

## **APOCALYPSE (1) THE WRITER<sup>1</sup>** **“IN HEAVEN AN OPEN DOOR”**

The Revelation to John, the last book of the New Testament, belongs to those four centuries around the birth of Christ, two before and two after, which many people experienced “an open door” in heaven. It’s the time that apocalypse, revelation was rife, that many “apocalypses” have been written. Most of them could remind us of our own dreams – pictures following each other, often without a “logical” sequence, without beginning or end. One of them stands out: this book which made it into the Bible, even when quite some people didn’t like it at all and wondered why it had been taken into the canon of the Bible. Luther, the German reformer, must have said that his spirit could not find itself at ease in it. This book of Revelation stands out, because like every true supersensible experience it has a beginning and an end – a beginning in time and space on earth, and an end which leads back into that time and space. John introduces the book in three steps.

### **Introduction**

In the first three verses, John states that God gave this revelation to Jesus Christ, to show his servants what must soon take place. In order to give this revelation, he sent his angel to his servant John, that he would witness to the contents: to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, “even to all that he saw”. Then John adds a blessing, the first of seven “beatitudes” found in the Revelation, blessing those who read aloud, who hear and who keep what is written in this book, “for the time is near”.

As we see in the Gospel of John, the “witness” comes forward with his testimony as John the Baptist did (see for instance 1:6-8 and 10:41-42), as well as “the disciple whom Jesus loved” (see from chapter 11 and after 12:17: 19:35 and 21:20-24). That Gospel also knows well the importance of “keeping” the words of Christ (8:51, 14:15 and 15:10).

After having, as it were, legitimized himself as to the source and the revelation he is to be shown, in 1:4-8 John addresses his audience, the “seven churches in Asia”, in the area colonized by the Greeks where he had lived and worked for so long, giving them blessings from the One we would call God the Father (“who is and who was and who is to come”) and from the spirits before his throne, as well as from Jesus Christ in three manifestations: as faithful witness (of the Father), as first-born of the dead (himself, as the Son), ruler of kings on earth (in whom the Spirit has come into its own).

Then out of the revelation he has experienced, John breaks out in a glorification of him whom we know in three ways: the One who loves us, who has freed us by his blood from our sins, who will make us into self-reliant priests to his God and Father. And speaks of His Coming, with the clouds, so that every eye will see him, “every one who pierced him”; directly introducing the pictures of Cross and Lamb. As a kind of affirmation to what John has written, the voice of the Lord God comes through, of Him “who is and who was and who is to come”, Alpha and Omega, the Almighty.

Now John begins to speak for and out of himself (“I, John”), evoking shared martyrdom over years of “patient endurance” because of “the word of God and the testimony of Jesus” (as he had already written). Having spent years of being exiled on the island of Patmos, lying before this part of the coast of Asia Minor, he exactly pinpoints the beginning of his revelation: the Lord’s Day – the day of divine service, when he “was in Spirit”, and received his task: to write what he sees in a book and send it to the seven churches in the seven cities named.

In this way, John directly relates his “open-mindedness”, his ability to receive revelation, to his typical experiences of the Sunday – enabling him to hear this loud voice behind him, like a trumpet. Then, turning to see the voice that was speaking to him, indeed he sees seven golden lampstands, and in the midst of the lampstands perceives one like a son of man – the first vision to be described in this book of revelation.

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**At the very end** of the book, many of the themes from the beginning come back. But first, at the end of the final vision (21:6-7), in the words of the angel who showed John the city and the river flowing through the city, we hear an echo of the words of the One sitting on the throne in that final vision (21:5): “these words are trustworthy and true”. The angel then evokes the very first words of the Introduction, about the angel sent to show to His servants what must soon take place – by, as is said here, “the Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets”. And the promise of His Coming – soon, is added here in the first of the three times they are heard in the conclusion of the book (22:7, 12, 20), before the 6<sup>th</sup> beatitude affirms the importance of “keeping” the words of the prophecy of this book.

**In conclusion**, in the verses 8-9 “I John” affirms that indeed he is the one who “heard and saw these things” – which he had described throughout the book. Again, he is rebuffed by the angel whom he wants to worship (see 19:10), as the angel is a fellow servant with John and his brothers, the prophets, and with those who keep the words of this book (again this “keep”!) – the revelation to John, in this last part, being seen as a prophetic vision.

John, in the first of the words of the Lord which follow (22:10-12), contrary to what had been said to him when the Thunders spoke (10:4), is told that he should not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book – “for the time is near” (see 1:3). For the near future, it will be “business as usual” for both evildoers and righteous. But He who is coming soon will bring with him his “recompense”, his “reward”, in settlement of things done or omitted. And once more, as in the Introduction after the promise of Christ’s coming, the voice of the Lord God comes through, of Him “who is and who was and who is to come”, Alpha and Omega, beginning and end, affirming what has been revealed (22:13). The 7<sup>th</sup> beatitude rounds this off, reminding us strongly of our human task to continue to “wash our robes” (see 6:11 and 7:9 and 14). Who indeed will have conquered (to use the refrain in the Seven Letters and in the Last Vision [in 21:7]), will have access to the main elements of that new heaven and new earth; the others, as already has been expressed in 21:8, will have to stay “outside”.

Addressing directly those who, servants of his Lord and God (1:1), were to receive this revelation, “I Jesus” now affirms this testimony for the churches (22:16ff). Doing so, he calls to mind vital elements of the two first visions in this revelation: the ancestry of the Lamb who was perceived as sacrificed (5:6), as well as the moment that “One like a Son of man” reveals himself as the Son of God to him who gains the morning star (2:18 and 28). In such a way he prepares for the fulfillment of the 4<sup>th</sup> beatitude (19:9 following 19:7), using the image found in the Last Vision (21:2 and 9) of the Bride who invites everyone to “Come” to this marriage supper of the Lamb, at the same time calling up the vision of the multitude before the throne and words of the Last Vision (7:16 and 21:6). Those who have conquered, who have received their settlement, have already paid their price and may just “come”.

John, being the witness to the prophecy of this book, here as in the beginning (1:2-3), has to “warn” (22:18ff) that this prophecy as a whole is inviolable, as it is a road to fulfillment, Therefore, whoever adds to it or takes away from it, will be “outside” as well.

Finally (22:20ff), the voice of his Lord and the voice of his seer merge in promise and expectation of His Coming, and in blessing.

### **The Seer himself**

Who is this John, who was able to go into and to come out of those strong supersensible experiences with such clarity and consequence?

Is he one of the twelve apostles, who with his brother James, son of Zebedee (Mt 4:18), was called directly after Peter and Andrew to follow the Lord? Who was part of the circle of disciples, sent out (Mt 10:2) into the world and one of those present at the Ascension of Christ and at Whitsun (Acts 1:13 and 2:1)? The twelve apostles, who then went out into the world – whose words and deeds are mostly known through legends and apocryphal writings?

Or is he the witness who picks up the testimony of John the Baptist to “the beginning”, as recorded in the first part of the Gospel of John (1:7, 10:41), and testifies to the second part of that gospel (21:7, 20 and 24)? Then he would be the one known as “the disciple whom Jesus loved”, who “lies close to the breast of Jesus” (13:23), stands under the cross and testifies to his piercing (19:26 and 34-35), who reaches the empty tomb first (20:2-10): the one whom Jesus loved (11:3 and 5). This is Lazarus who in

such a dramatic way is raised from death after four days (11:17) – the defining moment for the decision to put Jesus to death (11:53). The same who in his gospel so strongly records the words of Christ about “keeping his word” (8:51-55; see 14:15-24 and 15:10).

Around the turn of the century in Ephesus people were filled with veneration for John, that old, that very old presbyter whose message “children, love each other” had more impact than any long sermon. An early disciple of the apostles and their followers, Papias, bishop of Hierapolis in Phrygia not that far from Laodicea (who lived in the first part of the second century), had as his own teachers some who had been taught by John the Presbyter. Writing of him, he evokes the image of one who himself already has grown “beyond time”, having a different relationship with death than others. Vincent van Gogh, in his painting “Raising of Lazarus”, may have touched on this mystery of John the Presbyter who was John the Evangelist. A few months before his own death, Van Gogh paints a scene where we, who look at the picture, are included within the space from which Lazarus is raised, looking as it were “from the inside” out to the sun which sends its rays on the one lying there, shining behind the person with outstretched arms who looks on with awe.<sup>2</sup>

### “The Revelation – to John”<sup>3</sup>

John not only conscientiously, as we have seen, begins and ends his book. He is also increasingly engaged in the revelation which he witnesses, the “revelation to John”. And it may well be that his experiences as “the disciple whom Jesus loved” shape what he is able to say, for instance in that amazing and unique proclamation of His Coming: “and every eye will see him, every one who pierced him, and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him” (1:7). What he experienced when standing by the cross, seeing His side pierced with a spear (John 19:25-35) has opened his soul for the one whom he then sees as “a Lamb, standing, as though it had been sacrificed” (5:6).

His first vision grows out of his Sunday-experience of “being in the Spirit”. Then he hears a loud voice behind him, like a trumpet (1:10), calling on him to write what he sees in a book and to send it to the seven churches named one after the other. Then, turning to see the voice that was speaking, he perceives seven golden lampstands and in the midst of the lampstands “one like a son of man” – the Christ within his seven congregations. “Write what you see, what is and what is to take place hereafter” (1:19). When he begins to write down the letters to the angels of the seven congregations, many particulars of the appearance of the “one like a son of man” return. “He who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands” (2:1), “The first and the last, who died and came to life” (2:8), “He who has the sharp two-edged sword” (2:12) – and so on.

Then there happens a break. John continues with an “after this”, which indicates a longer pause. “After this I looked” (4:1). His second vision begins when he sees an open door in heaven, and hears the first voice, which he had heard speaking to him like a trumpet, saying: “Come up hither, and I will show you what must take place after this” – “at once” he is “in the Spirit (4:2). Now he sees a throne in heaven, and One seated on the throne. He describes the One sitting on the throne, and those around the throne, beings singing continuous praise in choirs of “Living Creatures” and “Elders”. The One seated on the throne has a scroll in his hand, and nobody in heaven or on earth or under the earth is able to open the scroll, written within and on the back. John, seeing this, weeps (5:4). But, consoled by one of the Elders, he perceives a Lamb standing in the midst of the throne and the beings, “as though sacrificed” – and he perceives that the heavenly deadlock has been broken. The seven seals are opened one after the other.

Once more “after this) (7:9), after a pause when the sixth seal had been opened, he sees a great multitude (the 144,000) standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, adding their own song of praise, which is taken up by the angels round the throne and its beings. Now one of the Elders addresses him, inquiring about those in white robes, and when John can’t answer he gives the answer himself. Then, after a silence in heaven “for about half an hour”, the seventh seal is opened

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<sup>2</sup> See Emil Bock in the chapter on John the Evangelist in his *Caesars and Apostles* (Floris Books, Edinburgh 1998). On the website of the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam, [www.vggallery.com/paintings](http://www.vggallery.com/paintings), can be found a picture of Van Gogh’s “Raising of Lazarus”.

<sup>3</sup> An overview of the structure of the Revelation to John will be added to part 2 of this series: “The Book”.

which releases the angel with the seven trumpets, which after the sixth trumpet include the seven thunders (10:3). Then an angel appears with a little scroll open in his hand. But John is told to seal up and not to tell what the seven thunders have said, as the mystery of God should yet be fulfilled. The voice which he had heard before from heaven tells him to take this scroll and eat it (“it will be bitter to your stomach, but sweet as honey in your mouth”). Having eaten it, he is told that he again must prophecy (10:11). He is told to measure the temple and the altar and those who worship there; but nothing more (11:1-2).

When the seventh trumpet has sounded and loud voices have spoken and praised, a heavenly woman is seen, pursued by a red dragon. When Michael and his angels have brought the scene of battle down to the earth, two beasts are seen rising, one out of the sea and one out of the earth itself, testing endurance and faith of those on earth with their words and deeds. But then the multitude of the 144,000 can be seen once more, now gathered around the Lamb on Mount Zion (14:1), redeemed from the earth and singing a new song. When the coming great separation<sup>4</sup> has been announced, John is told to write what a voice in heaven speaks: “Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord henceforth...”, the first of four beatitudes heard within John’s visions (14:13), before the One like a Son of Man sends his sickle in for the harvest of the earth.

The third “portent” seen in heaven opens John’s eye for the setting of the throne with its sea of glass before it, and for the temple of the tent of witness out of which come the angels with the seven bowls with the last plagues (15:1ff). When “it is done” (16:17) and the great separation has happened, one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls approaches John, to show him the judgment of the great whore, the “scarlet woman”. And he is carried away “in the Spirit” to the place where this woman dwells (17:3) – it seems to need a special effort to show him this final scene of earthly abomination. He “marvels greatly”, but is told that doesn’t need to marvel as all is going to be explained to him. “After this” he is able to perceive the final judgment on Babylon (18:1ff).

“After this”, once more “a great multitude in heaven” is heard by John, now crying their “Hallelujah” twice (19:1ff), answered by the Beings around the throne as well as by a Voice coming from the throne – all this answered once more by a Hallelujah from the multitude. Now the angel tells John to write the third beatitude heard in his visions: “Blessed are those invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb” (19:9) – now that the apocalyptic process is coming to its consummation. But when he wants to fall down and worship the angel, he is told not to do this, as they are fellow servants. And once more having seen “heaven opened”, a white horse appearing, with One sitting upon it, (19:11), he sees and hears all which happens successively, which makes it possible that a new heaven and a new earth come into being.

In the final vision of that new heaven and new earth, after the proclamation that “the dwelling of God is with human beings” and the words of Him sitting on the throne: “Behold, I make all things new”, John is for the last time told to write: “Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true” (21:6). And one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls comes to John, to show him the second woman: the Bride, the wife of the Lamb, carrying him away “in the Spirit” (21:9-10) to show him the holy city Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven, from God, as well as the river of the water of life flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city, with the tree of life on either side of the river.

In the following contribution, we will look at the book and its structure.

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<sup>4</sup> Let’s here use the word which Matthew in his Gospel uses for the final “separation” within mankind, when the Son of Man has come with all his angels, to “separate the sheep from the goats” (25:31ff), even when we are speaking about a separation on a cosmic scale.