

## INTRODUCTION

The opening words give the book its title: the Book of Revelation. The Greek is *apokalypsis*, hence the other name by which this book is commonly called: the Apocalypse. God is presented as the source of the revelation. It is made first to the risen and exalted Jesus and then, through a mediating angel, to John, and so to the assembled community whom the narrator is addressing.

The author of the Apocalypse identifies himself as John.<sup>1</sup> It was normal practice for those who composed in the genre of an apocalypse to publish their work in the name of a famous person known to have been the recipient of divine revelation. The differences in style between this work and the Gospel and Letters of John make it likely that an anonymous writer from the Johannine community in Ephesus composed the work and presented in its John's name because he wished his words to be read within the spiritual heritage of John, the Beloved Disciple, whose witness inspired the Fourth Gospel.

The Greek word *apokalypsis* denotes the removal of a veil (*kalamma*), as does the Latin *revelatio* (*velum*). The veil that is being removed is that which comes between the divine and the human. It is important to realise that it is we who are veiled, not God. 'The earth is full of God's glory' (Isaiah 6:3); it is we who are unable to see God. When, in response to grace, we open our mind and heart to God's grace and gain some insight into the wonder of the divine, a revelation has occurred. Revelation is happening in partial ways all the time. In the words of the prophet Amos:

The Lord God does nothing without revealing his secret to his servants the prophets

– Amos 3:7

In our text, the author seems to be alluding to the following statement from the Book of Daniel:

There is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries and who has shown what must take place in the after-days.

– Daniel 2:28

Some individuals, because of the purity of their intelligence and the intimacy of their communion with the divine, penetrate the divine more deeply than the rest of us. When they share their inspired insight with us, we recognise that revelation is taking place, for some of the veil hiding God from us is being drawn aside.

<sup>1</sup> See also 1:4; 1:9; 22:8.

**1 The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants what must soon take place; he made it known by sending his angel to his servant, John, <sup>2</sup>who testified to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw.**

## Revelation

In the Judeo-Christian religious tradition, Moses and the prophets stand out as mediators of revelation. Transcending them all, for the disciples of Jesus, is Jesus himself. The mystery of his human intimacy with God is the continuous object of Christian contemplation. Our author is sharing with the Christians of Asia Minor the fruits of his inspired reflection upon the exalted Christ and on the significance of Christ for their present and future experience. He wishes to communicate to them the meaning of their experience as he has come to grasp it through his communion with Christ, the one who has full access to the divine.

No New Testament writing speaks more eloquently of the revelation made to and through Jesus than does the Gospel of John, for whom Jesus is the very Word of God made flesh. We find Jesus making statements such as the following:

I have not spoken on my own, but the Father who sent me has himself given me a commandment about what to say and what to speak.

– John 12:49

The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own authority; but the Father who dwells in me does his works.

– John 14:10

I have given them the words which you gave me.

– John 17:8

The Apocalypse is a continuation of this revelation, for it gives expression to the inspired insight received in prayer by the author from the risen Jesus.

When the author speaks of God ‘showing his servants what must soon take place’, he is not necessarily claiming that a prophet sees future happenings, as it were, in a vision, and then describes to others what he has seen. It is not a matter of simply taking a look. The language is symbolic. He is inviting his audience to share his insight by sharing his prayer. They will need all their intelligence and all their wisdom to interpret his words accurately. For revelation to occur, there must be a penetration of intelligence in response to grace.

Our author speaks of himself as bearing witness ‘to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ’. In John’s Gospel we read:

He who comes from above ... bears witness to what he has seen and heard ... he who receives his testimony sets his seal to this, that God is true. For he whom God has sent utters the words of God.

– John 3:31-34

For this I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth.

– John 18:37

God’s word, God’s self-revelation, was made in Jesus, and completed in the testimony to God which Jesus gave on the cross. In making of his death a self-offering to God in faith and a gift of himself to us in love, Jesus witnessed to the depths of his faith in God’s love. The resurrection revealed God to be as Jesus constantly portrayed him.

We have an indication here of the proper context in which we are to read this work. It is intended to be read out solemnly by a narrator to the assembled community during the liturgy. We will grasp the literary genre of this work only if we place ourselves among the assembled faithful and listen as the narrator shares the revealed insights which he has been given into their situation.

John refers to his work as words of prophecy. Because of the way the word prophecy is commonly understood, we are not surprised that some people expect to find in the Apocalypse all kinds of predictions concerning the future. These same people tend also to see the predictions as coming true in their own day. This, however, is to distort the true function of prophecy as found in both the Old and New Testaments.

In the ancient world we find various forms of future prediction based on observable data. In ancient Babylon, for example, we find predictions based on observation of the movement of the stars (astrology), and of the condition of the liver of sacrificial animals, and other phenomena. These observable data were regarded as signs of the divine presence, action and will in history, and so as indications of the kind of appropriate behaviour which would please the gods and so ensure a favourable future. Certain elements of this mentality are observable in ancient Israel, but predictions based on what was considered magic were forbidden.<sup>1</sup>

More rational forms of prediction based on observable data were practised in the ancient world, as they are in the modern. The build up of military forces, the effects of social unrest, the probable results of political alliances, and other factors, then, as now, played a significant role in attempts to predict the future. Examples abound in the oracles of the prophets of Israel.

Another form of divination is associated with the Pythian *prophêtes* at Delphi. Much of this, too, was based on a gathering of information from the wide clientèle who consulted the oracle, but it was thought of more as a form of intuitive divination which was based on inspiration, judged to be from the gods. It is typical of the kind of prophetic prediction found in the Bible.

To understand prophecy as we find it in the Bible, we need to understand that reality was thought of as taking place on two levels.

**<sup>3</sup>Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of the prophecy and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written in it; for the time is near.**

<sup>1</sup> Leviticus 19:26; Deuteronomy 18:11; Isaiah 44:25; 47:13; Jeremiah 10:2

## Prophecy

One level is the surface level of the observable data of human historical events. The other level is that of the mysterious divine purpose and will. The second level is the one of ultimate significance and it is constantly influencing the first, where we find the reality of human freedom, with repentance and co-operation with grace on the one hand, and, on the other, sin delaying and even thwarting God's will in the short term.

The problem with understanding prophecy as predicting future events is that on the plane of human history, the future is necessarily *unpredictable*, for it emerges as a result of the intersecting of many independent free decisions. We can sometimes see the way things are heading, and we can make probable predictions in limited areas with some confidence, but we cannot foresee the future in any definitive sense.

God, to whom everything is present, sees these future free decisions, but it is inaccurate to say that God *foresees* them, for this implies that God sees the future *before* it happens. God who does not exist in time sees what is future to us, because in its actual happening it is present to him.

When Old Testament prophecy is concerned with the historical future it is presented and understood with an implied or expressed condition. *If* people continue to ignore the truth they will have to suffer the consequences. *If*, on the other hand, they listen to God's word, they will enjoy the consequent blessing.

However - and here we are concerned with the essence of prophecy - the prophet's inspired vision penetrates beyond the surface plane of historical events. The prophet is primarily concerned with the over-arching providence of God which transcends the plain of human decision, but is always present to it, gracing it.

God's purpose transcends human decision and indecision, as does God's promise for the future. Whether or not we will enjoy its blessings depends on whether or not we choose to respond to grace. But independent of our response, God's providence covers our future. It is God's grace which now and in the future inspires both our actions and our will to do them.

When a prophet makes a prediction concerning the future, therefore, the precise historical details (in the rare cases when these are included) are always a matter of conjecture to be understood within the ambit of what is probable. The importance of prophecy lies in what it says about God and God's intention as perceived by the prophet. It is this which makes it easy for later generations to blame the failure of the prediction upon the sin of the people, and to keep discovering in their own historical circumstances the realisation of earlier predictions.

Prophecies of warning ('curses') are primarily faith-statements, for they remind people of who God is, of the fact that God's judgments are just, and of God's 'anger', that is to say, God's passionate concern for repentance and passionate determination to right wrong. On the human, historical plane, they functioned as warnings to bring about repentance, lest evil continue.

Prophecies of blessing are also primarily faith-statements, reminding people of God's loving providence. In addition they are hope-statements, encouraging fidelity and obedience so as to establish the conditions in which God's will can be realised, and God's blessing enjoyed.

Predictions, therefore, are statements concerning God's fidelity, and it is this which accounts for the preservation of the prophecies. They are also statements of human sin and human repentance and their probable effects: this is always open to error of judgment, but is also preserved as providing a good critical standpoint from which to look at our behaviour.

Like the prophets of Israel, John is concerned with his own contemporaries: God's design for them, and the ethical demands of their faith.

When John speaks of 'what must take place'(1:1), he is not supporting erroneous theories of determinism. He is carrying out his prophetic mission of keeping before the minds of his audience these transcendent truths, lest they get caught up in, and be overwhelmed by, what is happening within the limited horizons of their human perspective.

When he speaks of his work as being 'prophecy'<sup>1</sup>, he is asserting that he is proclaiming to his audience what he has come to see as he has reflected on their present experience in the light of faith. He is concerned with what is happening in Asia Minor, and he is concerned to challenge those Christians who are giving in to the seductive temptation to compromise with the Roman system and enjoy its apparent benefits, and to support those who are trying to be faithful to the way of life they learned from Jesus, even though they are being disadvantaged and even persecuted because of it. He is not communicating mysterious information which could only be discovered by people in the year 1000AD, or 2000AD, or any date in between: information which would have meant nothing to those for whom he was writing.

Their present is difficult, and their immediate future seems to be without hope. John sees that this is not true. From the perspective of prayer, and in the light of his divinely inspired insight, he wishes to focus their attention beyond the human plane to the transcendent truths that are at the heart of their faith.

They need immediate reassurance, and so he speaks of what must take place 'soon'(1:1). 'The time is near'(1:3)<sup>2</sup>, because the risen Christ in whom they have placed their trust is always present to them, always coming to them with his supporting grace, inspiring them to persevere and holding out to them the promise of salvation.

<sup>1</sup>See also Apocalypse 10:11; 19:10; 22:6-10; 22:18-19.

<sup>2</sup>Compare Deuteronomy 30:11-14.