

Early Centuries

The Apocalypse of John

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Among the books of the Bible there can be few that have been so widely utilized as the Apocalypse of John. From early times this book has been a favorite for those believers and communities who wait expectantly for “the end” (however that is conceived), for it has long been assumed that this is what the Apocalypse, or “Revelation,” is really all about. Down through the Christian centuries, therefore, careful attention has been paid to this book and much energy expended upon trying to understand more precisely what it is about the end that the book of “Revelation” actually reveals. The most widely accepted interpretation is that it reveals the events that will occur as the end of the world approaches; it is, in short, and to use the title of this book that has now become synonymous with its presumed contents, a timetable of the Apocalypse (Froom, 1946–54).

While it is true that interest in the book has a long and distinguished history (Sir Isaac Newton, for example, was fascinated by it, as his posthumously published *Observations upon the Prophecies* [1733] clearly shows), in recent times there has been no let-up in interpretative endeavor. And there are some extreme examples of the same: infamously, it was this book above all others that led David Koresh and his Branch Davidian community to self-destruct in Waco in 1993 (Newport, 2006). It is this book, too, which inspires much of the thinking in the now massively successful, and, one suspects, influential, *Left Behind* series. Contemporary evidence shows also how the Apocalypse of John has left its mark on many aspects of popular

culture and in the genres of music, literature, and art (Kovacs and Rowland, 2003; Newport and Walliss, forthcoming).

There has been a great deal of discussion regarding the authorship of this book. “John” is named as the author in four places (1.1, 4, 9; 22.8), with no further identifying information. Assuming that the work is not consciously pseudepigraphical, the traditional view is that the “John” in question is the author of the gospel of John (not that that book names “John” as its author), himself taken to be the brother of James, one of Jesus’ disciples (see Matt. 4:21). There are problems with this view, however, not the least of which is that the Greek of the Apocalypse is a very strange Greek indeed and not at all like that found in the Gospel. In fact, it would seem that whoever the author of the Apocalypse was, he (or just perhaps she) was much more at home linguistically in a Semitic rather than Hellenistic context, thinking in Aramaic perhaps, and with a thorough acquaintance with Hebrew, but writing in Greek (Thompson, 1985). And there are other indications that a thoroughly Semitic mind is at work here. For example, although the Hebrew Scriptures are never directly quoted, more verses than not in Revelation show the influence of the Hebrew texts (Moyise, 1996). Indeed, so soaked through with Jewish thought, literature, and language is the book of Revelation that some have even suggested that it originated as Jewish text that has been edited by a later Christian writer (Massyngberde Ford, 1975).

There is in fact little question that the author of the Apocalypse was a Jew. However, like Paul and most of the other early Christians, this Jew had come to the conclusion that Jesus was the Messiah and indicates that it was as a result of this belief that he had been exiled to the Isle of Patmos, a Greek Island in the Aegean Sea (Rev. 1:9). The fact that the author was an exile is important for an understanding of the text, as is the commonly held view that his exile coincided with a period of persecution of the Christian church at the hands of the Roman state. Again there is some dispute here: was this, as is most commonly thought, a period of persecution toward the end of the first century CE or an earlier one, perhaps in the 60s? In either case the experience has left its mark on the author whose theology is understandably reflective of it. This is a text born of suffering – both communal and individual. It is one also which comes from a period during which there is great external pressure to conform to society’s norms. The message that comes loud and clear in response is “I [Jesus] am coming soon; hold fast to what you have, so that no one may seize your crown” (Rev. 3:11).

Certainly the “end of the world” and the return of Jesus is a theme of significant importance to the author of the Apocalypse. However, some, most famously Rowland (1972), have raised a fundamental challenge to the

notion that “apocalyptic” literature really has “the end” as its principal concern. The Greek word *apocalypsis* (the word used in Rev. 1:1), it is argued, is rather about “drawing back the veil,” that is, to “un-cover—*apo-kaluptein*” something. This act of “uncovering” might of course include aspects of revealing what is to come (see Rev. 1:1 and 4:1), but more central to the genre’s concern is the act of taking the seer “behind the scenes” of this world so as to put on show the heavenly reality behind the earthly façade. In the Apocalypse, John is hence taken through a door into heaven (Rev. 4:1, 2) and given in effect a tour of God’s dwelling place, the purpose of which is to reassure him, as the one who is to speak to God’s persecuted and distressed community, that whatever the outward appearance, God is in control and that all things will, in the end, work to God’s glory and achieve God’s purpose. The great beasts of Revelation as depicted so graphically in chapter 13 and via the Whore of Babylon motif of Rev. 17–18, then, may appear to be in control to the untrained eye as they (in the form of the Roman state) persecute the saints; but in fact God guards every soul that is slain. They rest under the altar (Rev. 6:9) dressed in white robes awaiting vindication. Satan does his work now (Rev. 12), but he will be bound (Rev. 20); the wicked prosper in the present, but their final end is certain. The righteous suffer now, but will inherit eternal life.

It would appear, then, that the author of the Apocalypse calls for endurance in the face of two major challenges: persecution and assimilation. The people of God will suffer physically; they will be slain and trodden upon by the unrighteous who individually and collectively are instruments in the hands of Satan (for as Rev. 12 and 13 reveal, it is none other than this “old serpent” who is at work behind the scenes) and in this context the promise of reward is held out to those that endure to the end. As important as this theme is, however, perhaps an equal concern to the author is the pressure to conform to practices that, while widespread and accepted in the larger society, are not to be engaged in by the people of God. In the “letters to the seven churches” found in Rev. 2–3, there are dire warnings to those who do assimilate and compromise their distinctiveness—to those who are in danger of losing their “first love” and have become “lukewarm” (Rev. 2:4; 3:16). It is this uncompromising call to purity of faith and endurance under stress that is perhaps the most fundamental concern to the author. The “end of the world” is of course a key part of this, for by showing that God in the end will win out, that wrongs will eventually be righted, that the wicked will be slain, that Satan will be destroyed and that the righteous will be granted access to the new Jerusalem and the right to eat of the tree of life (Rev. 21), John shores up the community and gives hope and confidence for

the future. But the theology of the future, with its rewards and paradisaical bliss, is very much invoked to serve present needs and determine behavior in the here and now.

The author of the Apocalypse does of course have other important theological concerns which are worked out in this text. It is a contentious but nevertheless arguable view that outside of the Gospel of John, the Apocalypse contains the “highest” christology in the New Testament (though Col. 1:15ff. and perhaps Phil. 2:6–11 may be contenders here). Certainly the portrait of Jesus which the author presents is a powerful one. He is “King of Kings and Lord of Lords” (Rev. 17:14; 19:16); he is “the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth” (Rev. 1:5); and the description of him in the latter part of chapter 1 is truly a description of a being the likeness of which (at the very least) borders on the divine. What is more, while the instruction from the angel to whom John offers worship is “You must not do that! . . . Worship God!” when worship is offered to Christ, it is apparently appropriate and accepted (Rev. 5). And yet this is also the lamb who was slain (Rev. 5), whose blood cleanses sinners from their sins (Rev. 1:5). The Christ here is, then, recognizable as the Christ of the church: a divine Christ whose blood was spilt to bring redemption; and one ought not to underestimate the extent to which within the New Testament, 2000 years of Christian tradition notwithstanding, this reasonably clear dual testimony is distinctive.

The author of the Apocalypse is hence a figure in Christian history who should not be ignored. His influence has been significant, and not only in theological backwaters inhabited by the eschatologically obsessed, the millennially extreme, and/or the religiously volatile. The author speaks not just from the landscape of first-century Christianity in general, but from the specific context of a persecuted community and a social setting where a blurring of the boundaries between those who are “called out,” “the *ek-klesia*—the Church,” and the society from which they are called to stand in righteous relief is a real danger, and probably an actual fact. The author’s voice is a clear one, a clarion call to distinctiveness and perseverance in difficult times. It is perhaps not a voice the full impact of which is acceptable today, as Christians seek to maintain a rather more moderate balance between distinctiveness and inclusivity. But it is a voice that is worth hearing, for the questions it addresses continue to echo in contexts entirely distant from, but similar to, John’s own.

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