Introduction

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

The Revelation: What Is It?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Revelation: Why Was It Written?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

> 11 *Let those who do wrong continue to do wrong; let those who are vile continue to be vile; let those who do right continue to do right; and let those who are holy continue to be holy.*"
>
> 12 "*Look, I am coming soon! My reward is with me, and I will give to everyone according to what they have done.* 13 *I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End.*
>
> 14 "*Blessed are those who wash their robes, that they may have the right to the tree of life and may go through the gates into the city.* 15 *Outside are the dogs, those who practice magic arts, the sexually immoral, the murderers, the idolaters and everyone who loves and practices falsehood.*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

2. Jeremiah 51:45.

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

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

The Revelation: Who Wrote It?

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

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

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

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

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

The Revelation: When Was It Written?

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

Some Concluding Words about Interpretation

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

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

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

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

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

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

4. See 1 Cor 5:9–11.

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

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

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

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