

The Prologue

1:1–8

The Relevance of the book of Revelation

Come up hither', says the mysterious voice (Rev. 4:1); and John is transported into regions so strange and remote that many Christians hesitate to explore them with him. The Gospels and Letters are territory which is more familiar and more accessible; can this extraordinary book at the end of the Bible, belonging (in more senses than one) to a different world, have anything to do with the practicalities of life in the twentieth century?

From the outset, however, the book of Revelation claims to have been written not for the benefit of a minority in the church, but for all; and not for its own age alone, but for the church in all ages. Like the rest of the Bible, it speaks today.

a. Relevance claimed in the Title

Luke's two-volume history (his Gospel, and the book of Acts) was compiled for a person whom he calls Theophilus (Lk. 1:3, Acts 1:1). Nevertheless we have no doubt that what he wrote for Theophilus is relevant for readers in any age. Paul's Letters were written to particular Christians living in the Roman Empire. Nevertheless we take it that what he wrote to them applies equally to us. These writings were meant specifically for first-century readers, but we do not hesitate to accept them as relevant to modern Christians also. How much more ought we to accept the relevance of those parts of the New Testament which are actually addressed to Christian people in general?

And the Title (1:1–3) tells us that this book is of such a kind. It is the Revelation of Jesus Christ given by God to his servants. If I am one of those who serve him, then this book is for me, however irrelevant its contents may seem when I first glance through it. It behoves me therefore to persevere in reading it, so that I may receive the blessing its author promises me (1:3).

b. Relevance claimed in the Greeting

Although in the Title John tells us that his message is for Christ's servants in general, in the Greeting (1:14–8) he says he is writing in particular to the seven churches of Asia. What he sends them is more than the short letters contained in chapters 2 and 3. The entire book is his letter, and his final 'yours sincerely' comes in its very last verse (22:21). So the address in the Title ('to his [Christ's] servants') and that in the Greeting ('to the seven churches that are in Asia') are both headings to Revelation as a whole. What John is writing is *in form* a letter to a group of first-century Christians, but *in fact* a message to all Christians without distinction. Its beginning and ending place it in the same category as the Letters of Peter and Paul, of James and Jude, written in the first instance to situations in the early church, yet containing apostolic truth intended by God for the church in all ages. Revelation is no mere appendix to the collection of letters which makes up the bulk of the New Testament. It is in fact the last and grandest of those letters. As comprehensive as Romans, as lofty as Ephesians, as practical as James

or Philemon, this 'Letter to the Asians' is as relevant to the modern world as any of them.

c. Relevance claimed in the opening Scene

We leave the Prologue (1:1–8), and steal a preview of Scene 1 of the great drama, where we see the risen Christ dictating to John his letters to the seven churches. To the church in Pergamum he says: 'I have a few things against you: you have some there who hold the teaching of Balaam' (2:14). To the church in Thyatira he says: 'I have this against you, that you tolerate the woman Jezebel' (2:20). What do we learn from these references?

It was in the time of Moses, probably in the thirteenth century BC, that Balaam misled God's people by his false teaching. Thirteen hundred years later, however, that teaching is still very much alive, misleading God's people at Pergamum. It was in the ninth century BC that Jezebel, Ahab's queen, was causing similar trouble in Israel. But 900 years later, in Thyatira, we find not merely her teaching but the lady herself once more in evidence!

Christ is not of course speaking of the reincarnation of a person, but of the repetition of a pattern. Bible history is full of such repetitions. Thus the preaching of Jesus repeats the pattern of the preaching of Jonah (Mt. 12:39 ff.), and the lifting up of Jesus on the cross is like the lifting up of the bronze snake by Moses (Jn. 3:14). John the Baptist not only resembles, but in a sense actually is, the prophet Elijah, who lived centuries earlier (Mt. 11:14).

The Letter to the Hebrews, rooted as it is in the Old Testament, provides many examples. God's message coming with urgency through the mouth of David, 'Today ... hear his voice', was an equally urgent message when the Hebrew Christians read it 1,000 years after David, and when Moses' contemporaries heard it 300 years before him (Heb. 3:7–4:10). Going back further still, the oath God made to Abraham has undiminished force for us (Heb. 6:13–18). And it was in the remotest past of human history that Abel expressed his faith by the sacrifice he offered to God, but even now 'he being dead yet speaketh' (Heb. 11:4, AV). Just as in every generation the evil influence of Balaam and Jezebel is likely to reappear, so God in his mercy is constantly repeating the great truths of salvation; they are 'new every morning' (La. 3:23).

So we must give the fullest meaning to the present tenses of these verbs. The immediacy of Hebrews 3:7, which may be translated 'the Holy Spirit *is saying* "Today ... hear his voice"', is matched by that of the seven-times-repeated command of Revelation 2 and 3, which we could similarly translate, 'Hear what the Spirit *is saying* to the churches.' What we have here is a restatement of those truths of the spiritual world which were as real in the days of John as they had been in the days of Jezebel, and which are no less relevant today. The promise of blessing with which Revelation opens and closes (1:3; 22:7) is for all, even today, who will study and heed its teaching.

d. An important consequence

If this is so, there follows a conclusion of some importance.

Before we even reach the second verse, three major questions have been raised, which have long exercised the minds of critics and commentators. The name 'Revelation' (Greek *apokalypsis*) not only tells us that this is to be an 'unveiling' of great truths about Jesus Christ, but also links it with the particular type of Jewish religious literature called 'apocalyptic'. The question then arises, how far did John mean his book to be read as an example of apocalyptic, and therefore how much does one need to know about apocalyptic before one can understand the book properly? John himself is the second question. Is he in fact John the apostle, the son of Zebedee, and the author also of a Gospel and three Letters; or does that traditional view have fatal weaknesses, which mean that the author must have been someone quite different, but having the same name and similar authority? The third question concerns the 'servants' to whom the book is addressed. Would it not help us to understand the book if we could

know exactly who they were, and what were the situations and the needs to which John was writing?

The fact that questions like these have been dealt with in very summary fashion in the Introduction does not mean that they are unimportant. But a warning is necessary. When the reader first encounters what seems to him to be the obscurity of Revelation, he may say, 'If only I had more specialized knowledge of Jewish literature, or Roman history, or Greek philosophy, these mysteries would become clear to me.' And this, I believe, is misleading. For the number of God's servants who are equipped with that kind of learning will always be comparatively small—not many wise are called (1 Cor. 1:26)—whereas the message of Revelation is addressed, as we have seen, to all his servants without distinction. Its chief value must therefore be of such a kind that Christians with no special academic resources can nevertheless appreciate it.

This is not to belittle the value of biblical research, still less to exalt anti-intellectualism; the study of Scripture demands the fullest possible use of the Christian's mind. But it is to assert that the prime requirement for the understanding of these great mysteries is a knowledge, such as John himself had, of the Word of God and the Witness of Jesus (Rev. 1:2, 9). For the majority of those who have set out to explore John's book, that Word and that Witness have had to be the only illumination: the Bible in their hands, and the Spirit in their hearts. It is by the focusing of this beam down the centre of their path, rather than by the sidelights which critical study sheds on its rough edges and dark corners, that 'the wayfaring men, though fools, shall not err therein' (Is. 35:8, AV).

1. The Title (1:1–3)

It is not John's revelation—he is merely the reporter of it—but Jesus Christ's; and even Jesus is not its originator, for he receives it (as John's Gospel also frequently tells us) from his Father. Through the five stages of its transmission, from Father to Son to angel to writer to readers, it comes with undiminished clarity as the Word of God and the Witness of Jesus. That phrase describes here what John was about to be shown on the island of Patmos. In verse 9, on the other hand, where it occurs again, it refers not to the object but to the cause of his coming there. Already God had spoken to him, already Christ had testified to the truth of that word, and it was because John would not and could not deny this Christian experience that he was sent into exile. And now he was again to receive the Word and the Witness, a genuine message from God, which in due course was to be read aloud in church meetings like other inspired scripture (verse 3). It would in a sense be nothing new; simply a recapitulation of the Christian faith he possessed already. But it was to be the last time that God would repeat the patterns of truth, and he was to do so with devastating power and in unforgettable splendour.

These verses discourage 'futurist' views of Revelation. Certainly the book deals with much that still lies in the future. But notice that John was shown 'what must soon take place'. This is a phrase taken from pre-Christian apocalyptic and subtly changed. The revelation to Daniel concerned what was to happen 'in the latter days' (Dn. 2:28). But the early church believed that when the Christian era began, the last days had actually begun also (Acts 2:16 f.; 3:24). It is true that the word for 'soon' could also be translated 'suddenly' (it is ambiguous, like the English 'quickly'); and it could therefore be held to mean that when the prophesied events did happen, they would happen speedily, but that they might not begin to happen till long after John's time. On this view the greater part of Revelation might still, even today, be unfulfilled. 'Suddenly', however, sounds most unnatural in the context of verse 1; and the verse as it stands is certainly not referring to the far future. When we find Daniel's 'what will be in the latter days' replaced by John's 'what must *soon* take place', the object is rather the opposite—to bring events which were once distantly future into the immediate present; so that it is in this sense that 'the time is near'.

Time for what? we may ask. Time for the end of time, and all its associated events? Time for the beginning of a long series of happenings which will eventually usher in the end? Time for some immediate crisis of trouble or persecution, which will be a kind of foreshadowing of the end? John is

not told immediately.

But it is worth pointing out what Daniel had in mind when he spoke of the events of the latter days. It was the dream of Nebuchadnezzar, in which that king had been shown, in the shape of a great statue, a succession of world empires beginning from his own. In the days of the last of those empires, explains Daniel, 'the God of heaven will set up a kingdom which shall never be destroyed' (Dn. 2:44).

And now John has seen the latter days arrive. The setting up of God's kingdom has begun with the coming of Christ; and the promise that 'it shall break in pieces all these kingdoms and bring them to an end, and it shall stand for ever' (Dn. 2:44), is already starting to be fulfilled. The fulfilment is a process, not a crisis; and a lengthy one, not a sudden one, we may observe—for though events at its climax will move swiftly enough, the process itself will occupy the whole of the gospel age, from the inauguration of the kingdom (12:10) to its final triumph (11:15). If this that Daniel has foreseen for the latter days is what the angel is now bringing into John's immediate purview, then 'the time is near' indeed. As soon as his letter reaches its destination in the churches of Asia, they will be able to say, 'These things are happening *now*.' Such immediacy it has always had for attentive readers, and so it can reveal to us in our own twentieth-century world the present reality of the conflict between the kingdom of the world and the kingdom of our Lord.

2. The Greeting (1:4–8)

At least ten churches had been established in the Roman province of Asia by the time John was writing, so there must have been some reason for his choice of seven of them. For the moment we simply note that both the number of the churches, whose symbolic meaning we shall consider later, and the order in which they are addressed, which is as likely to be a matter of stylized symmetry as one of mere geography, seem to indicate that his message is for the church in general.

John opens with the greeting found in most of the New Testament Letters. But just as the readership he has in view is particularly broad, so his description of the senders is particularly lofty. Grace and peace come in this case from the triune God, and each of the three persons of the Godhead is named in turn.

The description of God the Father, which resembles the divine name made known to Moses in Exodus 3:14, shows the oddity of some of John's language. Its grammar has been smoothed out in the RSV; but what he actually wrote was the Greek equivalent of 'Grace and peace *from he* who is ...'. Surely it should be 'from him'? Perhaps John was seeing God as one who is always 'he', the subject of every sentence, who governs every other part of speech and is himself governed by none. We shall find in Revelation many declarations, much more explicit than this, of what is called in Hebrews 6:17 'the unchangeable character of his purpose'. At any rate the disjointed grammar is only on the surface, and may be due to the breathtaking sequence of his visions; for their deeper truth is perfectly consistent, and forms an interlocking grammar of the spirit.

It is in fact the Spirit, who is before the throne, at the heart of the Godhead, and thus knows the deep truth of God (1 Cor. 2:10 f.), who is mentioned next. John's vision is going to take him into the heavenly sanctuary, of which the Jewish Tabernacle was a copy and shadow (Heb. 8:5); and perhaps the unusual order of the Trinity here (Father, Spirit, Son) corresponds to the plan of the earthly sanctuary, where the ark in the Holy of Holies represents the throne of God, the seven-branched lampstand in the Holy Place before it represents the Spirit, and in the courtyard before that stands the altar, with its priest and its sacrifice both representing, of course, the redeeming work of Christ.

If the description of the Father contains one of the first of John's solecisms, that of the Spirit contains one of the first of his mysteries. *Seven* spirits—do they mean the one Spirit in his essential nature, as the seven churches stand for the one church as she really is? Or do they mean the Spirit equally present in each of the churches (see 5:6)? Or do they mean the sevenfold gifts of the Spirit (*cf.* Is. 11:2)? We cannot know for sure. But we are duly warned that for some of the locked doors of

Revelation, keys may be hard to find.

God the Son has the fullest description. Its Old Testament roots are in Psalm 89:27, 37, and it portrays him in his threefold office of Prophet, Priest, and King. Here the Trinity is earthed, and theology (verse 5a) turns into praise (verses 5b, 6). Jesus Christ is the Prophet who came into the world to bear witness to the gospel of salvation (for although the word for ‘witness’ is *martyrs*, ‘a martyr’, the basic thought is not the death he dies so much as the testimony he bears); and that loving condescension is for *us*. He is the Priest who has offered himself and died, and then risen from the dead, to obtain new life also for the rest of God’s children. To be ‘washed’ in his blood (AV) is a perfectly acceptable biblical metaphor, found for example in 7:14; but the RSV’s reading, ‘freed ... by his blood’, is not only better attested, but calls up the associations of the exodus—the death of the pass-over lamb, and the rescue of Israel from Egypt. At Calvary a more far-reaching rescue has been effected; and that deliverance is for *us*. He is now exalted as King of kings, and as Israel was brought out of slavery to be God’s kingdom of priests (5:9, 10; Ex. 19:6), so a share in his kingdom is available to *us*. And one day he will return, as he himself has said; for it was not John, but Jesus, who first brought together the two prophetic pictures of clouds and mourning tribes in connection with his second coming (Dn. 7:13; Zc. 12:10; Mt. 24:30). Those who pierced him will at last recognize him, and bewail the lost opportunity of salvation. But his own people will be expecting him, knowing that he is ‘the Alpha and the Omega’, both Beginning and End of all things. And thus his work will be completed.

This is the Almighty God who is sending grace and peace to us his servants in the long letter which follows. Grace and peace, be it noted—not perplexity and a puzzle; and we must read it in the expectant spirit that looks for his blessing. The letter is to be cast in the form of a drama; and after the Title and Greeting which together form its Prologue, the curtain rises, and the drama begins.

Scene 1: The Church in the World: Seven Letters Dictated 1:9–3:22

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.

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 (Mk. 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 (Ex. 19:16; Ezk. 43:2; Dn. 7:9; Ezk. 1:7). The Son of man's title and the general description of him are there too (Dn. 7:13; 10:5 f.).

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 Mt. 24:12; and see pp. 85 ff.). 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.

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 the fulness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein; for he has founded it upon the seas, and established it upon 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' (Am. 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 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 RSV of Luke 22:15 reads, 'I have earnestly desired'; what Luke wrote in Greek was, as the AV translates, 'with desire have I desired'. Genesis 31:30 has the same sort of phrase: in the RSV, '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, 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 (Gn. 41:32). The disciples are shown two separate miracles which convey the same truth, to teach them a particular lesson (Mt. 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 mind of man is incurably centrifugal, for ever flying off at a tangent. He must be brought back to the great central truths—made, literally, to *concentrate*. Those truths God outlines for him 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 on to 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's tribulation than the sharing of his kingdom. The mountains and mines of Patmos 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 Pneumati*), 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 (Jn. 8:12), gives his disciples the same title (Mt. 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 (Mt. 18:10; Acts 12:15) and nations (Dn. 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' (Tit. 2:13)—we know from verse 18 that it can be none other—and the sight is literally breathtaking (verse 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, 'He who 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 lamp-stands 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 tribulation and kingship 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 Pneumati* 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 lives in it; but as to what it means, where it is going, why it treats him so capriciously, how can he know these things? Only let it be related to *that* world, and he begins to understand. He comes to see a

plan in history, and to grasp what is really happening, where he fits in, and how it will all end. He perceives the grand design on the right side of the tapestry which explains the tangle of crossed threads and loose ends on the side he is more familiar with. So he learns to link in his 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. He is able to face the tribulation, because of what he knows of the kingdom: to confront the storm, because his foundations are deep in the rock. 'The tribulation 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 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 toward 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 men in general or from pseudo-apostles and Nicolaitans in particular. 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. 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 them that hate thee, 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'. 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 forgotten that they are also expected to be Mr Great-heart. To them Christ shows himself as equally zealous for the right. He too shows strength and vigilance—but it is the church he holds and patrols (verse 1). He too has a sharp eye for wrong—but it is in the church that he detects it. He too will not endure evil—but the evil he threatens to destroy is the church herself, if she will not repent.

And the first lamp was indeed removed. Church and city together have vanished; all that remains is the place-name Ayasaluk—and that, ironically, commemorates not Ephesus but John. There is still the promise of life in paradise for the individual who remembers from what he has fallen, and returns to his first works and his first love. But let the loveless church beware. 'If I have prophetic powers, and

understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing' (1 Cor. 13:2).

3. The Second Letter: To Smyrna (2:8–11)

One does not need background knowledge of Smyrna to understand the message to the church there, but still it is illuminating to learn that the beauty of this city, which rivalled Ephesus, was the beauty of a resurrection. Seven hundred years before, old Smyrna had been destroyed, and had lain in ruins for three centuries. The city of John's time was one which had risen from the dead. In sharp contrast to the fields which once were Ephesus, Smyrna thrives even today as Izmir, second largest city in Asiatic Turkey. And resurrection was to be the experience of its church also.

The immediate prospect was one of suffering and even death. This was a certainty—a fact which has lessons for those of us who live in comparative ease. Would we be taken aback to find persecution knocking at our door tomorrow? Many a church has had to learn to live with that prospect, and so ought we. For the great tribulation that John sees bringing this age to an end he also sees in miniature, recurring constantly in the experience of God's people. And it is a test. It is the devil's action, but God's intention.

The persecution at Smyrna was made especially poignant by the fact that the great enemy was the local community of Jews. These were God's people racially, but not really (Rom. 2:28), and were in fact blaspheming God as they persecuted his church under the guise of doing him service (Jn. 16:2). Perhaps it was economic pressure from these Jews that brought the church to poverty, and slanderous accusations by them (for 'Satan' means 'slanderer') that led to imprisonment and death.

But let the Christians take heart. For the Christ who unveils this dismaying prospect is one who has himself been through a Smyrna-experience. Like their city, their Lord also 'died and came to life', and guarantees a resurrection for them too. The enemy is strong. Behind these Jews stands Satan; it is he, not Abraham, who is their spiritual father (Jn. 8:33, 44). But behind Satan stands God, and God is in final control. If one great lesson is that suffering is certain, the other is that it is limited. For the Smyrnaeans, it would be for 'ten days' some time in their near future: there would in the goodness of God come an eleventh day, and all would be over. God's control does not mean that Satan is prevented from inflicting pain and hurt. Nowhere does the New Testament promise freedom from suffering in this life; indeed, without the cross there will be no crown. But what God does guarantee is that though the church may suffer even the death of the body, she will not suffer the death of the soul. So Paul, having himself learnt these two lessons, demonstrates a true Christian sense of proportion in the face of tribulation: 'I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us' (Rom. 8:18).

The message therefore is that Smyrna must be not *fearful*, but *faithful*—to look not at the suffering, but beyond it to the all-controlling God.

4. The Third Letter: To Pergamum (2:12–17)

If Ephesus was the New York of Asia, Pergamum was its Washington, for there the Roman imperial power had its seat of government. There also was built the earliest temple for the state-sponsored worship of the Emperor. Whether or not this was what Christ meant by 'the throne of Satan', it emphasizes the kind of difficulties the Pergamene Christians had to face. For them Satan is not merely, as at Smyrna, a slanderer working through a group of ill-disposed Jews. He appears as 'the ruler of this world', to take a phrase from John's Gospel (Jn. 14:30); and what John's first Letter would call 'the world' (1 Jn. 2:15 ff.) is in fact the great enemy of the church at Pergamum.

It includes the power of other institutions besides the machinery of state. The enormous Pergamene

library (the town gave its name to ‘parchment’), the famous healing ministry of the priests of Aesculapius, and crowning the city’s acropolis the Greco-Asiatic altar of Zeus the Saviour—all this paraphernalia of an ‘alternative society’, catering for mind, body, and spirit, is added to the overt demands of the Roman state. (In the same way we shall find in Scene 4 the beast from the earth joined by the beast from the sea to offer men a viable life-structure outside the kingdom of God. But that story must wait its turn: anticipating John’s further revelations is a fruitful way of misunderstanding them.)

In brief, Satan is working here through the pressures of non-Christian society. He persecutes; the suffering which will come to Smyrna has already come to Pergamum, and one at least has died a martyr’s death (verse 13b). He seduces; the Nicolaitans we met at Ephesus are here also, and though we know practically nothing about them, their teaching is apparently of the same kind as that of Balaam, who had led God’s people into sin long before (Nu. 31:16; 25:1–3). Both the sins mentioned in verse 14 may be taken literally. Both appeared in the time of Balaam, both reappeared in the New Testament church (1 Cor. 5 and 8), and the pathway to them is the kind of temptation which is typical of worldliness in any age: ‘Where is the harm in it? Everyone else does it; why shouldn’t you?’

Seduction, or persecution—a choice of evils which the world offers the church. For a soft-centred permissive society can be curiously hard on those who refuse to go along with it. ‘They are surprised that you do not now join them in the same wild profligacy, and they abuse you’ (1 Pet. 4:4). The gay streets of Vanity Fair can still lead to prison and a stake: either you buy or you burn. This is not, indeed, the ten days’ reign of terror which Smyrna was to expect. Antipas was apparently the only member of the church at Pergamum who had actually been martyred. But how does Christ’s commendation read? ‘You did not deny my faith *even* in the days of Antipas’; implying that it was always a temptation, though especially of course at that time.

For some the temptation is too strong, and they give way. Compromise creeps in; the distinction between the church and the world is blurred; there is too much tolerance, too little discipline. ‘The fault of Pergamum is the opposite of the fault of Ephesus: and how narrow is the safe path between the sin of tolerance and the sin of intolerance!’

Nevertheless in the end it is Christ they have to reckon with. The power of the sword rests not with the rulers of Rome nor with the ruler of this world, but with him (verse 12). It is the sword of judgment in two senses, discerning the truth (Heb. 4:12) and punishing the evil (Rom. 13:4), and he will use it even against those in the church who will not repent (verse 16).

But there remains a promise to those who do repent and over-come. It is not easy to understand, and many suggestions have been made, especially about the meaning of the white stone (verse 17). Since the context speaks of feasts of idol-meat and the feast of manna which God spread for Israel in the desert, perhaps the reference is to an ancient use of square stones as tickets of admission to some public entertainment. So the promise of eternal life which ends each of the first two Letters is repeated here in terms appropriate to the Christian who will not compromise with worldly pleasures and idol-meat banquets. Christ gives that man a personal invitation to the true pleasures of the banquet of heaven, which are, in fact, himself: for ‘all the promises of God find their Yes in him’, and he is the true manna, the heavenly bread (2 Cor. 1:20; Jn. 6:31–35).

5. The Fourth Letter: to Thyatira (2:18–29)

The sins in the church at Thyatira, like those at Pergamum, are immorality and compromise with idol worship. Here, as there, we may take them literally, though they also constitute the spiritual adultery of which God’s people have often been guilty. The biblical metaphor is that the true God is Israel’s husband; the false gods are her lovers (Je. 3; Ezk. 16; Ho. 2, *etc.*). Jezebel, like Balaam, was in the Old Testament story an outsider who seduced God’s bride into this kind of unfaithfulness (1 Ki. 16:31; 2 Ki. 9:22).

There are however differences between the two situations. Against beleaguered Christians like

those at Pergamum, Satan uses the pressures of the world to ‘squeeze’ them ‘into its own mould’ (Rom. 12:2, JBP); but where the church is noted for its growth and vigour (verse 19), he knows that he can do most damage not by pressure without but by poison within. So in Thyatira a particular woman takes on both the evil character of Jezebel and the prophetic role of Balaam, and begins to teach, as if from God, new ‘deep things’ which some members of this strong and lively church are only too willing to explore.

Bishop Butler was unjust to accuse John Wesley of ‘pretending to extraordinary revelations and gifts of the Holy Ghost’. But many have so pretended, and their revelations, when divorced from what Scripture has already revealed, can be ‘a very horrid thing’ indeed. Their sinister voice is often heard in the midst of surging spiritual enthusiasms. As the Reformation gathers momentum, John of Leyden proclaims himself Messiah at Münster. As the idealism of the Children of God makes a bid for the loyalty of modern youth, Christian parents are dismayed to find their offspring being encouraged to abandon their home ties. ‘No other gods before me’, ‘Honour your father and mother’—mere dull traditionalism compared with the exciting voices of the new prophets.

The fact that such voices are to be expected in a lively church is no excuse for her allowing them to go unchecked. Rather the reverse. The more favoured she is, the more severely she will be judged. Christ of the piercing eyes and the trampling feet comes to her like the sun shining in full strength (1:16), infinitely more terrible than the pagan sun-god Apollo, whose temple at Thyatira was famous. His glory searches her mind and heart, and ‘there is nothing hid from its heat’ (verse 23; Ps. 19:6). Those who will not repent he threatens with suffering and death, certainly in a spiritual sense and possibly also (with these punishments as with the sins of verses 20, 21) in a physical sense. To those who will repent, he promises that with this one major hindrance removed, they will become the splendid missionary church they have it in them to be. Verse 27 is a Greek adaptation of the Hebrew of Psalm 2:9; the first half of the verse is ambiguous in both languages, but the curious wording which results here does express the double effect of the preaching of the gospel. For the ‘authority over the nations’ which is given to Christ in Psalm 2, and to the church here, is authority to proclaim the rule or kingdom of God. He who rejects that rule will perish; but he who accepts it will live (2 Cor. 2:15, 16; Jn. 20:23; Lk. 24:47). What is more, to the church which is a faithful gospel-lamp in the dark night of this world Christ also promises himself as the morning star (22:16), the assurance of the coming dawn, when lamplight will be swallowed up in the light of eternal day.

6. The Fifth letter: To Sardis (3:1–6)

In spite of their faults, in all the churches so far addressed Christ has recognized much good. What will he find to commend in Sardis? Nothing. The only ‘good’ she has is a good reputation, for which there is in fact no basis. Christ’s verdict on her is devastatingly brief: in name she is alive, in fact she is dead.

Let us make no mistake about Sardis. She is not what the world would call a dead church. Perhaps even by her sister churches she is considered ‘live’. Indeed, since Christ tells her to ‘wake up’, and warns her that his coming to judge her will be quite unexpected, it seems that she herself is not aware of her real spiritual state. All regard her as a flourishing, active, successful church—all except Christ. Her works do not in fact measure up to the standard he expects; not one of them has really been ‘completed’ (verse 2, NEB). If he threatens not to confess her before God, the reason is that in spite of all her activities she is not in fact confessing him (verse 5; Mt. 10:32).

Failure to complete? Failure to confess? None would be more surprised at the accusations than she herself. But ‘When we remember what “complete” fulfilment of the Christian life meant to the Christians of Smyrna ... we shall better understand what John demanded of the church at Sardis’: secure, complacent, like the city she lived in, untroubled by persecution of heresy, she ‘set herself the task of avoiding hardship, by pursuing a policy based on convenience and circumspection, rather than whole-hearted zeal’.

It is not quite accurate to say that her reputation is the only good thing she has. There are a few

things about her which are not yet dead, though they are dying (verse 2). There are a few people in her whose righteousness is still unstained (verse 4). Above all, there are memories of her first response to the gospel, ‘how she received and heard’ (verse 3, RV). The word is ‘how’, not ‘what’—if only she can recapture that ‘how’, the spirit of penitence and commitment of those early days! Otherwise Christ threatens to come in a surprise visitation of judgment, like a thief in the night. What he describes in this way could be his return at the end of the age, as in Matthew 24:36–44, but is likelier to be some more immediate punishment. John ‘expected the final coming of Christ to be anticipated in more limited but no less decisive visitations’. The experience of the church of Sardis will be like that of the citadel of Sardis, never taken by assault and thought to be impregnable, but more than once captured by stealth.

Even the promise of verse 5 carries a warning. There is no mention here of the kingdom and the power and the glory which in the other Letters are explicitly the reward of victorious Christians. All that Christ promises to the victors of Sardis is non-deletion from the book of life, and the white robe of his righteousness—simply, that is, their acceptance before God; as if to underline that the church as a whole is likely to forfeit even that.

If Christ alone can see and expose the plight of Sardis, certainly he alone can deal with it. And this he is ready to do. He is the one ‘who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars’; and when he brings together the stars, who are the angelic representatives of the churches, and the sevenfold Spirit, two things can happen. The seven spirits are the eyes of God, from whom nothing is hidden (5:6): hence the message of severity we have just heard. But they are also the life-giving power of God; and in Sardis, as in all the seven cities, Christ has in his hands both the needy church and the life-giving Spirit. He can bring the two together, not only to diagnose but also to revive the dead. And we may be sure that if Sardis remembers and heeds and repents, he will do so.

7. The Sixth Letter: To Philadelphia (3:7–13)

Apart from Smyrna, Philadelphia is the only church with which Christ has no fault to find. Whatever sternness there may be in his tone is due not to the finding of faults, but to the facing of facts. For a testing-time approaches—not, surely, the last great tribulation, as though John were mistakenly expecting that to be imminent, nor yet some local persecution, which could hardly be a ‘trial ... coming on the whole world’; but the perennial ordeal, of which all particular trials and especially the last one are embodiments. And the church has no great strength to meet it. Christ does not minimize the difficulties.

But he does encourage the church. It faces both opposition and (possibly) opportunity, and his intention is to overcome the one and to confirm the other.

Philadelphia is again like Smyrna in that it has to face the opposition of the ‘synagogue of Satan’ (2:9). We can catch the flavour of the Greek word for ‘lie’ by thinking of these people as ‘*pseudo-Jews*’. They claim, falsely, to be the holy people of God. In contrast, Christ speaks as the true Holy One (verses 9, 7). He refers to the ancient prophecies of how God’s people will one day be vindicated and the rest of mankind will bow before them. The fulfilment of these prophecies, he tells the church, will be the reverse of what the Philadelphian Jews expect: *they* will have to ‘bow down before *your* feet’, and acknowledge ‘that I have loved *you*’. Let the Christians take heart, for it is on them that the Lord has set his favour.

Frequently in Revelation John joins the other apostolic writers in teaching that the privileges and promises given to Old Testament Israel have been inherited by the Christian church. The doctrine is here, for example, in the Letter to Philadelphia and its biblical background. Enquiry as to the meaning of the ‘key of David’ takes us to the book of Isaiah; we shall find allusions from every part of it here in Revelation 3. The ‘key’ appears in Isaiah 22:22, together with the promise that its custodian Eliakim, steward of the household, shall have the same authority that Christ has here to open or shut. To open or shut what? The entrance to the house of David. And for what purpose? The gates are opened, says

Isaiah, ‘that the righteous nation which keeps faith may enter in’ (26:2). Then, just as Eliakim himself is fastened ‘like a peg in a sure place, and ... a throne of honour to his father’s house’ (22:23), so in consequence the weak, the despised, and the converted outsider will be given ‘in my house and within my walls a monument and a name’ (56:5). The nations shall come in too, in humble submission (60:11); ‘all who despised you shall bow down at your feet’ (60:14; *cf.* 49:22, 23). The whole group of ideas thus concerns entry to the house of David, the kingdom, city, and temple of God. What happens to it we may follow step by step. The Lord condemns Jewish legalism (‘Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees ... you shut the kingdom of heaven against men; for you neither enter yourselves, nor allow those who would enter to go in’, Mt. 23:13) and transfers the doorkeeper’s authority to the apostolic church (‘I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven’, Mt. 16:19). So Peter and his associates have the privilege of first admitting not only Jews, but also Samaritans and Gentiles, to permanent membership of the kingdom (Acts 2, 8, 10). In this way the entire concept—key, door, city, temple, and pillar—becomes a Christian one, and the basis for the reversal mentioned above. The Jews will ‘learn that I have loved *you*’.

This undeserved favour is at the root of it all. In a sense, Christ keeps (or preserves) his people because they keep (or observe) his word (verse 10), and the encouragements for Philadelphia, as for Smyrna, are intended for all who are loyal to him. But the chain of cause and effect goes further back: they obey his word only because he has first set his love on them. It also goes further on: the final result of his loving care for them will be that this church of ‘little power’ will be established as an immovable pillar in the temple of the heavenly Jerusalem (verse 12). She will be thrice sealed, as belonging to God, belonging to God’s city, and belonging to God’s Son. His tender promise to those who are painfully aware of weakness and insecurity is that they shall finally *belong*.

Until they reach that destination he calls them to endurance; and also, no doubt, to service. Elsewhere in the New Testament the ‘open door’ is a picture of opportunity (1 Cor. 16:9; 2 Cor. 2:12); and though, as we have seen, it here means primarily their own assured entry into the New Jerusalem, it is also the way by which others are to be brought in—even (if the picture in Isaiah is totally reversed) Jews converted from the synagogue of Satan. So they are doubly encouraged, for Christ who nullifies the opposition also magnifies the opportunity. The door has been opened by him, and none can shut it. Let them again take heart, and use the strength they do have in the service he sets before them.

8. The Seventh Letter: To Laodicea (3:14–22)

Archaeology has filled in much interesting background to this Letter. Laodicea was a banking centre and a textile town, famous also for the manufacture of a certain kind of eye ointment (see verse 18); lime-laden water flowed, tepid and sickly, from nearby springs (see verse 16). So Christ’s words to the church there were uncomfortably apt. But even without such background knowledge, we could not mistake his judgment on her. ‘If only you were cold or hot!’—what more terrible condemnation could there be of a church’s condition, than that the Lord would prefer even a cold Christianity to the sort he actually finds in her?

Elsewhere in Asia we have seen that the state of a church has often corresponded to the state of its city. At Laodicea, however, the two are contrasted. The church is the image of the city reversed in a black negative. Financiers, physicians, clothing manufacturers are among its notable citizens; but ‘poor, blind, and naked’ is the verdict on its church. ‘It has failed to find in Christ the source of all true wealth, splendour, and vision.’

The lukewarmness of Laodicea is the worst condition to which a church can sink. It is worse even than Sardis, where a glimmer of life remained. The only good thing in Laodicea is the church’s thoroughly good opinion of herself—and that is false. She claims to have everything, and has nothing; and did we not remind ourselves that in 1:16, yes, there *are* seven stars held in the hand of Christ, we might well doubt whether she is a true church at all. Can we therefore be shocked by Christ’s

outspoken opinion? We may find it hard to accept what in effect he says in verse 16: 'You make me sick.' But it is the Amen, the faithful and true Witness, who speaks these words, and they are of a piece with those other frightening scriptures which speak of the Lord's loathing (Ps. 95:10) and his derision (Ps. 2:4).

Yet even Laodicea has a chance. The fact that he rebukes her shows that he still loves her (verse 19); and the threat of total rejection if she will not repent is balanced by the promise of total reinstatement if she will. For the sake of this disastrous church, he presents himself in verse 14 as the beginning, or (less misleadingly) the origin, of God's creation, the one who is able to go right down into the chaotic abyss of Laodicea's failure and make her anew, as he once made the world.

But *if she will*: that is the nub of the matter. Divine sovereignty is by no means undercut by this. Christ alone can provide the riches and the robes and the ointment; his is the persuasive voice which counsels Laodicea to accept his offer; he comes, he stands, he knocks, he calls. His sovereignty is implicit in his being the 'origin of creation', and that truth she had been taught long since, when Paul's Letter to Colosse had come to her also (Col. 1:15–18; 4:16). But the question for her is whether *she* will open the door and let him in again. For 'the only cure for lukewarmness is the re-admission of the excluded Christ.'

Should the church even yet be deaf to his appeal, he addresses himself to its members one by one, for 'when Christ says *if any man* ... he is appealing to the individual. Even if the church as a whole does not heed the warning the individual may.' And to any in the Laodicean church who give evidence of this hoped-for repentance, he promises in verses 20 and 21 perhaps the most majestic reward of all, a seat at the divine banquet and a place on the throne of heaven.¹

¹ Wilcock, M. (1986). *The message of Revelation: I saw heaven opened*. The Bible Speaks Today (26–58). Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.