

REVELATION 1:19: AN ESCHATOLOGICALLY ESCALATED PROPHETIC CONVENTION

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Many commentators consider Rev 1:19—"Write, therefore, what you have seen, what is now and what will take place later"—to provide a structural summary for the book. R. H. Charles, for example, believes that

these words summarize *roughly* the contents of the Book. The *ha eides* is the vision of the Son of Man just vouchsafed to the Seer; *ha eisin* refers directly to the present condition of the Church as shown in chaps. ii-iii., and indirectly to that of the world in general; *ha mellei ginesthai meta tauta* to the visions from chap. iv. onwards.¹

If Revelation is indeed assumed to have such a three-part structure, this interpretation is certainly plausible, especially in light of the parallel between 1:19c and 4:1. The latter verse, which marks the opening of the book's apocalyptic section, reads: "Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this." There is only a minor variation between "what will take place" (*ha mellei ginesthai*, 1:19) and "what must take place" (*ha dei ginesthai*, 4:1), and the same phrase, *meta tauta* ("after this"), is used at the end of each verse.

All of this notwithstanding, however, it must be questioned whether this is how Revelation's original audience would have interpreted 1:19. The parallel to 4:1 is only one of several with other verses in the book. An examination of each of these suggests that while 1:19 may function effectively as an outline of John's Apocalypse, the author's original concern in this verse was to assert the divine inspiration of his work and specifically its superiority to contemporary pagan prophecies, customarily attested with similar formulae as a guide to the future and the will of God.

I. DANIELIC ALLUSIONS AND THE ESCHATOLOGICAL INSIGHT OF THE TRUE PROPHET

As Gregory K. Beale has demonstrated,² Rev 1:19 is actually one of a group of verses providing structure to the book by echoing the themes and

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¹ R. H. Charles, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Revelation of St. John* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1920), 1. 33. Charles prefers the textual variant *ginesthai* to *genesthai*.

² G. K. Beale, "The Influence of Daniel upon the Structure and Theology of John's Apocalypse," *JETS* 27 (1984) 415-421.

language of Daniel 2. In the LXX the interpretation of the dream around which the chapter centers is introduced with “(God) has shown King Nebuchadnezzar what must take place (*ha dei genesthai*) in the last days” (2:28). We recognize the same phrase in Rev 4:1, at the beginning of the book’s apocalyptic section, and with a minor variation in 1:19, a verse whose likely structural significance has already been noted. But it also appears at the beginning and ending of Revelation: Both 1:1 and 22:6 describe God’s giving the Apocalypse “to show his servants what must take place (*ha dei genesthai*) soon.”

Significantly, John has twice replaced Daniel’s phrase “in the last days” with “soon” (*en tachei*, 1:1; 22:6) and twice with “after this” (*meta tauta*, 1:19; 4:1). The two phrases should therefore be considered interchangeable. The implication in each case is that the events Daniel distantly foresaw will imminently find their fulfillment. As Beale observes:

If it can be concluded that these Daniel 2 allusions in Revelation are intentional and draw with them the contextual idea of Daniel 2, then there is a basis for proposing that this idea provides the framework of thought for the whole of the Apocalypse—i.e. eschatological judgment of cosmic evil and consequent establishment of the eternal kingdom.³

In 1:19c, therefore, in light of the Danielic parallels at key points throughout the book, *meta tauta* is an eschatological phrase referring to the days in which the kingdom of evil will be destroyed and the kingdom of God established. As we shall see shortly, it is insight into these events that allows John, in this verse, to assert the superiority of his divinely inspired revelation over the pretensions of pagan competitors.

II. ESCHATOLOGICAL INSIGHT AS THE HIGHEST PROPHECY: FURTHER PARALLELS TO 1:19

Only the last phrase in Rev 1:19 provides the parallel to 1:1; 4:1; 22:6, however. The rest of the verse is structurally and thematically different from the other three. We must therefore consider a different set of closer parallels within the book. These are verses that, like 1:19, present a formula of three elements covering past, present, and future, each introduced with the definite article in Greek and connected with *kai . . . kai* (“and . . . and”). Revelation 1:4; 1:8; 4:8 refer to God as the one “who is, and who was, and who is to come.” Similarly Christ describes himself in 1:17–18 (there is no sentence break in the Greek) as “the first and the last and the living one.” An ironic application of the same formula is found in 17:8, where the beast is described as the one who “was, and is not, and will ascend from the Abyss.” (The definite article is missing in this case, probably to deny the beast the honors implicit in formal titles. The parallel to 1:19 is nevertheless striking in its own distinctive ways, with *eides* at the beginning of both phrases and *mellei* plus the infinitive at the end.)

³ Ibid. 420.

Such a threefold formula, when used of God, describes his eternal deity (1:4; 1:8; 4:8). When applied similarly to Christ it asserts his rightful claim to the same status and honors (1:17). And when applied mockingly to the beast it parodies his hollow claims to the same position (17:8). What, then, is the function of this formula in 1:19, where it is applied to the book? By analogy, it is to assert its divine inspiration. This becomes particularly evident when the first-century context is considered.

W. C. Van Unnik has observed that John's contemporaries would customarily use similar past-present-and-future formulae as a conventional means of asserting the divinity of a god or the divine inspiration of a prophet.⁴ But John's use of the device is polemical rather than merely imitative: He makes significant purposeful changes in the convention in 1:19 and elsewhere, as he does in other conventions he appropriates.⁵

In the case of divine titles, for example, the secular convention was to use "was, is, and will be." R. H. Charles, for example, notes the Greek refrain "Zeus was, Zeus is, Zeus will be" and the similar inscription on the statue of Isis at Sais (where, interestingly, the three elements are connected with *kai . . . kai* and the first is preceded by the definite article).⁶ Thus, as Van Unnik notes, in describing Christ not as "the one who will be" but as "the one who is to come" John "used a formula current in later Jewish and Gentile circles, but stressed the eschatological note by changing *ho esomenos* into *ho erchomenos*."⁷

The same process of polemical appropriation is at work in 1:19. The "past" element in this formula is a verb for seeing ("what you saw"). This leaves the two verbs for being ("that which is" and "that which must be after this") to cover all of historical time, necessarily with a twofold rather than threefold formula. We know from the parallels to Daniel noted earlier that the final phrase has eschatological overtones. A twofold division of time is therefore exactly what is presented: In an eschatological context, historical past, present and future are seen as comprehended together in "this age" and superseded by "the age to come." The use of the formula here is therefore polemical indeed: John is asserting that his prophetic insight ("what you saw") covers not only the full breadth of everything the pagan prophets may have grasped ("that which is"—historical past-present-and-future), but also the inbreaking eschatological reality that transcends and supersedes it ("that which must be after this").

Even with this understanding in view, however, the verse can still function as a structural summary. "What you saw," in context, does refer to the immediately preceding vision, as is consistently the case when this phrase is used throughout the book. Similarly, "what is" has initial specific

⁴ W. C. Van Unnik, "A Formula Describing Prophecy," *NTS* 9 (1962) 86-94.

⁵ Perhaps the clearest example is the use John makes of a symbol appropriated from contemporary coins, the goddess Roma ensconced on the famous seven hills. In Revelation 17 she is parodied as a prostitute. For discussion see E. Stauffer, *Christ and the Caesars* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1955) 188-189.

⁶ Charles, *Commentary*, 1. 10.

⁷ Van Unnik, "Formula" 94.

reference to the dangerously compromised situation of the churches described in the letters, which makes them woefully unprepared to face the impending imperial persecutions ("what is to come"), symbolically depicted in the apocalyptic visions.

Nevertheless the images and phrases of Revelation often admit of more than one valid interpretation. Indeed Revelation is a book that rewards diligent study: The deeper one delves, the richer the ore one strikes. So it is an aid to greater understanding to recognize that, as John sketches out in broad strokes the material his Apocalypse covers, he appropriates a secular convention in such a way as to assert his book's true divine inspiration and superiority over pagan pretenders. This assertion in turn reveals the eschatological setting in which John sees himself writing, in which the destruction of the kingdom of evil and the establishment of the kingdom of God are already beginning in his own lifetime.

III. VISION CONTENT AND BOOK CONTENT: DOES CHRIST SPEAK IN PAGAN FORMULAE?

The interpretation offered here may raise another concern for many, however. Revelation 1:19, whether understood by this approach or primarily as a structural summary, is a record of John's prophetic commissioning by Christ. It is, in fact, ascribed to him as a direct quotation. But if 1:19 is an adaptation of a pagan prophetic commonplace, is John not putting some very secular words in Christ's mouth? How can the Apocalypse be divinely inspired if it is not a faithful record of the vision John saw?

The real issue here is how we are to understand the relation between the content of the vision John saw and the book he wrote. One approach to this question is to posit that John, by command, simply recorded everything he saw and heard, exactly as he saw and heard it, as he was seeing and hearing it. Any deviation from this would constitute a breach of faith. Revelation 1:19, therefore, records actual words of Christ. If there is any polemical intent with regard to pagan pseudoprophets, it is Christ's, not John's.

But there are numerous problems with this view of John's role in the composition of the book. For one thing, it is a near impossibility to pinpoint exactly when John actually starts transcribing the encounter he is clearly narrating at first. There are practical difficulties as well; 1:19, for example, would have to have been spoken by Christ with a sword in his mouth. Beyond such considerations there is a theological problem with the view of Scripture implied: If Revelation was indeed dictated, it is the only such book in the NT. All the others are recognized as the production of human authors under divine inspiration, whose works would not otherwise have been included in the canon. A transcription view of Revelation comes very close to a docetic view of Scripture (to use an analogy from the Christological controversies), in which human authorship is only illusory.

But perhaps the gravest problem with this view is that it has the authority relationship backwards: It is not the vision John saw, but rather

the book he wrote, that is canonical and authoritative. To insist that Scripture conform to the vision is to make the higher authority submit to the lower. The NT insists that anything a prophet sees or says must be weighed against the Scriptures before it is to be accepted. John's Apocalypse is the product of this process: In meditating on his vision in light of the truths known to him through the OT Scriptures, he came to express its message in canonical written form using the apocalyptic genre that drew so heavily on those Scriptures for its vivid symbolism and imagery.

Recognizing the characteristics of this genre provides the solution to the difficulties one feels in imagining that John would have adapted a secular commonplace and ascribed it to Christ himself. In making use of the apocalyptic genre, John can portray his vision as having been communicated in highly symbolic form through angelic and divine mediators merely as an ingenuous literary convention without the expectation that readers will take the contents of the book for the exact, literal contents of his vision.⁸ (A helpful example from English literature is the way John Bunyan begins *Pilgrim's Progress* by saying he is reporting what he saw in a dream, expecting readers to know he is actually writing an allegory.) Thus John can adapt a recognizable phrase from secular usage to communicate the precise force of Christ's commissioning words without leading his readers to believe that he is presenting the actual words themselves.

There is, however, a danger here. Just as it is necessary to guard against a docetic view of the book that undervalues its human authorship, so it is necessary, once Revelation is recognized to be a literary composition employing characteristic apocalyptic conventions, to guard against an Ebionite view that would undervalue the book's divine inspiration. It is possible to be so aware of the brilliant stylistic and literary innovations in the book that one loses sight of its original motivating vision. This can be done all too easily, as one typical example suffices to illustrate:

Comme toutes les apocalypses, l'Apocalypse de saint Jean décrit les événements des derniers jours. L'énumération qu'on y trouve, des troubles, des malheurs et des conflits des derniers temps, appartient au genre littéraire et on évitera donc d'y chercher une véritable révélation au sens propre du mot. Par contre, il faut porter un intérêt tout spécial à ce que l'auteur ajoute aux schèmes traditionnel[s]: dans ces nouveautés, il transmet un message original et nous devons chercher là la vraie révélation.⁹

True, one must pay special attention to the ways John transforms and transcends the very genre in which he is writing, because that is one means of appreciating the profound revelation he received. But this literary

⁸ The Apocalypse Group of the SBL Genres Project concluded that "apocalypse" constitutes an ancient literary genre, characterized by "a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient," adding that "the various media of revelation—visions, auditions, otherworldly journeys, writings—are all qualified by the otherworldly mediator and are in fact diverse kinds of otherworldly revelations" (J. J. Collins, "Towards the Morphology of a Genre," *Semeia* 14 [1979] 9, 11).

⁹ J. Comblin, "Le Rassemblement du Peuple de Dieu," *AsSeign* 66 (1973) 42.

power does not constitute the true revelation itself. Rather, it is employed in the service of presenting that revelation in Scripture-tested canonical form.

IV. CONCLUSION

Revelation 1:19, when understood in light of its parallels throughout the book, enables us to appreciate the Apocalypse as the divinely inspired work of a human author. Taken in a literal sense it expresses John's commission from Christ himself to present to the Church of his day a picture of its true spiritual state and imminent, ultimate challenge. Understood in a literary sense it reveals the knowledge, skill and care he brought to that task as writer and prophet. It is thus not only a thematic and structural summary of the work but also a worthy object of study for those who would appreciate the power and beauty of the final book in the canon.