

Contents

General preface	ix
Author's preface	xi
Chief abbreviations	xiii
The structure of the drama	xv
Introduction	1
The prologue (1:1–8)	7
Scene 1: The church in the world: <i>seven letters dictated</i> (1:9 – 3:22)	15
Scene 2: Suffering for the church: <i>seven seals opened</i> (4:1 – 8:1)	32
Scene 3: Warning for the world: <i>seven trumpets sounded</i> (8:2 – 11:18)	52
Scene 4: The drama of history: <i>seven visions of cosmic conflict</i> (11:19 – 15:4)	71
Scene 5: Punishment for the world: <i>seven bowls poured out</i> (15:5 – 16:21)	94
Scene 6: Babylon the whore: <i>seven words of justice</i> (17:1 – 19:10)	105
Scene 7: The drama behind history: <i>seven visions of ultimate reality</i> (19:11 – 21:8)	124
Scene 8: Jerusalem the bride: <i>seven final revelations</i> (21:9 – 22:19)	145
The epilogue (22:20–21)	161
Study guide	164

Revelation 1:9 – 3:22

Scene 1: The church in the world: *seven letters dictated*

The repeat of patterns

The opening Scene of the drama is a stupendous vision of the living Christ, who dictates to John a series of individual letters addressed to the seven churches for whom the entire book is being written. What is said we shall consider shortly. First we notice how it is said.

In a brief preview we have already glimpsed a repetition of Old Testament patterns, where the teaching of Balaam and Jezebel is recurring in the church life of these New Testament Christians. Now, as the whole Scene unfolds before us, we see how rich it is in such repetitions. Pattern echoes pattern throughout its length, as in an intricate poem. It positively rhymes.

Some of these echoes can be perceived without any background knowledge at all. Every letter starts with a description of Christ which repeats part of the total description of him at the beginning of the Scene. Every letter corresponds in shape to every other, beginning with the names of the addressees and the sender, continuing with statements about the former and messages to them, and ending with a command and a promise. Indeed, it is hard not to see in the basic structure of most of the letters (though John does not draw attention to this) a seven-beat rhythm which echoes the broader rhythm of the Scene as a whole. In the first letter, for example, it runs thus: (1) To the Ephesians (2) speaks the Holder of the seven stars: (3) I know certain good things about you, (4) but a bad thing too, (5) so repent. (6) Hear what the Spirit says; (7) the victor shall eat of the tree of life.

The Message of Revelation

For readers familiar with other parts of the Bible, deeper echoes sound. The promises to those who conquer will be repeated in later Scenes of Revelation: the tree of life (2:7) in chapter 22, the escape from the second death (2:11) in chapter 20, and so on. The portrayal of Christ has already appeared in earlier scriptures; the glory itself is the same that shone on the mount of transfiguration (Mark 9:2–3) – if the writer of Revelation was the apostle John, he himself had already seen on a hilltop in Palestine what he now saw on a hilltop in Patmos. What goes with that glory (the sound of trumpet-voices and many waters, the dazzling whiteness and the glowing bronze) was also the accompaniment of divine appearances in the Old Testament (Exod. 19:16; Ezek. 43:2; Dan. 7:9; Ezek. 1:7). The Son of Man's title and the general description of him are there too (Dan. 7:13 [NRSV mg.]; 10:5–6).

Nor is it simply words and phrases that are repeated. The warnings to Christ's churches here correspond at several points with the warnings to his disciples in Matthew 24 (e.g. 2:4 and Matt. 24:12; and see pp. 52ff.). The solemn declaration 'I will give to each of you as your works deserve' (2:23) is both 'Christ's invariable rule' and that of his apostles also.¹

Once you begin looking for this sort of thing elsewhere, it is remarkable how much of it you will find. Repetition is one means by which the psalmists 'rhyme' their poetry; what is echoed from line to line is not the sound but the sense – 'The earth is the LORD's and all that is in it, the world and those who live in it; for he has founded it on the seas, and established it on the rivers' (Ps. 24:1–2). It gives force to the words of the prophets: 'For three transgressions of Damascus, and for four . . . For three transgressions of Gaza, and for four . . . For three transgressions of Tyre, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment' (Amos 1:3, 6, 9). It is to be found on the grandest scale in the 'types' or patterns of biblical history, the great vertical pillars which show at every level something of the plan of the whole building, and to which our attention is most clearly drawn in the letter to the Hebrews. It is equally to be found in some of the smallest bricks that go to make up the building – tiny phrases, most of them hidden behind the plaster of an English translation, though at least one remains visible.

This is a fragment of a verse in the AV of Luke's Gospel, which yields the clue to why Scripture is so full of repeated patterns. One purpose of

¹ Swete, p. 25; and see Rom. 2:6; Jas 2:14–26.

repetition, as we have seen, is to show how relevant the Bible is. If what happened in the time of Balaam could happen again in the time of John, we are warned that it is equally likely to happen today. But repetition has another purpose. The NRSV of Luke 22:15 reads, 'I have eagerly desired'; what Luke wrote in Greek was, as the AV translates, 'With desire I have desired'. Genesis 31:30 has the same sort of phrase: in the NRSV, 'you longed greatly'; in Hebrew, 'you longed with longing'. Repetition of this kind has in fact been taken over into New Testament Greek from Old Testament Hebrew, where it is the regular way of expressing emphasis. To say a thing twice is to intensify it. To repeat means to underline.

And this is what God is doing constantly. He has basically just one message for men and women, the good news of salvation. But in his concern to get it across, he knows that one statement of it will not be enough. 'Once God has spoken,' says the psalmist, but 'twice have I heard' (Ps. 62:11). Thus Pharaoh is given two different dreams which convey the same message, to impress him with its validity (Gen. 41:32). The disciples are shown two separate miracles which convey the same truth, to teach them a particular lesson (Matt. 16:5–12). The purpose of hitting the same nail several times is obvious: to drive it home.

God is plainly teaching by this method throughout the rest of Scripture. And with good reason. The minds of men and women are incurably centrifugal, for ever flying off at a tangent. They must be brought back to the great central truths – made, literally, to *concentrate*. Those truths God outlines for us again and again, sometimes by a pencil sketch, sometimes by a more detailed pen drawing, sometimes by brushfuls of paint. The likelihood therefore is that he is doing the same in Revelation; and unless we have good reason to believe the opposite, we may expect the truth conveyed in this book to be intensive rather than extensive. In other words, what we are shown here is more likely to be a working over in colour of a picture we already know in outline, than to be an extra piece of canvas tacked onto the original picture.

1. Scene 1 opens: the church centred on Christ (1:9–20)

Up to the day when he heard the trumpet-voice, John's banishment must have seemed much more the sharing of Jesus' tribulation (*persecution*) than the sharing of his kingdom (9). The mountains and mines of Patmos

The Message of Revelation

were surroundings calculated to depress, not to encourage. But though John was physically 'in Patmos' (*en Patmō*), on this particular Lord's day he was also *in the spirit* (*en pneumatī*), and as for Jacob long before, the stony wilderness of exile proved for him the very gate of heaven. The voice spoke: the saint turned: the Mediterranean island scene faded behind him, and before him opened the vision of another kind of reality altogether.

It was the circle of seven lamps which first caught his eye. The lamps mean the churches, as we are told immediately. Even without verse 20 we might deduce this meaning from such passages as Philippians 2:15–16. Those who shine like lights in the world, says Paul, are those who hold the word of life. So Christ, who is *the* light of the world (John 8:12), gives his disciples the same title (Matt. 5:14).

The meaning of the other cluster of lights, the stars, is less easy. Suggestions that the *angels* are leaders of the churches, or messengers from them, or their 'spirit' in the modern sense of character or ethos, raise a number of difficulties. It seems simplest to take the word at face value. Scripture does seem to show (and not only in apocalyptic writings) that both individuals (Matt. 18:10; Acts 12:15) and nations (Dan. 10:13; 12:1) can each have an 'angel', a spiritual counterpart on the heavenly level; presumably the same may be true of churches. At any rate the angel and his church members are closely identified; Christ's message is addressed to him or to them indiscriminately; and both star and lamp, in different ways, give light to the world.

But the lesser lights of earth and sky pale before the splendour of the sun. This opening Scene is dominated by 'the glory of our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ' (Titus 2:13) – we know from verse 18 that it can be none other – and the sight is literally breathtaking (17). John certainly sees him as God; he gives him the attributes of deity by using the same kind of language that Ezekiel and Daniel use to describe God, and recalls Christ's own claim in John 14:9, 'Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.' From this point onwards, the centrality of Christ is the ruling theme of Revelation. All things depend on their relation to him.

This may explain one curious feature here. The seven lampstands cannot help but recall the one that stood in Moses' tabernacle. Moses, who like John was given a vision of spiritual reality, was told to construct a replica of what he had seen, and the seven lamps which (among other things) he duly made were united in a single lampstand. John's lampstands, however, are separate. Perhaps we are meant to see in them the church as

she appears in the world, congregations located here and there, which can be isolated and indeed destroyed (2:5). But on the heavenly level, the church is united and indestructible, for she is centred on Christ. The lampstands are scattered across the earth; but the stars are held together in the hand of Christ.

So it must be for all who are his people. The *persecution* and *kingdom* and *endurance* which Jesus knows, John knows also, and if we are truly his companions we shall share the same experience. *En Patmō* we suffer; but *en pneumatī* we reign. The practical result at which Revelation aims is to make us see the first in the light of the second. Even the progression from Scene 1, set entirely in this world, to Scene 8, set entirely in the next, serves the same purpose. This world the Christian knows because he or she lives in it; but as to what it means, where it is going, why it treats Christians so capriciously, how can we know these things? Only let it be related to *that* world, and we begin to understand. We come to see a plan in history, and to grasp what is really happening, where we fit in, and how it will all end. We perceive the grand design on the right side of the tapestry which explains the tangle of crossed threads and loose ends on the side we are more familiar with. So we learn to link in our mind the church as he sees it, lamps that gleam here and there across the dark world, ever seemingly threatened by extinction, and the church as Christ shows it, a cluster of inextinguishable stars in the hand of their creator. John is able to face the persecution, because of what he knows of the kingdom: to confront the storm, because his foundations are deep in the rock. *The persecution and the kingdom produce the patient endurance.* That is the object of the book of Revelation.

2. The first letter: to Ephesus (2:1–7)

If the traditions about John are correct, his pulse would have quickened as he heard that the first of the seven letters was destined for the church at Ephesus, for there, it is widely believed, he himself was for many years bishop. As might be expected, the character of the church came to reflect the character of its leader. The two sides of the John of the New Testament – an apostle of love, yet a ‘son of thunder’ – are seen again, interestingly enough, in two stories that have been handed down concerning his later years at Ephesus: on the one hand, his refusal to stay under the same roof as the heretic Cerinthus, and on the other hand, his

The Message of Revelation

reduction of all his message to a sermon of one sentence, which in extreme old age he used to repeat at every church meeting: 'Little children, love one another.' We can tell from Acts and Ephesians that the early church there was likewise characterized by both love and zeal. As the city of Ephesus claimed to be the 'metropolis', or mother city, of the whole of Asia, so its church could claim by her evangelistic and pastoral concern to be the mother church of that province, and Paul could write of her 'love towards all the saints' (Eph. 1:15).

By the time John writes, some years have passed. How is the church now? Her zeal is undiminished. Her *works, toil* and *patient endurance* are all commended, and especially the value she places on sound doctrine. Though she gladly endures suffering, she will certainly not endure false teaching, whether from evil people in general or from pseudo-apostles and Nicolaitans in particular.² According to the letter written to the Ephesians not long after this by Ignatius, bishop of Antioch, the report that has reached him is of a church so well taught in the gospel that no unorthodox sect can gain a hearing among her members, a church which has taken seriously the warnings of Paul at the time of his last contact with her leaders.³ Nor does the message from Christ in any way belittle their concern for purity and soundness; would that all the Lord's people were keen-sighted enough to know when and how to say with the psalmist (Ps. 139:21), 'Do I not hate those who hate you, O LORD?'

But in her keenness for the truth, the church at Ephesus has lost her love, 'the one quality without which all others are worthless'.⁴ It is noteworthy that only in the first and last of the seven letters is a church threatened with actual destruction, and in each case the reason is the unnerving, purely negative one, that *it lacks fervent devotion*. 'You have abandoned the love you had at first,' says Christ. 'Do not misunderstand me; you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate; I commend your zeal. But where is your love? For on that your very survival as a church depends.'

Such a failure is only too possible. It has to be confessed by all Christians who have cast themselves in the role of Mr Valiant-for-Truth, and

² We shall consider the latter when they reappear in 2:15.

³ Acts 20:28-31; Eph. 5:3-17; Ignatius, *To the Ephesians* 6, 9.

⁴ Caird, p. 31. 'It is not clear whether this is love for Christ . . . or for one another . . . or for mankind at large. It may well be that a general attitude is meant which included all three' (Morris, p. 60).