



like all others, must run the gauntlet of texts and questions that its commitments render difficult, taking maybe damaging blows and perhaps even being held below the waterline. The proof of the pudding will always be in the eating. My interpretative approach, like that of other commentators, has been arrived at through many, many readings of the texts, both with and without companions and guides.

As I walk through the text again, it is entirely possible that my interpretative strategy will be foiled by obstacles that the text itself presents. This should be the case for any responsible strategy of interpretation. A good interpretative approach will be the vision by which the reader is enabled clearly to perceive both the further distant object of the whole book and its place in the wider scripture and the much nearer objects of specific texts and passages within it.

Such an approach will bring the logic and meaning of particular passages and the import of their imagery into crisp focus and as we raise our eyes from the texts immediately before us, will enable us also to see the rest of the book and the entirety of the scriptures from an arresting and revelatory new vantage point. In part due to its difficulty and its favour among certain heretical groups, there was ambivalence and uncertainty around the book's canonicity in some quarters of the early church. However, its apostolic authority and authorship had very widespread early support and the book also enjoyed great popularity.

Papias, Irenaeus, Justin Martyr and Melito of Sardis, all writing at various points in the 2nd century, all seem to regard the book as scripture, written by the Apostle John. It is also included in the list of New Testament books in the Muratorian canon, quite likely also from the 2nd century. Craig Kester, who helpfully discusses the history of the reception of the book, specifically connects much of the opposition to, or ambivalence about revelation, to anti-montanism and anti-millennialism, both heretical movements that made much use of the book.

He discusses Dionysius of Alexandria, who writing in the 3rd century, disputed the apostolic authorship of the book, observing the difference in writing style, literary form and theology between it and the Gospel of John. Marcion also rejected it early on, on account of its pronounced Jewish character. Uncertainty about the status of revelation continued for a bit longer in the East.

Questions of canonicity are naturally tied to questions of apostolic authorship. The author identifies himself early on as John, in the very first verse. He is connected with churches in the province of Asia, in verse 4, churches to whom he writes directly in chapters 2 and 3. He is the witness of the entire prophecy, as we see in chapter 22, verse 8, exiled on the island of Patmos, one of the Dodecanese islands in the south of the Aegean Sea, off the coast of the province of Asia, about level with Miletus.

Beliefs about authorship depend upon considerations both internal and external to the

text. Early attributions of authorship, internal claims, style and various other considerations will inform our judgement on this matter. A number of possibilities immediately present themselves.

The first possibility is that it is pseudonymous or pseudepigraphical. Jewish writers of apocalypses, the genre to which revelation principally belongs, typically wrote under the guise of some ancient figure. Richard Borkum has argued that such writing was not necessarily intended to be deceptive, but was understood within the conventions of the genre.

However, early Christians do not seem to have accorded the same indulgence to such factually inaccurate attributions of authorship, even under the forgiving terms of genre norms. Nor, as R.H. Charles makes clear, do Christians share the same convictions about the state of prophecy that invited the conventions of pseudepigraphical apocalypses among their non-Christian Jewish contemporaries. Some early Christians who rejected the authority of the book attributed it to Corinthus, albeit with no serious evidence in their favour.

One argument against such pseudonymity, raised by Greg Beale, is how lightly the author refers to himself. Pseudepigraphical works typically over-egg the pudding of their identifications. But in Revelation, very little is made explicitly to rest upon John's apostolic identity.

He doesn't even refer to himself as an apostle. Indeed, this is one of the reasons why we have this debate about authorship to begin with. A second possible identification of the author is as John the Elder.

Mentioned by Papias, this is presumably a different figure from John the Apostle. This figure is also mentioned later on in Eusebius. For some commentators, this particular identification rests in part upon the assumption that John the Apostle never lived in Ephesus.

A third proposal was put forward by J. Massingbird Ford, who makes the case that the book largely comes from John the Baptist and his disciples. I don't know of anyone else who has followed her in this particular position. John Mark is a fourth suggestion that seems to have little or no support.

Finally, there is the fifth and traditional association of the authorship with John the Apostle, the son of Zebedee. Traditionally, it has been held that the same John who wrote Revelation authored the Gospel of John and the Epistles of John. However, some commentators argue that Revelation was written by the Apostle John and the Gospel of John by a different hand.

Most scholars question Johannine authorship nowadays, both of John's Gospel and of the

Book of Revelation. Nevertheless, conservative scholars generally continue to argue for it. David Owen notes several features that give weight to the identification of the author as a Palestinian Jew who had fled Palestine for the Diaspora.

The author knew the Old Testament exceptionally well, which he largely quoted in what Owen terms a Semitizing Greek, more characteristic of an Aramaic or even Hebrew speaker, rather than a person who spoke Greek as his first language and used the Septuagint. He was familiar with the Jewish cult of the Temple, aspects of the life of Jerusalem and Palestine and he wrote in a genre that particularly belonged to the region of Palestine. His conceptual world was also very distinctively Jewish.

While such a description would likely fit the Apostle John well, he wouldn't be the only possible candidate. The differences between the style of the books of John's Gospel and Revelation is perhaps one of the strongest arguments against the same John being the author of both. The style of Revelation is quite distinctive.

It differs sharply from that of the Gospel in several respects. The case against Johannine authorship on the basis of style is an old one. It dates back to Dionysius of Alexandria at the very least and is strongly presented by such as R.H. Charles.

Arguments against common authorship need not entail a radical disconnection of the Johannine material, of course, as the author might have been a disciple of John or someone in his near orbit. One could also make a case for the involvement of some other figure or figures in the composition of one or both of the books in question alongside John, who would have led to the divergence of the styles. There is early external evidence for the authorship of the Apostle John, of course.

Internally there are arguments for common authorship of the Gospel and the Epistles and Revelation, or at the very least extreme affinity. In the Gospel, 1 John and Revelation, but nowhere else in the New Testament, with the debatable exception of Hebrews, the Son is referred to as the Logos. There are other strong theological affinities, such as between their presentations of Christ as the Brigham or the presentation of Christ as the Divine Lamb.

In a far more extensive and daring case, Warren Gage and Fowler White have argued that the two books are a two-volume work which can be structured chiasmically. They observe even more remarkable parallels between specific passages in the two books, whose specificity weighs in favour of very close affinity between the two volumes. One should also note the prominence of witness-bearing in both books, and the importance of a character named John who bears witness at the outset of both.

The traditional claim that the Apostle John authored both the Gospel and the Book of Revelation should not be jettisoned, even though it may have difficult questions to answer on the front of style. Another very key question concerns dating. Depending on

one's dating of the book, certain fundamental interpretative approaches to the entire book may be ruled out or made more or less likely.

As a specific and especially keen example of this, a reading that regards the book as largely referring to events of AD 70 obviously rests heavily upon a pre-AD 70 dating. The majority of modern scholars hold a date toward the end of Domitian's reign, claiming the support of a statement of Irenaeus. Domitian's reign offers a backdrop for the book in escalating emperor worship and the persecution of Christians.

A minority of scholars, among whom I count myself, advocate an earlier and formally much more common dating towards the end of the 60s AD, with the dominant setting being not the Roman Empire, but apostate Judaism prior to the destruction of Jerusalem in the Jewish War in AD 70, which is a culminating event in that reading of the book. This question is one in which there are liberal and conservative commentators on both sides. Kenneth Gentry has written extensively on the question of the book's dating.

He presents both external and internal evidence for the position. Among the internal evidence that the temple is seemingly still standing in chapter 11, John alludes to Jesus' statement of Luke 21-24 concerning the destruction of the temple as something yet to occur in 11-2. He argues that the seven kings in Revelation 17 are clearly Roman emperors in context and that the reigning emperor must be Nero.

The extremely Palestinian character and conceptual provenance of the book also weighs in favour of an earlier date. He cites the Shepherd of Hermas, Papias, the Muratorian Canon and Clement of Alexandria as external evidence in support of a pre-AD 70 date. He questions the clarity and the strength of the evidence of the Irenaeus quotation cited by most scholars in favour of a later date.

Besides these considerations, we should also consider the importance of AD 70 and the destruction of Jerusalem as the dominant prophetic horizon of the rest of the New Testament. There is no conclusive argument on either side of this debate. However, considering the reasonableness of a pre-AD 70 dating and the stronger internal and wider canonical considerations for an AD 70 horizon, I favour the earlier dating.

Revelation is typically classed as apocalyptic literature in genre, although clearly other genres are present, such as the letters of the first three chapters. Reading Revelation well depends heavily upon knowing what type of material we are reading. While its canonicity was disputed by some, one could argue that Revelation is the most canonical book of all.

Scriptural allusions and echoes, though seldom direct citations, pervade the entire book. Unless you are already profoundly familiar with the rest of the scripture, you probably shouldn't expect to be able to understand the book of Revelation. Many modern people like to read the book of Revelation as if it were a strange prophetic text by a

Nostradamus-style figure, cryptically foretelling events in the far distant future in a sort of impressionistic form or in some sort of symbolic code.

Their interpretative strategies are drawn from cultural notions about the sort of thing that prophecy is, rather than scripturally informed ones. However, this is to approach Revelation without learning the lessons of how to read it from the rest of the scriptures, especially the Old Testament prophets, who employ symbols in a very different manner from this. John is told that the events foretold are shortly to come to pass.

The events in question are not random big world events that are awaited, but events that will serve as the fulfilment of the covenant in judgment and salvation. The book is deeply symbolic, depending upon the dense matrix of symbolism and typology that pervades the scripture. Without extensive familiarity with that, we will be seeing Apache helicopters and all sorts of other fanciful imaginings in its symbolism.

As we go through the book, what such an approach means in practice will become more apparent. Once again, the proof of this approach will be seen in the success of its application, in illuminating the book in ways that are not merely idiosyncratic to the imaginative interpreter, but which follow clearer and non-arbitrary principles provided to us by the rest of the scripture. Symbolism is not code.

Rather, symbolism is apt for prophecy because of the numerous connections that it invites, the way that it brings elements together. While code tends to require a one-to-one correlation, symbolism fills out by relating things to other things and to deeper patterns and realities. There are four commonly recognised fundamental approaches to the book of Revelation.

Again, these approaches are proposed syntheses of the teaching of the book in big pictures that are constantly related to and framing the details. These approaches inescapably shape the way that people read the details, but the movement should also be going the other way, as the details inform the big picture. Ian Paul lists them as follows.

First Idealist. The Idealist approach is concerned with perennial spiritual truths about the relationship between the church and the world and about God's plans in history. The second is the Futurist approach.

This approach believes that the book is concerned with the events at the final end of history, an apocalypse often regarded as imminent in the days of the interpreter. The third approach is the Historicist one. This believes that the book is concerned with events over the entire history of the church.

Again, it is commonly the case that interpreters advocating this approach see themselves as much nearer to the conclusion of this history than to its beginning. Finally,

many people read the book as referring to contemporary historical events within the lifetime of John and his readers, or a Preterist reading. The book is about events that are shortly to occur, and there are various forms of this position.

Some relate the book primarily to Christians in the Roman Empire suffering persecution, while others, like I do, relate it primarily to the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. While one of these angles of approaches will almost invariably predominate, they need not be absolutely mutually exclusive, but can include dimensions of one or more of the others. Peter Lighthouse and Robert Mounce both make this point well.

Divinely orchestrated history establishes fundamental theological and typological patterns, so reflecting upon events of the first century should teach us about patterns by which we can better understand events that are yet future. Furthermore, scriptural prophecy often exhibits a telescoping character, referring to various levels of fulfilment simultaneously. While the immediate fulfilment of the prophecy is mostly, but not exclusively, AD 70, later events can develop that fulfilment or raise it up to a new level.

The first chapter can be neatly divided into verses 1-8 and 9-20, which can in turn be loosely mapped onto each other. The book is the revelation of Jesus Christ. Jesus is the one who is unveiled within it, and he is also the one who is doing the unveiling.

The revelation is not about random future events, it is about Christ. A good reading of the book should always take this as its starting point, it is an important key to the whole. And there is a movement of this revelation.

It starts off with God, moves to Jesus Christ, to the angel, and then the servant John, who then delivers it to the church. The revelation is signified, or symbolised, by the sent angel. The angel here is literally the messenger.

Knowing that the term simply means messenger, we need not presume that angel requires that the figure in question be some specific type of heavenly being. Peter Lighthouse argues that the figure in view is the spirit, as the messenger of the sun. The revelation is given by the father, shown by the son, and signified through the spirit.

It is a Trinitarian pattern. And as it is signified, the book needs to be read as symbol. We must read it in terms of patterns of prophecy and apocalypse that can be found within the Old Testament already.

The revelation concerns things that must soon take place. These are events on the near horizon, not in the very far distant future. This is immediately relevant to the addressees, it is not some event over 2000 years away from them in the future.

John is a witness to the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ, and he sees this. Just as the Gospel of John begins with a witness named John, who has to bear witness to the light, here we have another John who bears witness to the risen Christ, the one who

is dazzling in his splendour. The prophecy is designed for public reading and hearing in the church, and those who do so are blessed. Its contents must be kept.

It is a spur to practical faithfulness, obedience and endurance for its hearers. It is not just some mysterious prophecy to be speculated about. It is written for a specific body of people, to prepare them for faithfulness in tribulation.

It is addressed to the church, it is a word for their situation, it is relevant to them because the time is near. The crises that the book speaks of are on the very near horizon. More particularly, it is addressed to the seven churches in Asia.

These are seven specific bodies of Christians in the province of Asia in the west of modern Turkey. The Apostle John has seemingly been based in Ephesus for a while. The churches that he writes to are neither in Palestine nor in Rome, but they are caught between these two worlds.

It is written to Christians with a strong Jewish background. And he starts with the Trinitarian benediction, him who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Father, the seven spirits before his throne, the Spirit, and Jesus Christ the faithful witness, the Son. There are Trinitarian benedictions in Paul, and here we see one in John.

These are early evidence of the fundamentally Trinitarian form of Christians' faith. The title him who is, and who was, and who is to come is an unpacking of the meaning of the revelation of the divine name, Yahweh, I am who I am, the name declared to Moses in Exodus chapter 3. It also draws upon language in places such as Isaiah chapter 41 verse 4, I the Lord, the first and with the last, I am he. The seven spirits are connected with the Spirit.

The lampstand with seven lamps as the eyes of the Lord in Zechariah 4 might come to mind. In Isaiah chapter 11 verse 2, there is a sevenfold reference to the Spirit. This is connected also with the imagery of flame.

The principles for the union and separation of flame differ from those of typical solid objects. The one fire of the Spirit can be sevenfold on the lampstand, much as the divided tongues of Pentecost which first lit the church as a lampstand are the one flame of the Spirit that has descended upon her. We have three titles of Christ given here, faithful witness, firstborn of the dead, ruler of kings, and three actions also, he loves us, freed us, and made us a kingdom and priests.

Christ's redemptive death has liberated the church. There are allusions here to Exodus chapter 19 verses 5 to 6. Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine, and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. Verse 7 is, as Lighthart suggests, the theme verse of the book.



Christ is coming with the clouds, he will be seen even by those who crucified him, and the tribes of the land will mourn. The context is especially one of first century Palestine, of the Jews and their tribes in the land, where people responsible for the crucifixion of Christ were still alive. It is reminiscent of Jesus' statement to the high priest at his trial in Matthew chapter 26 verse 64, but I tell you, from now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of power and coming on the clouds of heaven.

This draws upon two key prophecies. The first is in Daniel chapter 7 verses 13 to 14. The ascension of the Son of Man to reign, and the ascension of the saints in him, and his triumph over the beasts, especially the fourth beast, is a Daniel background for the book of Revelation.

This prophecy will be fulfilled in the near future. Also in the background is Zechariah chapter 12 verse 10. Jesus is the pierced shepherd of the book of Zechariah.

He is the one who is lifted up in his crucifixion and in his resurrection and ascension to God's right hand. People will see Christ lifted up from the earth on the cross, and later the evidence that he is established in heaven and coming on the clouds, as the fulfillment of the prophecy of Daniel. Christ is the firstborn son who dies for the people, and lifted up he is the one to look to for life, he is the one who gathers all peoples to himself.

The mourning here is likely twofold. For some it is the mourning of repentance, while for others it is the mourning of those who suffer judgment. The same term is later used in Revelation chapter 18 verse 9 of the kings of the earth mourning the downfall of Babylon the Great.

This is another fulfillment of Zechariah chapter 12. John addresses the seven churches of Asia. He introduces himself as their brother and partner.

He is someone suffering in the same tribulations as they are. He also uses a similar form of introduction as Daniel does on several occasions in his prophecies. He has been exiled to Patmos on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.

It should be noted that this expression, the word of God and the testimony of Jesus parallels verse 2, as verses 9 to 20 can be loosely mapped onto verses 1 to 8. The testimony of Jesus might be either the testimony that Jesus himself bore, or the testimony about Jesus. Or perhaps the ambiguity is intentional. It may be both.

John is in the spirit on the Lord's day. What is the Lord's day here? It might perhaps be a reference to the day of the gathering of the assembly. The day of the Lord in the Old Testament prophets is the great day of judgment and salvation.

Perhaps this is also an early reference to Sunday as the day when the people of God gathered, the day of the Lord, the day of Christ, the day of his resurrection. John is in the

spirit. He experiences a vision.

He is moved by the spirit and he moves in the spirit. He hears a voice like a trumpet and he turns. This is similar to the trumpet at Sinai, associated with the theophany there.

It's also similar to Ezekiel 3. Then the spirit lifted me up and I heard behind me the voice of a great earthquake. There are a great many allusions to the book of Ezekiel and Daniel in the book of Revelation. This is a sort of prophetic commissioning, the sort of thing that we find in various places in the Old Testament.

John is instructed to record the vision in a book to be sent to the seven churches of Asia. He turns to see the voice. It's an embodied voice and he then goes on to describe the one who speaks.

There are seven golden lampstands. These represent the churches lit with the spirit on the day of Pentecost. It's a vision of the holy place with a glorious Christ, the one like the Son of Man, in its midst as priest and brigrim.

He's in the midst of the lampstands and he's the one who tends and guards them. He gives them the oil of the spirit they require. This is also reminiscent of the lampstand vision in Zechariah chapter 4. There's a description of the whole body of this Son of Man.

The description here should remind us of the wasifs of the Song of Songs and also the visions that we see in places like Daniel 10 and Ezekiel chapter 1. In the Song of Songs, the lovers describe each other from head to toe and Jesus is described in the same way here. He is the lover, he is the brigrim and we are moving towards the wedding. He is dressed in glorious garments like a priest.

He has dazzlingly white hair like the Ancient of Days described in Daniel's vision in Daniel chapter 7 verse 9. His eyes are like a flame of fire, like the throne of the Ancient of Days, although likely also connected to the seven eyes of the spirit mentioned in Revelation chapter 5 verse 6 and Zechariah chapter 3 verse 9. Christ's eyes are the eyes of judgment. They don't merely receive things but they go out throughout the earth with their searching and consuming gaze. The description here should remind the hearer of Daniel chapter 10 verses 5 to 6 and Daniel's vision of Michael, which I believe is a reference to Christ.

I lifted up my eyes and looked, and behold a man clothed in linen, with a belt of fine gold from Euphaz around his waist. His body was like beryl, his face like the appearance of lightning, his eyes like flaming torches, his arms and legs like the gleam of burnished bronze, and the sound of his words like the sound of a multitude. This is just one example of literally hundreds of occasions when the book of Revelation would be picking up imagery from the books of Ezekiel or Daniel or some other part of the Old Testament.

If you do not know these Old Testament texts you will struggle to understand what John

is referring to in his prophecy. Daniel's response to this vision is very similar to John's. Both Daniel and John fall down as dead or in deep sleep.

The metallic elements here should also remind us of the dream of Nebuchadnezzar and the statue of various metals in Daniel chapter 2. As Lighthouse observes, Christ is also like an empire. The statue represented all these different kingdoms and Christ is the one who gathers peoples and nations in himself. He is going to form a new kingdom, a kingdom that is represented in this glorious body, a body that represents not just Christ as an individual but Christ as the church.

The face of Christ shines like the sun. The sun is described as like a bridegroom leaving his chamber in Psalm 19 and Christ here is the bridegroom who has the brilliance of the sun. He is the true light that came into the world as we see in John chapter 1. Out of his mouth comes a two edged sword, the sword of the word that judges and divides.

He holds in his hand seven stars, perhaps a reference to the seven of the sun, moon and the five visible planets of Jupiter, Mars, Mercury, Venus and Saturn. Traditionally also associated with the days of the week. Coming face to face with the glory of God, the prophet becomes as dead as in the story of Isaiah or Daniel for instance.

Faced with the glory and the holiness of God, the prophet realizes his mortality and his sinfulness. Christ, however, lifts John up and declares himself. He is the I am, he is the first and the last.

He is the one who cannot be bounded by time. He bounds time himself. As the risen one, he is the one who has conquered death and taken its keys.

He is the living one, the one over whom death has no power. John is instructed to record what he has seen, both those things that currently are, the things that are not seen in the heavens above and also those things that have not yet taken place. The seven stars are the angels and the seven lampstands the churches.

The angels might refer to human messengers sent like the spirit of God. The letters of the next two chapters are addressed to the angels, who are described in a way that suggests that they are not perfect beings but rather are beings who are flawed and sinful. It is quite likely that they are the pastors of the churches in question.

A question to consider. Why is lampstand imagery appropriate for the church? From what other parts of scripture can we develop lampstand imagery?