only their pagan neighbours did. Worshipping the beast was something many of John's Christian readers were tempted to do or were actually doing or even (if they

¹⁰ E.g. Russell, *Method and Message*, 17.

listened, for example, to the prophet 'Jezebel' at Thyatira) justified. Whether the visions bring consolation and encouragement or warning and painful challenge depends on which of the groups of Christians depicted in the seven messages a reader belongs to. Moreover, as we shall see in chapter 4 of this book, the call to 'conquer' which is addressed to all the churches in the seven messages, transcends both consolation and warning. It calls Christians to a task of witnessing to God and his righteousness for which the consolations and warnings of the seven messages are designed to prepare them.

Once we have fully recognized the specificity of the seven messages to the churches, it is possible to ask whether John also envisaged other readers. Why does he write to *seven* churches? These were by no means the only Christian churches in the province of Asia, and John must surely have expected his work to be passed on from these seven to other churches in the area and even farther afield. The definitiveness with which he seems to envisage his prophecy as the final culmination of the whole biblical prophetic tradition suggests a relevance for all Christian churches. This is what the number seven must indicate. We shall observe quite often in this book the symbolic significance which attaches to numbers in Revelation. Seven is the number of completeness.¹¹ By addressing seven churches John indicates that his message is addressed to specific churches as *representative* of *all* the churches. This conclusion is confirmed by the refrain – a summons to attend to a prophetic oracle – which occurs in each of the seven messages: 'Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches' (2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22). This seems to invite all readers to listen to the message addressed to each of the seven churches. It does not diminish the specificity of what is said to each church, as peculiarly relevant to that particular church. It means that precisely by addressing very specifically a variety of actual church situations, Revelation addresses a *representative* variety of contexts. The range of different situations in these seven churches is sufficient for any Christian church in the late

¹¹ Note the way that the Muratorian Canon claims that both John (in Revelation) and Paul actually wrote to *all* churches by writing to seven.

first century to find analogies to its own situation in one or more of the messages and therefore to find the whole book relevant to itself. Churches in later periods have been able to do the same, allowing for a necessary degree of adjustment to changing historical contexts.

UNDERSTANDING THE IMAGERY

We have already noticed the unusual profusion of visual imagery in Revelation and its capacity to create a symbolic world which its readers can enter and thereby have their perception of the world in which they lived transformed. To appreciate the importance of this we should remember that Revelation's readers in the great cities of the province of Asia were constantly confronted with powerful images of the Roman vision of the world. Civic and religious architecture, iconography, statues, rituals and festivals, even the visual wonder of cleverly engineered 'miracles' (cf. Rev. 13:13-14) in the temples¹² – all provided powerful visual impressions of Roman imperial power and of the splendour of pagan religion.¹³ In this context, Revelation provides a set of Christian prophetic counter-images which impress on its readers a different vision of the world: how it looks from the heaven to which John is caught up in chapter 4. The visual power of the book effects a kind of purging of the Christian imagination, refurbishing it with alternative visions of how the world is and will be. For example, in chapter 17 John's readers share his vision of a woman. At first glance, she might seem to be the goddess Roma, in all her glory, a stunning personification of the civilization of Rome, as she was worshipped in many a temple in the cities of Asia.¹⁴ But as John sees her, she is a Roman prostitute,

¹² S. J. Scherrer, 'Signs and Wonders in the Imperial Cult: A New Look at a Roman Religious Institution in the Light of Rev 13:13-15', *JBL* 103 (1984), 599-610.

¹³ See P. J. J. Botha, 'God, Emperor Worship and Society: Contemporary Experiences and the Book of Revelation', *Neot.* 22 (1988), 87-102.

¹⁴ Cf. D. Magie, *Roman Rule in Asia Minor to the End of the Third Century after Christ* (Princeton University Press, 1950), 1613-14; S. R. F. Price, *Rituals and Power: The Roman Imperial Cult in Asia Minor* (Cambridge University Press, 1984), 40-3, 252, 254; R. Mellor, *ΘΕΑ ΠΩΜΗ: The Worship of the Goddess Roma in the Greek World* (Hypomnemata 42; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1975), 79-82.

a seductive whore and a scheming witch, and her wealth and splendour represent the profits of her disreputable trade. For good measure there are biblical overtones of the harlot queen Jezebel to reinforce the impression. In this way, John's readers are able to perceive something of Rome's true character – her moral corruption behind the enticing propagandist illusions of Rome which they constantly encountered in their cities.

It should be clear that the images of Revelation are symbols with evocative power inviting imaginative participation in the book's symbolic world. But they do not work merely by painting verbal pictures. Their precise literary composition is always essential to their meaning. In the first place, the astonishingly meticulous composition of the book creates a complex network of literary cross-references, parallels, contrasts, which inform the meaning of the parts and the whole. Naturally, not all of these will be noticed on first or seventh or seventieth reading. They are one of the ways in which the book is designed to yield its rich store of meaning progressively through intensive study. Secondly, as we have already noticed, Revelation is saturated with verbal allusions to the Old Testament. These are not incidental but essential to the way meaning is conveyed. Without noticing some of the key allusions, little if anything of the meaning of the images will be understood. But like the literary patterning, John's very precise and subtle use of Old Testament allusions creates a reservoir of meaning which can be progressively tapped. The Old Testament allusions frequently presuppose their Old Testament context and a range of connexions between Old Testament texts which are not made explicit but lie beneath the surface of the text of Revelation. If we wonder what the average Christian in the churches of Asia could make of this, we should remember that the strongly Jewish character of most of these churches made the Old Testament much more familiar than it is even to well-educated modern Christians. But we should also remember the circle of Christian prophets in the churches (cf. 22:9, 16) who would probably have studied, interpreted and expounded John's prophecy with the same kind of learned attention they gave to the Old Testament prophecies.

As well as their pervasive allusion to the Old Testament, the images of Revelation also echo mythological images from its contemporary world. The serpent or the dragon, Revelation's symbol for the primeval source of evil in the world, the devil (12:3-9), is a good example of a symbol with strong biblical roots (Gen. 3:14-15; Isa. 27:1) which Revelation evokes, but also with wide cultural resonances in the minds of contemporary readers, owing to its prominence in pagan mythology and religion.¹⁵ Another type of contemporary allusion is the idea of invasion from the East (9:13-19; 16:12). Here John takes up a very real political fear in the Roman Empire in the first century AD, since the threat of invasion from the Parthian Empire was widely felt. It had the same kind of overtones of conquest by a cruel and alien civilization which the threat of Russian invasion had for many western Europeans in the period of the Cold War, though for some of Rome's eastern subjects it offered the prospect of liberation from Roman oppression. When Revelation pictures the kings of the East invading the Empire in alliance with 'the beast who was and is not and is about to ascend from the bottomless pit' (17:8), it is echoing the contemporary myth which pictured the emperor Nero – remembered by some as a villainous tyrant, transfigured by others into a saviour-figure – returning one day at the head of the Parthian hordes to conquer the Roman Empire.¹⁶ In ways such as these, John's images echo and play on the facts, the fears, the hopes, the imaginings and the myths of his contemporaries, in order to transmute them into elements of his own Christian prophetic meaning.

Thus it would be a serious mistake to understand the images of Revelation as timeless symbols. Their character conforms to the contextuality of Revelation as a letter to the seven churches of Asia. Their resonances in the specific social, political, cultural and religious world of their first readers need to be understood if their meaning is to be appropriated today. They

¹⁵ R. Bauckham, 'The *Figurae* of John of Patmos', in Ann Williams, ed., *Prophecy and Millenarianism: Essays in Honour of Marjorie Reeves* (London: Longman, 1980), 116-21; in revised form: chapter 6 ('The Lion, the Lamb and the Dragon') in Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy*.

¹⁶ See chapter 11 ('Nero and the Beast') in Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy*.

do not create a purely self-contained aesthetic world with no reference outside itself, but intend to relate to the world in which the readers live in order to reform and to redirect the readers' response to that world. However, if the images are not timeless symbols, but relate to the 'real' world, we need also to avoid the opposite mistake of taking them too literally as descriptive of the 'real' world and of predicted events in the 'real' world. They are not just a system of codes waiting to be translated into matter-of-fact references to people and events. Once we begin to appreciate their sources and their rich symbolic associations, we realize that they cannot be read either as literal descriptions or as encoded literal descriptions, but must be read for their theological meaning and their power to evoke response.

Consider, for example, the descriptions of the plagues of the seven trumpets (8:6-9:21) and the seven bowls (16:1-21). These form a highly schematized literary pattern which itself conveys meaning. Their content suggests, among many other things, the plagues of Egypt which accompanied the exodus, the fall of Jericho to the army of Joshua, the army of locusts depicted in the prophecy of Joel, the Sinai theophany, the contemporary fear of invasion by Parthian cavalry, the earthquakes to which the cities of Asia Minor were rather frequently subject, and very possibly the eruption of Vesuvius which had recently terrified the Mediterranean world.¹⁷ John has taken some of his contemporaries' worst experiences and worst fears of wars and natural disasters, blown them up to apocalyptic proportions, and cast them in biblically allusive terms. The point is not to predict a sequence of events. The point is to evoke and to explore the meaning of the divine judgment which is impending on the sinful world.

The last of the seven bowls results in the fall of Babylon in an earthquake of unprecedented proportions (16:17-21). If we took this as literal prediction, we should soon find it contra-

¹⁷ For these allusions, see, as well as the commentaries, J. M. Court, *Myth and History in the Book of Revelation* (London: SPCK, 1979), chapter 3; R. Bauckham, 'The Eschatological Earthquake in the Apocalypse of John', *Novum Testamentum* 19 (1977), 224-33, which becomes chapter 7 ('The Eschatological Earthquake') in Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy*.

dicted by later images of the downfall of Babylon. In 17:16, Babylon, now portrayed as a harlot, is stripped, devoured and burned by the beast and the ten kings. The traditional punishment of a harlot is here superimposed on the image of a city sacked and razed to the ground by an army. Chapter 18 extends the image of a city besieged and burned to the ground (cf. especially 18:8: 'pestilence ... famine ... burned with fire'), but we are also told both that the site of the city becomes the haunt of the desert creatures (18:2) and that the smoke from her burning continues to ascend for ever (19:3). On the literal level, these images are quite inconsistent with each other, but on the level of theological meaning, conveyed by the allusions to the Old Testament and to contemporary myth, they offer complementary perspectives on the meaning of Babylon's fall. The earthquake of 16:17–21 is that which accompanies the theophany of the holy God coming to final judgment. The sacking of Babylon by the beast and his allies alludes to the contemporary myth of the return of Nero to destroy Rome. It is an image of the self-destructive nature of evil, which on the level of theological meaning is not inconsistent with the idea of the destruction of evil by divine judgment but presents it under another aspect. The fire of 17:16 becomes in chapter 18 the fire of divine judgment, of which the paradigmatic Old Testament instance was the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. Like an apocalyptic Sodom sunk in the eternal lake of fire and sulphur, Babylon's smoke ascends for ever (cf. Gen. 19:28; Rev. 14:10–11; 19:20). The desolation of Babylon as a haunt of desert creatures evokes Old Testament prophetic pictures of the fate of both Edom and Babylon, the two great enemies of the people of God in much of Old Testament prophecy. All this – with much more in these chapters – makes up a wonderfully varied but coherent evocation of the biblical and theological meaning of the divine judgment John's prophecy pronounces on Rome; but if we try to read it as prediction of how that judgment will occur we turn it into a confused muddle and miss its real point.

Perhaps enough has been said to indicate that the imagery of Revelation requires close and appropriate study if modern

readers are to grasp much of its theological meaning. Misunderstandings of the nature of the imagery and the way it conveys meaning account for many misinterpretations of Revelation, even by careful and learned modern scholars. In this book, we need especially to stress the way John has developed his literary use of imagery into a distinctive mode of theological thought and communication. Because Revelation does not contain theological discourse or argument of the kind with which readers of the New Testament are familiar in, for example, the Pauline letters, it should not be thought to be any less a product of profound theological reflection. Its images are by no means a vaguer or more impressionistic means of expression than the relatively more abstract conceptual argument of a Pauline letter. They are capable both of considerable precision of meaning and of compressing a wealth of meaning into a brief space by evoking a range of associations. The method and conceptuality of the theology of Revelation are relatively different from the rest of the New Testament, but once they are appreciated in their own right, Revelation can be seen to be not only one of the finest literary works in the New Testament, but also one of the greatest theological achievements of early Christianity. Moreover, the literary and theological greatness are not separable.