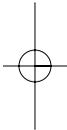
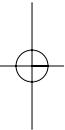
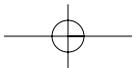


TYNDALE NEW TESTAMENT COMMENTARIES

VOLUME 20

TNTC

REVELATION



TYNDALE NEW TESTAMENT COMMENTARIES

VOLUME 20

GENERAL EDITOR: LEON MORRIS

REVELATION

AN INTRODUCTION AND COMMENTARY

LEON MORRIS



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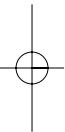
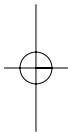
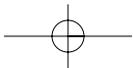
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GENERAL PREFACE

The original Tyndale Commentaries aimed at providing help for the general reader of the Bible. They concentrated on the meaning of the text without going into scholarly technicalities. They sought to avoid 'the extremes of being unduly technical or unhelpfully brief'. Most who have used the books agree that there has been a fair measure of success in reaching that aim.

Times, however, change. A series that has served so well for so long is perhaps not quite as relevant as when it was first launched. New knowledge has come to light. The discussion of critical questions has moved on. Bible-reading habits have changed. When the original series was commenced it could be presumed that most readers used the Authorized Version and one could make one's comments accordingly, but this situation no longer obtains.

The decision to revise and update the whole series was not reached lightly, but in the end it was thought that this is what is required in the present situation. There are new needs, and they will be better served by new books or by a thorough updating of the old books. The aims of the original series remain. The new commentaries are neither minuscule nor unduly long. They are exegetical rather than homiletic. They do not discuss all the critical questions, but none is written without an awareness of the problems that engage the attention of New Testament scholars. Where it is felt that formal consideration should be given to such questions, they are discussed in the Introduction and sometimes in Additional notes.

But the main thrust of these commentaries is not critical. These

books are written to help the non-technical reader to understand the Bible better. They do not presume a knowledge of Greek, and all Greek words discussed are transliterated; but the authors have the Greek text before them and their comments are made on the basis of the originals. The authors are free to choose their own modern translation, but are asked to bear in mind the variety of translations in current use.

The new series of Tyndale Commentaries goes forth, as the former series did, in the hope that God will graciously use these books to help the general reader to understand as fully and clearly as possible the meaning of the New Testament.

Leon Morris

AUTHOR'S PREFACE TO THE FIRST EDITION

The book of Revelation is, I fear, a very neglected book. Its symbolism belongs to the first century, not to our own age. Twentieth-century men accordingly find it difficult and tend to dismiss it as irrelevant. This is unfortunate because its theology of power is of the utmost importance to an age as preoccupied with the problems of power as is ours. In this Commentary I have tried to explain the significance of the symbolism and to show the bearing of the message of Revelation on the problems of the day. Some of the problems of this book are exceedingly difficult and I certainly have not the capacity to solve them. But it is my hope that I have been able to point towards the solution of enough of the more obvious difficulties for some modern readers to be able to discern the main thrust of the book.

One difficulty is that there are various schools of interpretation. Many exegetes are quite sure that only their own particular approach will yield the correct interpretation. As best I can I have carefully weighed the contentions of those who have written before me, or at least of such of them as I have had time to read. The literature on this book is enormous, and I make no claim to have mastered it all, though I can say that I have profited very much from what I have read. While I have not felt able to align myself with any one of the usual schools of interpretation, I would like it to go on record that I have not differed from accepted points of view without a careful weighing of the issues involved. In the process I have become

indebted to many, to so many, indeed, that I hesitate to single out names. I must content myself with a general expression of indebtedness and with the specific acknowledgments I have made in the body of the Commentary and in the footnotes.

While this Commentary has been on the way for many years, and therefore I have had time to think a good deal about some of its problems, it has had to be written in the intervals (all too few and short) in a busy life as college principal. I ask the reader's pardon accordingly for its many infelicities. I would like to express my appreciation of the patience of the publishers and General Editor. Though they commissioned this book years ago and had every right to expect it long since, they have treated my failure to produce it earlier with kindness and understanding. I am grateful.

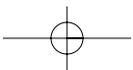
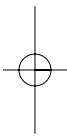
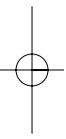
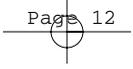
Leon Morris

PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

It is a privilege, having written a commentary, to be able to avail oneself of the comments made by some who have used it and also of books that have been written subsequently. I have learnt much from the commentaries of Beasley-Murray, Mounce, Ladd, Sweet and others. The call for a second edition enables me to make use of this material and to go through what I wrote in the first edition with a view to amendment and clarification. I have made the New International Version the text I have quoted and this has meant a good deal of minor alteration. Sometimes when I have felt that NIV did not quite express the Greek I have made my own translation. I trust that this will not hinder the reader in any way.

My basic position remains as in the first edition, but there are many small changes. I trust that these will increase the usefulness of the volume.

Leon Morris



CHIEF ABBREVIATIONS

- Abbott Edwin A. Abbott, *Johannine Grammar* (Black, 1906).
- Alford Henry Alford, *The Greek Testament*, vol. IV (Rivingtons, 1875).
- ANF *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Eerdmans reprint of the Edinburgh edition, n.d.).
- AS G. Abbott-Smith, *A Manual Greek Lexicon of the New Testament* (T. & T. Clark, 1954).
- Atkinson Basil F. C. Atkinson, *The War with Satan* (Protestant Truth Society, n.d.).
- AV The Authorized (or King James) Version, 1611.
- BAGD William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich (eds.), *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (trans, of W. Bauer, *Griechisch-Deutsches Wörterbuch*); second ed. rev. and augmented by F. Wilbur Gingrich and Frederick W. Danker (University of Chicago Press, 1979).
- Barclay William Barclay, *The Revelation of John*, 2 vols. (Saint Andrew Press, 1960; *Daily Study Bible*).
- BDF F. Blass and A. Debrunner, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament*, trans, and rev. by R. W. Funk (Cambridge, 1961).
- Beasley-Murray G. R. Beasley-Murray, *The Book of Revelation* (Oliphants, 1974; *New Century Bible*).
- Beckwith Isbon T. Beckwith, *The Apocalypse of John* (Baker reprint, 1967).

- Caird G. B. Caird, *A Commentary on the Revelation of St. John the Divine* (Black, 1966; *Black's New Testament Commentaries*).
- Charles R. H. Charles, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Revelation of St. John*, 2 vols. (T. & T. Clark, 1920; *International Critical Commentary*).
- Colclasure Chuck Colclasure, *The Overcomers* (Nelson, 1981).
EB *Encyclopaedia Biblica* (Black, 1914).
ET *The Expository Times*.
- Farrer Austin Farrer, *The Revelation of St. John the Divine* (Oxford, 1964).
- Ford J. Massyngberde Ford, *Revelation* (Doubleday, 1975; *Anchor Bible*).
- Glasson T. F. Glasson, *The Revelation of John* (Cambridge, 1965; *Cambridge Bible Commentary*).
- Goldsworthy Graeme Goldsworthy, *The Gospel in Revelation* (Paternoster, 1984).
- GNT* *The Greek New Testament*, being the text translated in The New English Bible, edited with Introduction, Textual Notes and Appendix by R. V. G. Tasker (Oxford and Cambridge, 1964).
- HDB* James Hastings (ed.), *A Dictionary of the Bible*, 5 vols. (T. & T. Clark, 1898–1904).
- Hendriksen W. Hendriksen, *More than Conquerors* (Tyndale Press, 1962).
- Hoeksema H. Hoeksema, *Behold He Cometh* (Kregel, 1974).
- Hort F. J. A. Hort, *The Apocalypse of St. John I–III* (Macmillan, 1908).
- IB* *The Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 12 (Abingdon, 1957).
- IBD* *The Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, 3 vols. (IVP, 1980).
- IBNTG* C. F. D. Moule, *An Idiom Book of New Testament Greek* (Cambridge, 1953).
- ISBE* *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia*, 5 vols. (Howard Severance, 1929; rev. ed., 4 vols. Eerdmans, 1979–).
- JB The Jerusalem Bible, 1966.
- Jeske Richard L. Jeske, *Revelation for Today* (Fortress, 1983).
- JTS* *The Journal of Theological Studies*.

- Kepler Thomas S. Kepler, *The Book of Revelation* (Oxford, 1957).
- Kiddle Martin Kiddle, *The Revelation of St. John* (Hodder, 1940; *Moffatt New Testament Commentary*).
- Ladd George Eldon Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John* (Eerdmans, 1972).
- LB The Living Bible, 1972.
- Love J. P. Love, *I, II, III John, Jude, Revelation* (SCM, 1960; *Layman's Bible Commentaries*).
- LSJ H. G. Liddell and R. Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, new ed. rev. by H. S. Jones and R. McKenzie, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1940).
- LXX The Septuagint Version.
- M James Hope Moulton, *A Grammar of New Testament Greek*, vol. 1, *Prolegomena* (T. & T. Clark, 1906); vol. 2, Wilbert Francis Howard (ed.), *Accidence and Word-Formation* (1919); vol. 3, Nigel Turner, *Syntax* (1963).
- MM James Hope Moulton and George Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament* (Hodder, 1914–29).
- Moods* Ernest de Witt Burton, *Syntax of the Moods and Tenses in New Testament Greek* (T. & T. Clark, 1955).
- Mounce Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation* (Eerdmans, 1977; *New International Commentary on the New Testament*).
- MS(S) Manuscript(s).
- NBD* *The New Bible Dictionary*, ed. J. D. Douglas et al. (IVP, 1962).
- Newell William R. Newell, *The Book of the Revelation* (Moody, 1947).
- Niles D. T. Niles, *As Seeing the Invisible* (SCM, 1962).
- Orr Robert Wallace Orr, *Victory Pageant* (Pickering & Inglis, 1972).
- Preston and Hanson Ronald H. Preston and Anthony T. Hanson, *The Revelation of Saint John the Divine* (SCM, 1949; *Torch Bible Commentaries*).
- Rossetti Christina G. Rossetti, *The Face of the Deep* (SPCK, 1911).
- RSV Revised Standard Version, 1946–52.

- RV Revised Version, 1881.
- S Bk Herman L. Strack and Paul Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch*, 4 vols. (C. H. Beck'sche, 1922–28).
- Simcox William Henry Simcox, *The Revelation of S. John the Divine* (Cambridge, 1894; *Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges*).
- Smith J. B. Smith, *A Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Herald, 1961).
- Sweet John Sweet, *Revelation* (SCM, 1979; *Pelican Commentaries*).
- Swete Henry Barclay Swete, *The Apocalypse of St John* (Macmillan, 1907).
- Stoffel Ernest Lee Stoffel, *The Dragon Bound* (John Knox, 1981).
- TCGNT *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, Bruce M. Metzger (United Bible Societies, 1971).
- TDNT *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley of *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum neuen Testament*, 10 vols. (Eerdmans, 1964–76).
- Tenney Merrill C. Tenney, *Interpreting Revelation* (Eerdmans, 1957).
- TNTC Tyndale New Testament Commentary.
- Torrance Thomas F. Torrance, *The Apocalypse Today* (James Clarke, 1960).
- Turner N. Turner, 'Revelation' in *Peake's Commentary on the Bible*, ed. Matthew Black and H. H. Rowley (Nelson, 1962).
- Walvoord John F. Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1966).

The following translations are cited by the translator's surname or the title, whichever is appropriate: Amplified, Berkeley, Ferrar Fenton, Goodspeed, Knox, Moffatt, Phillips, Schonfield, Twentieth Century, and Weymouth. The Pseudepigrapha are cited from the edition of James H. Charlesworth, Philo and Josephus from the Loeb edition and the Talmud from the Soncino translation.

INTRODUCTION

i. Interpretation

The Revelation (or the Apocalypse, as it is often called, from its opening word in the Greek) is by common consent one of the most difficult of all the books of the Bible. It is full of strange symbolism. There are curious beasts with unusual numbers of heads and horns. There are extraordinary phenomena, like the turning of one-third of the sea into blood (8:8), which are impossible to envisage. Modern readers find it strange. They are moreover not usually attracted by the fantastic schemes of prophecy which some exegetes find in it, and whose ingenuity is matched only by their improbability.

The result is that for many Revelation remains a closed book. Except for one or two passages, like the vision of the redeemed in chapter 7, or that of the heavenly Jerusalem in the final two chapters, it remains largely unread. We recognize that it is part of the canon of Scripture and therefore we accord it formal recognition. But we remain uneasy and we do not make use of it. We turn our back on its mysteries and luxuriate in John's Gospel or the Epistle to the Romans.

This is a great pity. This book has much to teach us in the twentieth century.¹ J. B. Phillips tells us that he found the task of translating this book ‘in the true sense of that threadbare word, thrilling. For in this book the translator is carried into another dimension – he has but the slightest foot-hold in the Time-and-space world with which he is familiar. He is carried, not into some never-never land of fancy, but into the Ever-ever land of God’s eternal Values and Judgments.’²

It is of the utmost importance that we do not lose touch with the eternal realities so stressed in Revelation. Perhaps there is no age for which its essential teaching is more relevant. These are days when the decisions of great powers have far-reaching effects on ordinary men and women. We may have no great interest in ideologies, yet find that our lives are affected by decisions reached in Moscow or in Washington, decisions in which we have had no voice, nor conceivably could have. Are we then no more than pawns caught up in a great ideological conflict? Nobody wants a nuclear holocaust, but are our lives destined to be snuffed out in a worldwide inferno brought about almost against the will of those controlling the destinies of the nations? Is there something demonic about those evil forces which even our most powerful statesmen seem unable to control? Revelation speaks to an age which is tortured by problems like these, for it was written to a minority with problems of its own about the realities of power. Indeed it has been called, not unjustly, ‘a theology of power’, albeit power exercised in love, for it is the slain Lamb who is triumphant.³

This is not how it has always been seen. Through the centuries the

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1. Cf. A. M. Hunter, ‘Revelation, beyond all other books, has made people feel that heaven is real; and in the strength of that blessed conviction go forth anew to do battle with the world and all its evils’ (*Introducing the New Testament*, SCM, 1945, p. 113).
 2. J. B. Phillips, *The Book of Revelation* (Collins, 1960), p. 9.
 3. ‘No other New Testament book proclaims the sovereignty and rule of God in so eloquent, if so bewildering, a way. Yet divine power is conditioned by love: the lion is also the lamb (5:5f.)’ (Ralph P. Martin, *New Testament Foundations*, ii, Paternoster, 1978, p. 379).

book has been interpreted in a variety of ways. We may sum up the principal ways of viewing it as follows:

a. The 'preterist' view

This starts with the situation of the church in the first century and ends there. It sees the book as arising out of the situation of the first Christians and that is its outstanding merit. The Roman Empire dominates the scene. The Seer was wholly preoccupied with the church of his day. He wrote out of its situation and indeed has nothing more in mind than its situation. This view has the merit of making the book exceedingly meaningful for the people to whom it was written. And it has the demerit of making it meaningless for all subsequent readers (except for the information it gives about that early generation).⁴ It should perhaps be added that some variant of this view is adopted by most modern scholars.⁵

b. The 'historicist' view

Those who see the book this way claim that it is an inspired forecast of the whole of human history. They see its symbols as setting out in broad outline the history of western Europe and as stretching right on until the second coming of Christ.⁶ This view does indeed

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4. Cf. Merrill C. Tenney, 'The preterist has an interpretation which has a firm pedestal, but which has no finished sculpture to place on it' (p. 144).
 5. E.g. W. G. Kümmel, 'The Apocalypse is a book of its time, written out of its time and for its time, not for the distant generations of the future or even of the end-time. It is an occasional writing (*Gelegenheitsschrift*), as much so as are the epistles of the NT, and which, therefore, as a matter of principle should be understood in relation to the history of its time' (*Introduction to the New Testament*, SCM, 1966, p. 324).
 6. Beatrice S. Neall assumes the historicist position 'because it sees in Revelation an outline of the course of history from John's day to the eschaton'. But the book concerns 'various historical movements and events in the Western world and the Christian church' (*The Concept of Character in the Apocalypse with Implications for Character Education* (Univ. of America, 1983, pp. 10, 15).

make Revelation meaningful for this generation, at any rate in part. And it is a strengthening of faith to see the whole of history as under the control of God. But the early Christians could not have got much out of a book whose concern was basically for later periods. For them most of the book on this view must have been an insoluble puzzle. Yet we should surely hold that those to whom it was written had or could have had a satisfying understanding of it. It is also curious that a book forecasting human history should largely ignore the world outside western Europe. Historicist views also labour under the serious disadvantage of failing to agree. If the main points of subsequent history are in fact foreshadowed, it should be possible to identify them with tolerable certainty, otherwise what is the point of it? But there are many historicist views and no real agreement.⁷

c. The 'futurist' view

Some hold that, apart from the first few chapters, the book is exclusively concerned with happenings at the end of the age. They see the seven seals and all the rest as being concerned with the end of the world, and as prefiguring those events which will usher in the second coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. This robs the book of all significance for the early Christians and, indeed, for all subsequent generations right up to the last. For all intermediate generations it is merely a forecast of what will happen in the last days. Until those days come it means little, except that God has an ultimate purpose.

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7. Samuel A. Cartledge points out that each adherent of this school of interpretation works things out so that the end falls in his own time. He further says, 'No one who studies the widely divergent conclusions reached by this school through the centuries is likely to become a member of this school and believe in the particular scheme which makes his own days necessarily the last days' (*A Conservative Introduction to the New Testament*, Zondervan, 1957, p. 206). Jeske cites contemporary equations of the symbols of Revelation with happenings in our own day (pp. 3f.).

d. The 'idealist' view

Idealists maintain that there are few or no references in Revelation to happenings, whether at the time of the writer or subsequently. On this view the whole book is concerned with ideas and principles.⁸ It sets out in poetic form certain theological conceptions. It is not particularly concerned with the situation of the early church, nor with that of the church in later days, nor with that of the end-time. It simply sets out principles on which God acts throughout human history. This secures its relevance for all periods of the church's history. But its refusal to see a firm historical anchorage seems to most students dubious to say the least.

It seems that elements from more than one of these views are required for a satisfactory understanding of Revelation.⁹ We must always begin with the situation of the church to which it was written. Indeed, we must keep that situation in mind throughout our study if we are to make sense of this difficult book, for it is the clue to many things.

The gospel had been preached throughout the Roman province of Asia (as elsewhere). Some had believed and become Christians. They had been taught that Jesus of Nazareth was the Christ, the Son of God. He had been rejected by the Jews and crucified. But that was simply the way in which he brought salvation to us. He could be greeted by those in heaven with the words: 'you were slain, and with

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8. Cf. W. Milligan, 'While the Apocalypse thus embraces the whole period of the Christian Dispensation, it sets before us within this period the action of great principles and not special incidents'; 'we are not to look in the Apocalypse for special events, but for an exhibition of the principles which govern the history both of the world and the Church' (*The Revelation of St. John*, Macmillan, 1886, pp. 153, 154f.).
 9. G. T. Manley notes a variety of systems of understanding this book, but concludes by urging the reader to maintain 'an open mind to deal with each portion of the book as seen in relation to its context and to other parts of Scripture' (*The Revelation of St. John*, IVF, n. d., p. 11). This is still good advice. Each passage must be interpreted in its own context, and not forced into an overall scheme.

your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation' (5:9). Having died for us he rose triumphant now to die no more (1:18). He went back to heaven, but in due course he would return. He would destroy the kingdoms of this world and set up God's perfect kingdom. It was an inspiring faith and the little group of Christians embraced it with fervour. They looked and longed for the promised consummation when God's will would be perfectly done throughout the whole earth.

And nothing happened.

The church continued to be a tiny group, doubtless adding a few members from time to time, but not becoming, and not looking like becoming, a mighty force to take over the Roman Empire. That Empire continued on its wicked way. Oppression and wrong abounded. Evil men prospered. Idolaters persisted in their idol-worship, and the cult of the emperor flourished. Because they would not conform, the tiny band of Christians found themselves the object of suspicion and sometimes outright persecution. A few of them were killed. Some were put in gaol.

What had become of the message which had induced them to become Christians in the first place? Where was the promise of Christ's coming? All things continued as they were from the foundation of the world. If God was active in the world it demanded a very strong faith to perceive it. And most of the Christians, as they always have been, were people with no more than an average faith. Had they been mistaken in coming to Christ in the first place? Was it all a delusion? Was Christianity a fine religion indeed for the sanctuary but totally unable to cope with the demands of the forum and the capitol? Must they conclude that it was a pretty delusion, which must inevitably be shattered on the hard rocks of social and political realities? Was real power in the hands of the emperor and his associates?

To a church perplexed by such problems Revelation was written. We must not think of it as a kind of intellectual puzzle (spot the meaning of this symbol!) sent to a relaxed church with time on its hands and an inclination for solving mysteries. It was sent to a little, persecuted, frustrated church, one which did not know what to make of the situation in which it found itself. John writes to meet the need of that church.¹⁰

Take for an example of his method the opening of the book sealed with seven seals. This is surely the book of human destiny, the book that tells what is in store for mankind. The first thing to notice is that ‘no-one in heaven or on earth or under the earth could open the scroll’ (5:3). The secrets of the future are not accessible to us, but remain fast sealed from our gaze. But the Seer is assured that ‘the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has triumphed. He is able to open the scroll and its seven seals’ (v. 5). When John looks for this Lion he sees ‘a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain’ (v. 6), a clear reference to Jesus Christ in his character as the crucified One. He comes and takes the book, at which there begins a mighty chorus of praise, first from the elders and living creatures close to the heavenly throne and then taken up by myriads of angels and finally by ‘every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them’ (v. 13).

In this way John makes his point that the future belongs not to the Roman emperor, nor to any human potentate or ecclesiastic. It belongs to no man or group of men, but only to Christ, the Christ who was crucified for the salvation of us all. He it is who can open the book of human destiny. All of us, and the destiny of all of us, are in his hands. This is recognized by those in highest heaven, by all the angels, and eventually by all that live. This peep behind the scenes brings to John’s readers a glimpse of the realities of power. Real power rests with Christ, the Lion. The appearances may be against it for the present. But ultimate reality is not dependent on present appearances.

Throughout the book John makes this point with emphasis. Continually he takes his readers behind the scenes. It becomes plain that earthly potentates do nothing but fulfil the plan mapped out for

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10. Cf. W. C. van Unnik, ‘This is not a book written to titillate or to gratify the curiosity of men anxious to tear aside the veil from the future. It is no book of riddles, although often in the past it has been treated as one. It does indeed draw veils aside and open up a vista of God’s actions and his ways; for it proclaims the kingdom of God, which is here and now and yet is still to come in its fulness, bringing with it the overthrow of all that is against him’ (*The New Testament*, Collins, 1964, p. 161).

them by God. They never manage to thwart him. In vision after vision the truth is emphasized that God is supreme and that he brings his purposes to pass in the affairs of men. The illustrations which make the point are drawn from the contemporary Roman Empire, so that the book is securely rooted in a given historical situation. But the principles set out in it are of permanent validity. We see them in operation still.¹¹ John's conclusion as to the location of ultimate power is just as relevant for us as for the little, persecuted church of the first century.¹²

Some find themselves troubled by the symbolism, and particularly by the difficulty in visualizing some of the Seer's more complicated pieces of imagery (where does one locate ten horns and seven heads on one beast?). So, too, some pieces of imagery do not fit in very well with other pieces. It is important to realize that John is an artist in words. We are to look for the meaning conveyed by each symbol in that symbol itself. It is a matter of indifference whether the symbols can be visualized or reconciled. That is not their purpose. Their purpose is to convey ideas.¹³

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11. Cf. F. B. Clogg, The author did not look beyond his own age, but inasmuch as his visions are an expression of the truth that all human history is in God's hands, they have in a sense been fulfilled many times over (*An Introduction to the New Testament*, Hodder, 1940, p. 293).
12. A. M. Hunter sees set forth in the book the great principle 'that all history is divinely controlled; that this world is the scene of a great conflict between good and evil; that the clue to God's character and action in history is to be found in Christ "the lamb slain from the foundation of the world"; that in the end of the day God must finally cope with evil and make an end of it; and that Heaven is the most real place of all' (*Interpreting the New Testament 1900-1950*, SCM, 1951, p. 103).
13. Cf. M. E. Boismard, 'When the Seer describes a vision, he translates into symbols the ideas suggested by God; he goes on then, by accumulating colors, symbolic numbers etc., without giving a thought to the resulting plastic effect. His purpose is, above all, to translate the ideas received from God, not to describe a coherent vision, an *imaginable* vision. To

G. B. Caird makes the point that the symbols do not all serve the same purpose. He likens them to the little flags on a map in a military headquarters where the movement of a flag may indicate something that has happened or alternatively something that is planned to happen. ‘The strange and complex symbols of John’s vision are, like the flags in this parable, the pictorial counterpart of earthly realities; and these symbols too may be either determinative or descriptive.’¹⁴ The visions, in other words, sometimes lift the veil and show things as they are. But on other occasions they reveal to us what God has planned. They may even be significant events, as initiating the working out of God’s plan.

2. The Revelation of St John and apocalyptic

The Revelation is commonly regarded as an example of apocalyptic. This is the name given by modern scholars to a class of literature which flourished during the last two centuries BC and the first century AD. It is not easy to define with precision, as the apocalypses varied widely and they shade off into other types of literature. But normally an apocalypse purports to be a revelation made by some celestial personage (like an angel) to a great figure of the past (such as Abraham or Moses or Ezra). The message is usually expressed in vivid symbolism, sometimes of a bizarre kind. It appears in difficult times and conveys the author’s profound conviction that the troubles in which his readers find themselves are not the last word. God in his own good time will intervene catastrophically and destroy evil. Not infrequently this deliverance is associated with God’s Messiah who would inaugurate God’s kingdom. The apocalyptists were usually pessimistic about the present world. They despaired of man’s efforts ever overcoming evil, and they looked to God to bring the victory. Perhaps it is this stress on the divine that

follow him to the end on the way he has chosen, one must play his game and convert into ideas the symbols he describes without troubling oneself about their incoherence’ (*Introduction to the New Testament*, ed. A. Robert and A. Feuillet, Desclée, 1965, p. 697).

14. Caird, p. 61.

accounts for the small attention they give to ethical teaching. They see evil as overcome, not by better living, but by God's mighty intervention. Apocalypses abound in history rewritten as prophecy in the mouth of some great figure of the past. Such 'prophecies' are, of course, precise enough up until the writer's own day, but vague thereafter (which affords scholars evidence of the dates of such writings).

There are good reasons for classing Revelation with apocalyptic. Thus it abounds in symbolism of a typically apocalyptic character, symbolism which is quite difficult to interpret. Again, it is like the apocalypses in its expectation of the setting up of God's kingdom, and its looking for a new heaven and a new earth. So too we notice its mention of angels, or revelations made through heavenly beings. But this book also has some marked differences from typical apocalyptic which we should not overlook. The principal points are as follows:

1. The writer repeatedly calls his book a prophecy (1:3; 22:7, 10, 18–19). Apocalyptic is usually distinguished from prophecy, but this writer claims to be in the prophetic tradition.¹⁵ In line with this his visions convey the word of God (1:2).¹⁶

2. The typical prophetic insistence on moral considerations is to be found throughout the book. Typical is the series of warnings to the churches and the demand for repentance in the Seven Letters (2:5, 16, 21–22; 3:3, 19).

15. Cf. M. Dibelius, 'A certain unique quality belongs to it, for there is here a union of apocalyptic knowledge and of the kind of prophecy which presses to an immediate effect ... nowhere else is the union so organically carried out as in this book' (*A Fresh Approach to the New Testament and Early Christian Literature*, Ivor Nicholson and Watson, 1936, p. 124).

16. A. Wikenhauser maintains that this book 'is not a product of the study or of intensive meditation on the signs of the times'. He thinks that it 'was born from the ecstatic experiences of a prophet'. He says further, 'The author is a genuine prophet ... The prophetic consciousness of the author is attested by the whole book' (*New Testament Introduction*, Herder, 1958, p. 545).

3. Apocalypses are pseudonymous, written in the name of some illustrious predecessor. This writer gives his own name (1:4).¹⁷

4. The pessimism of the apocalyptists does not seem to be found here. This age is not seen as hopelessly dominated by evil, though the writer does look for an outbreak of Satanic activity at the last time. But he sees history as the place wherein God has wrought out redemption. And though evil is depicted realistically the book is fundamentally optimistic.

5. The apocalyptists characteristically retrace history in the guise of prophecy. From the standpoint of someone in the remote past they forecast what will happen up to their own day. There is no trace of this in Revelation. Rather, in the manner of the true prophet, John takes his stand in his own days and looks resolutely to the future.

6. G. E. Ladd maintains that this book 'embodies the prophetic tension between history and eschatology. The beast is Rome and at the same time an eschatological antichrist which cannot be fully equated with historical Rome. While the churches of Asia were facing persecution, there is no known persecution in the first century A.D. which fits that portrayed in the Apocalypse. The shadow of historical Rome is so outlined against the darker shadow of the eschatological antichrist that it is difficult if not impossible to distinguish between the two. History is eschatologically interpreted; evil at the hands of Rome is realized eschatology.'¹⁸

7. The apocalypses normally contain curious visions whose meaning is not clear until they are explained usually by an angelic personage. Often the whole apocalypse depends on the contribution made by the heavenly guide. It is not unusual to have God himself pictured as contributing to the apocalyptic message. In Revelation this kind of explanation appears occasionally (an angel explains the

17. Cf. Wikenhauser, 'Perhaps the strongest proof of the genuinely prophetic character of the book is the fact that the author writes under his own name to definite Christian Churches of his own time and castigates them unsparingly. There is nothing similar in the apocryphal apocalyptic writings of Judaism' (*loc. cit.*).

18. Walter A. Elwell (ed.), *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Baker, 1984), p. 65.

mystery of the scarlet woman and the beast on which she rides, 17:7ff.). But the general practice is simply to narrate the vision and to allow the reader to work out the meaning.

8. In general it is the case that apocalyptists look forward to the coming of God's Messiah. He would introduce a new thing into human history. But for John the new thing has already appeared. He writes of a Messiah who will come indeed, but who has also already come and won the decisive victory. In his unforgettable picture of the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world he sets forth the truth that the Messiah has already come and has paradoxically won his triumph through crucifixion. He bears the marks of his suffering, but is King of kings and Lord of lords.

3. Authorship

Martin Kiddle has a notable statement on the difficulty and unprofitableness of discussion of the authorship of the Johannine writings of the New Testament. He concludes that 'it is quite impossible to determine the authorship of any of these books from the available evidence'.¹⁹ This may be unduly pessimistic, but the subject is certainly one of great difficulty. The following seem to be important points:

1. The writer of Revelation tells us that his name is John (1:4). He calls himself a 'servant' (1:1), 'your brother' (1:9), and apparently one of 'the prophets' (22:9).

2. The use of the name John without qualification may point to the apostle as author. No-one else, it is argued, would call himself simply John. Only one John was great enough among the Christians to need no description. The general air of authority that pervades Revelation would accord with apostolic authorship.²⁰

19. Kiddle, p. xxxiii.

20. E. Stauffer thinks that the relationship between the apocalyptist on the one hand and the church of Ephesus and the churches attached to it in Asia Minor on the other is very much like that of the Evangelist to his disciples and his churches. He cites Rev. 1:4; 2:1, 5 and John 21:22, 24 as evidence (*New Testament Theology*, SCM, 1955, p. 264, n. 75).