

Preface

A large part of our lives over the last 30 years has been dedicated to the study of the Book of Revelation and its setting in the New and Old Testaments. The more we spoke about our researches to others, the more we came to realize that lack of credibility was one of the main obstacles to comprehension. How can we begin to relate to the Book of Revelation if we do not believe what it seems to say? With the Book of Revelation, perhaps more than any other book in the Bible, there is a need to have faith in what it claims to be: 'the Word of God and the Witness of Jesus' (Rev 1,2), whose words are 'faithful and true' until the fulfillment of all its visions at the end of history (Rev 19,9; 21,5; 22,6).

Although this faith is to be regarded as a divine gift, there are many ways to help it on its path to accepting and understanding the Book of Revelation: familiarity with the text by reading it often, prayer to open the eyes of the soul, and scholarly commentary to explain its language and imagery. As we see it, there is also a need for brushing away the obstacles—all those prejudices and presumptions that have accumulated over the centuries. And this is the task we hope to achieve with these essays.

Most of the essays in this book have taken shape over the last 3 years and, except for the first, are presented in the same order as they were written. A quick glance will show that they progress naturally like an introductory course on the Book of Revelation, starting with the basic ABC's of author, background and composition, and ending with the more complex issues of symbolism and significance. So, although the essays are self-contained and can be read in any order, they will probably make more sense if read in the order they are presented.

Every piece of research has the potential to stimulate enquiries in related fields. This is what generated the first chapter in this book, which was written last of all. The modern presumption that 'the apostle John, a fisherman's son from Galilee, could never have become the writer of an apocalypse like the Book of Revelation, or of a gospel such as the Fourth Gospel', prompted the search for a radical explanation.

It has been known for some time that John's Apocalypse has a profound affinity with the writings of Enoch and, in particular, with a

pre-Christian 'ascent apocalypse' called the Parables of Enoch (*1Enoch* 37-71). From internal textual clues, a majority of specialists have agreed in recent years that the Parables of Enoch was produced towards the end of the first century BCE, in eastern Galilee. The local Israeli archaeologist, Mordechai Aviam, is more specific, and through echoes of the ancient landscape in the text, and vice versa, locates it to Magdala, the lakeside fish-processing town, recently excavated and now a popular archaeological site. This would certainly explain an early link with John for, as the son of a fishing-boat owner, he and his brother James would have made frequent crossings to Magdala to sell off surplus fish for processing and marketing. These visits to Magdala could easily have led to discussions over the prophecies of Enoch and especially the messianic prophecies in the Parables of Enoch. A deep interest awoken in the young John, in this way, would then explain why he became a disciple of John the Baptist before joining Jesus of Nazareth.

But there is more to it than that. As an industrial fish-processing centre, Magdala was not the best environment for the Scriptural study and contemplation that produced the Parables of Enoch. Everybody who knows the location will agree that the ideal place for that is Mount Arbel, with its spectacular views over the lake, its mountainous rim and Mount Hermon in the distance. In fact, it may be no coincidence that Mount Hermon and its surroundings form the earthly setting for the opening vision of the Book of Watchers, the book that precedes the Parables of Enoch in the *First Book of Enoch*.

A 'eureka moment' follows the discovery that at least 120 caves in the cliffs of Mount Arbel have been found with signs of inhabitation in antiquity, and of these many contain plastered cisterns and ritual baths (*mikva'ot*). In some, all that remains of these installations are fragments of plaster that can be dated back to Hasmonean times (167-63 BCE). History says that only robbers, rebels and refugees inhabited these caves when fleeing from the authorities and that, when the trouble had passed, they moved elsewhere. But the finding of *mikva'ot* and cisterns in many of the caves points to permanent and extensive occupation by a religiously observant community, not by outlaws or refugees. So, who were these residents?

The archaeological input to date amounts to two superficial surveys conducted in 1989 and in 2007. A more probing excavation of

particular sites could confirm the suspicion that this ‘cave-village’, as it is called, was home to the Essene scribal community responsible for a large number of intertestamental writings, including the Parables of Enoch, after they had separated from the branch that settled at Qumran. If this ‘hypothesis’ is confirmed, it will transform our understanding of the Essenes, the social setting of their literature, Second Temple Judaism and Early Christianity. Last but not least, it will also help to explain how members of the local population at that time, even humble fishermen like John, were introduced to the prophetic and apocalyptic literature of the Essenes. So, just as this first chapter arose as a ‘spin-off’ from the others, we hope that it too, in its turn, will stimulate interest and research in related areas.

Finally, we hope that the contents of these essays will not only help to throw light on the past, but also on the present and future, for the Book of Revelation embraces every age and all time, with a clear emphasis on the end of time and history. The last two essays, in particular, examine the way the Book of Revelation speaks about the consummation of history and the eschatological transformation of life, which is yet to come. Its final visions offer the glimpse of a future that is nowhere else to be found and enjoyed—a future of abundant life, blessing, peace and health in the presence of God and Christ.

Thanks are due to many individuals, scholars, priests and institutions for their critical support in this work, and especially to the staff of the École Biblique et Archéologique Française for their incomparable library service in Jerusalem. Above all, thanks and praise to him who ‘rebukes and chastens the ones he loves’ and then ‘stands at the door and knocks’ to see if he can ‘come in and eat with us’ (Rev 3,19-20).

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Introduction

The purpose of these seven essays is to prepare the reader for a fresh reading of the Book of Revelation by returning to the sources in a review of its remote setting, authorship, immediate background, composition, imagery and narrative. These subjects are all related to the making of the Book of Revelation and are therefore valuable for attaining greater understanding.

The first essay (*Lakeside Galilee and the Essene Caves Hypothesis*) describes the very special religious and cultural setting into which the author of the Book of Revelation was born and brought up. It presents an original account of Essene history and a new hypothesis about their presence in the Arbel cave-village near the Sea of Galilee, from about 100 BCE.

The next essay concerns the historical dispute about 'authorship'. The author of the book says his name is John and proceeds to speak to the churches with authority, as one who is known as a leader. The apostle John is the only leader of that name recognized by the tradition of the early Church. So, when his successors in these churches specifically identify the author as the apostle John, it is perfectly reasonable to accept their testimony, even though the author does not spell out his apostolic status. On the contrary, if any other opinion regarding authorship is to be accepted, the burden of proof lies on the challenger. In our view the case against the traditional attribution to the apostle John is very shaky indeed and should not be given priority over the tradition. The second essay in this collection (*The Author of the Book of Revelation*) therefore defends the traditional position on authorship and supports it with new evidence. This view is reinforced by the third essay (*The Johannine Question Answered*) which highlights the poverty of evidence against the traditional view and the blind alleys into which it leads.

In the fourth essay we revisit the book's 'historical background', which is tied to the date of authorship. Again, Church tradition gives us a precise date, which is entirely consistent with the historical evidence from the text itself. There are no grounds for doubting this evidence, so again we take the traditional date of 95-96 CE and piece together, from various sources, the events of that time (*The Historical Background to the Book of Revelation*). As we do this, we see how

rejection of the traditional date has obscured the quest for important background information. A drama of Shakespearian proportions was unfolding at the time, at the seat of imperial power in Rome, and the outcome was especially challenging for Christians. The Book of Revelation was given to the churches to help with this challenge, though up to now very few scholars are aware of this.

'Composition' is another area where progress has been stymied by refusal to recognize the authorship and authenticity of the text. The author tells us clearly that, like the ancient prophets and visionaries, he received his revelation by supernatural and mystical experience, and so investigation of the composition of his book should take this into account. In the fifth essay we explore this path and, with the help of other scholars, arrive at a deeply satisfying explanation of how the text was composed and structured (*The Composition and Structure of the Book of Revelation*).

The last two essays are about the imagery and symbolism in the Book of Revelation, the original medium of the text: the first of these sets out to identify the dominant imagery in St. John's visions, before examining its hermeneutical significance (*Imagery in the Book of Revelation and its Dominant Theme*). The second probes the narrative symbolism of the second part of the book and finds that although it can be traced back to ancient Middle-Eastern myth, its true focus is on the end-historical events surrounding the second coming of Christ (*Myth, History and End-Time Prophecy in Revelation 12-22*).

None of this would have been possible without the contributions of innumerable churchmen and scholars, down the ages, to whom appreciation and gratitude are always due. However, there is an unhealthy tendency in the academic world today to reject the tradition *a priori*, without carefully reviewing the evidence. The result is that scholars living 2,000 years after the writing of the Book of Revelation presume to know more about the book and its author than those witnesses, known for putting a high value on the truth, who lived where the author lived and within living memory of his presence, namely Justin Martyr who lived in Ephesus c.130 CE and Irenaeus who was born and raised in Smyrna c.125-130 CE. Both have independently stated for the record that the author of the book was John the apostle.

A recent example is called for. When Craig R. Koester, in his 2014 commentary on Revelation, writes "Since Justin and Irenaeus valued Revelation, it would be natural for them to assume that 'John' was the

apostle”,¹ one wonders whether this scholar seriously thinks Irenaeus and Justin were only stating an ‘assumption’ about the author, just as a modern scholar would do. Did Koester evaluate the evidence or is he projecting his own mental reasoning on to the statements of ancient churchmen? This becomes clearer later, when he is discussing the date of authorship: “it is unlikely that Irenaeus preserves reliable historical information. His comment about the date is linked to his assumption that the author was the apostle. If this assumption is incorrect, there is little reason to think that he was accurate about the date”.² So yes, he really does think that Irenaeus’ statements about authorship and date are only based on assumptions! Writing nearly twenty centuries later, he overlooks all the local knowledge that gave Irenaeus the certainty that John the apostle was the author—all the eyewitnesses, including Polycarp, Papias and even his own family and church community, from whom Irenaeus had learnt the facts. Repeating the same academic prejudice again and again does not make it true. It is an insult to the earliest witnesses, an embarrassment to scholarship and an obstacle to making further progress. Only by challenging these widely accepted and much-repeated presumptions and prejudices of scholarship, and by returning to the sources, can true progress be made.

May these essays be a small contribution. For further work on our new approach to the Book of Revelation, please take a look at www.newtorah.org.

¹ Craig R. Koester, *Revelation: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, The Anchor Yale Bible, New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 2014; 66.

² *Ibid.* 74.

