

Title

The 'Apocalypse' is the original title of the last book of the Bible. It is derived from 'apokalupsis', a Greek word, which means 'revelation' or 'disclosure'. The book is also known as the 'Revelation'.

Authorship and Date of Composition

The author identifies himself as John (1:1,4,9; 22:8). He is one of the prophets (22:9). He calls himself 'servant' of Jesus Christ (1:1) and 'brother and companion in tribulation' of those whom he is addressing (1:9). He is on the island of Patmos (1:10) probably banished by the Roman authorities. That he is a person of authority in the Christian community is evident from the fact that he is writing to the seven churches (2:1-3:22). But who is this "John"? Is he one of the Twelve, and known as the 'beloved disciple'? If not, what was the relationship between him and the apostle John? Is the seer of the Apocalypse and the author of the Johannine Gospel and the Epistles one and the same? Some internal indications seem to suggest some sort of a common origin of the Gospel of John and the Apocalypse. It is interesting to note that some details found in these two books are not available in any other books of the NT: Christ is presented as 'the Lamb' (Jn 1:29,36; Ap 5:6; 6:16 etc.), as 'Word of God' (Jn 1:1,14; Ap 19:13); the people of God are referred to as 'the spouse' (Jn 3:29; Ap 21:2,9; 22:17); water is referred to as life-giving in expressions like 'the living water' (Jn 4:10f; 7:38) and 'water of life' (Ap 7:17; 21:6; 22:1,17). Both the books cite Zech 12:10 (Jn 19:37; Ap 1:7). The absence of the temple in the heavenly Jerusalem (Ap 21:22) reminds us of Jn 4:21. However, there are numerous details pointing to the contrary, the most important being the language and the eschatological perspective. The eschatology of the Apocalypse is dominated by the apocalyptic tradition hoping for a future salvation. The Gospel, on the other hand, has no trace of the apocalyptic tradition and considers salvation as already possessed by the believer. Several key themes of the Gospel like 'to believe' (appears 98 times in the Gospel), 'the world

'(in the dualistic sense), and 'the truth' do not appear in the Apocalypse at all. 'Faith' which comes four times in the Apocalypse is not found in the Gospel¹. It is also significant that the author of the Apocalypse repeatedly mentions his name while that of the Gospel studiously avoids it. Further, he does not call himself an apostle, but on the contrary, speaks of the twelve apostles of the Lamb on the twelve foundations of the new city of Jerusalem ((21:14), which is more likely of a person who was not an apostle but one who looked back on the apostles and spoke. Hence, there is no unanimity among the Biblical scholars on the issue of the identity of the author of the Apocalypse. Nevertheless, the Apocalypse is not considered a pseudoepigraphon. It is generally admitted that the author has left us his real name. "There is not a shred of evidence, not even the shadow of a probability, for the hypothesis that the Apocalypse is pseudonymous," says R.H.Charles.² A.Feuillet also holds that the "John" is not the son of Zebedee, one of the Twelve but someone associated with the Johannine school of thought.³ 'After AD 70 (the fall of Jerusalem), apocalypticism was introduced into Asia Minor and c 80-90 a prophetic circle was formed near Ephesus. It's leader was John, who might well have been the author of Revelation, which is deeply steeped in apocalyptic tradition. The "Johannine circle" bearing the tradition of John, the Apostle of the Lord, and from which emerged the Gospel and the Letters bearing his name, might have been a continuation of the prophetic conventicle of Ephesus in which John was prominent. The various writings do not have to be consistent except in their basic faith in Jesus Christ; and, as the situations to which they addressed themselves were different, different styles and content were required."⁴ Scholars are at variance with each other while suggesting the date of composition of the Apocalypse. Some propose a date as early as the reign of Claudius (AD 41-54) while some suggest a date as late as the reign of Nerva (AD 96-98). Some even think of the persecution of Nero (AD 54-68) while a few others situate it during the reign of Vespasius (A.D.69-79). But a majority of scholars opt for a date during the persecution towards the end of the reign of Domitian (AD 81-96). The letters (chs 2-3) show that the seven churches were established churches. Ephesus (2:4), Sardis (3:3) and Laodicea (3:15) have lost their initial zeal. Hatred for Christians has spread. It had already claimed one victim (2:13) and John foresees a

time of persecution for those who profess faith in Christ (2:10; 2:15; 3:10). He sees 'the souls of those who were slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne' under the celestial altar (6:9). Rome 'is drunk with the blood of saints and the blood of the martyrs of Jesus' (17:6). All are required to worship the Roman Empire and bear its mark on them (13:4; 14:9,11; 16:2; 19:20). The author refers to the emperor numerically. His number is 666 (13:18; 17:9-11). But the identity of the person is still an enigma. Nevertheless, as the text bears witness, the persecution was the result of the refusal of the early Christians to comply with this stipulation. The persecution under Nero was not for refusing to worship the emperor. Moreover, Christians at that time were accused of setting fire to the city of Rome. Further, there is no proof of this persecution spreading outside Rome. But the next one, under Domitian, tallies with the textual evidence of the Apocalypse. Emperor Domitian, toward the end of his life, demanded emperor worship and decreed that he be worshipped as 'dominus et deus noster'. Hence, we can situate the book around this time (AD 90-96).

Outline

A. Introduction (1:1-8)

B. Series of Visions (1:9-22:5)

a. First Cycle of Visions (1:9-11:19)

i. Epiphany of Christ to John with messages to seven churches (1:9-3:22)

ii. The Scroll with Seven Seals (4:1-8:1)

iii. The Seven Trumpets (8:2-11:19)

b. Second Cycle of Visions

i. Symbolic Visions Revealing Secrets of the Past, Present and Future (12:1-14:20; 15:2-4)

ii. The Seven Bowls (15:1; 15:5-19:10)

iii. Vision of the Last Things (19:11-22:5)

C. Conclusion (22:6-21)

Synopsis

The Apocalypse is a revelatory narrative. The revelation is about 'what must soon take place'. It is given by God to Jesus Christ who in turn passes it on to John through an angel. It came to John on a Sunday on the island of Patmos situated in the Aegean Sea off the coast of Asia Minor. He is commanded to write down all that he sees and to send it to the seven churches of Asia (1:1-11).

John has a series of visions. In the inaugural vision, Christ gives him seven messages to the seven churches. Ephesus, Sardis and Laodicea have become slack in their fervour; Laodicea glories in her earthly prosperity. Hence they need to repent. Smyrna and Pergamum are warned against the Nicolaitans; Thyatira has not to tolerate the woman Jezebel. Philadelphia has nothing against her. Christ is coming soon. At his coming, all those persecuting the Christians or actively misleading them with their false teachings will be destroyed. But those who persevere in the true faith will be rewarded with eternal life (1:9-3:22).

The next vision concerns the scroll with seven seals. It opens with the glimpse of the heavenly court. God is enthroned, attended by 24 elders and four living creatures (4:1-11). This vision is closely linked to the following: the scroll and the Lamb (5:1-14) and they form the backdrop for the heptad of the seals. The opening of the first six seals (6:1-17) provides us with a symbolic description of the content of the sealed document. The opening of the first four seals forms a homogeneous group by the image of the four horsemen and by identical introductory words. It indicates disastrous times: war, famine and pestilence (6:1-8). The fifth seal (6:9-11) discloses the call of the souls of the persecuted for justice and the assurance thereof. The sixth seal announces the events that should precede the end of the world (6:9-17). The seventh seal does not follow immediately. There is an interlude of two visions. In the first vision (7:1-8), John sees the faithful under divine protection against the impending adversity; the second vision (7:9-17) brings out the ultimate salvation of the righteous more clearly than the first. The seventh seal

(8:1) heralds the next heptad : the seven trumpets.

The arrangement of the trumpet heptad is similar to that of the seals. There is a heavenly scene (8:2-6) which serves as a setting. The first four trumpets (8:7-12) form a block as did the first four seals. The fifth (9:1-12) and the sixth trumpet (9:13-21) form a contrast due to the wide development accompanying them. Finally a double interlude of visions (10:1- 11:13) precedes the seventh trumpet blast (11:15-19).

The series of visions related to the seven trumpets also concerns the eschatological events. They concern the universe: heaven, earth, the waters and the under-world. The first four trumpets are directed against the cosmos while the last three affect humanity more directly. The content is a free adaptation of the ten plagues mentioned in Exodus chs 7-10. The visions in the interlude, the mighty angel with a little open scroll (10:1-11) and the temple and two witnesses (11:1-13), anticipate the second cycle of visions and thus provide a link between the two halves of the book. John receives a new commission, and a new scroll is brought in the contents of which are depicted in chs 12-22. The vision of the temple and two witnesses (11:1-13) prepares for chs 12-22 by introducing the two key themes: the time limit for the eschatological woes and the beast ascending from the abyss.

The second cycle of visions begins with a number of symbolic visions revealing the past, present and future (12:1-14:20). There are seven of them, not explicitly numbered though. The first is about the conflict between a woman and the dragon (12:1-17). The second concerns the beast from the sea (13:1-10). The third is of the beast from the earth (13:11- 18). The fourth one depicts the Lamb and the 144,000 (14:1-5). The fifth deals with the three angels (14:6-13). The sixth presents the picture of the harvest and vintage (14:4-20). The seventh shows those who had conquered the beast (15:2-4). All these visions have one underlying theme: persecution.

The vision of the seven bowls (15:1, 5-19:10) portrays the divine judgement upon the earth and the wicked.

It resumes and elaborates the announcements of the three angels in 14:6-13, specially the fall of 'Babylon' (14:8). This series also has the same subject matter as the visions of the seals and of the trumpets, i.e., the events of the end-time. But the perspective is different. As in the seven seals, the themes of justice and vindication are predominant here. As in the seven trumpets, the natural elements and the themes from Exodus are present. The bowls differ from the trumpets in so far as they specify the adversaries of God and the reasons for divine judgement.

The vision of the seven angels with the last plagues (15:1, 5-16:1) reminds us of 12:1,3. The vocabulary takes us back to the sixth trumpet (9:18,20), and points to Exodus (11:1; 12:13). The first four bowls (16:2-9) are unified by their association with natural elements: the earth (v 2), the sea (v 3), the fresh waters (v 4), and the sun (heavenly body) (v 8). The last three bowls (16:10-21) have a historical and political perspective. In this section, too, John receives seven visions: receiving of the bowls of plague (15:5-8); pouring out of the bowls (16:1-21); a harlot sitting on the beast (17:1-18); an angel announcing the doom of Babylon (18:1-3); a voice calling out for the faithful to leave the doomed city (18:4-8); a symbolic action depicting the destruction of Babylon (18:21-24) and a great multitude singing a canticle of joy in heaven (19:1-10).

John now has the vision of the last things (19:11-22:5). He has a vision of the second coming of Christ (19:11-16) followed by the call of an angel to all the birds to 'the great supper of God' (19:17-18). Then he sees the final battle in which the beast and the false prophet are defeated (19:19-21). After this, he is shown the binding of 'the dragon, the ancient serpent, who is the Devil and Satan' (20:1-3). Now John beholds the thousand-year reign of the faithful with Christ (20:4-10). The next vision unfolds before him the last judgement (20:11-15). The final vision brings before his eyes the new heaven, the new earth and the new Jerusalem (21:11-22:5).

The visions being over, John adds a few sayings to his book (22:6-20). The angel bears witness to the authenticity of the contents of the book (22:6-7). Then there is an oracle implicitly attributed to Christ. This is followed by John's attestation of the book. After this John records his reaction to the angel and the angelic response (22:8-9). Next comes the directive to John (22:10) and the threat of judgement together with the promise of salvation (22:11-12). Then there is another oracle implicitly referring to Christ (22:13). After this we find a promise of salvation and a threat of judgement (22:14-15) followed by the self-identification of the revealer (22:16). Then there is an invitation extended to all to the 'water of life' (22:17). It is followed by a warning given against any violation of the integrity of the book (22:18-19). The section ends with the promise of Christ to come soon and a fervent cry of the faithful to this effect (22:20). The book ends with an epistolary blessing (22:21).

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