

G L O S S A

Opening the Book of Revelation

The most mysterious and least understood stage in the full ministry of Christ is the stage of His intensification. The book of Revelation clearly reveals this stage, but in order to see Christ's ministry in this stage, it is important to approach the book of Revelation with a proper view. The crucial key in understanding this mysterious book is Revelation 1:1, which says, "The revelation of Jesus Christ which God gave to Him to show to His slaves the things that must quickly take place; and He made it known by signs, sending it by His angel to His slave John." This verse informs us that the revelation of Jesus Christ is made known by signs. Unfortunately, the approach of many commentators and translators to this verse obscures its crucial significance and thus the revelation of Christ in the third stage of His ministry.

Commentators have increasingly favored an interpretation of *the revelation of Jesus Christ* which focuses on the prophetic aspects of Revelation rather than on the unique view of the person of Christ which is presented in the book of Revelation. This focus in many ways derives from the possibility of viewing *the revelation of Jesus Christ* as being either an subjective genitive (that is, a revelation given by Jesus Christ of things that will take place in the future), or an objective genitive (that is, a revelation concerning Jesus Christ Himself). From the point of view of the Greek language, of the structure of the verse, and of the use of the phrase elsewhere in the Bible, it indeed can be argued that Jesus Christ is either the subject or the object of this unveiling. When viewed as a subjective genitive, however, Revelation is relegated to a book of prophetic events rather than a book about Christ Himself. Translators, further, increasingly ignore the meaning of the verb *sēmainō*, which includes the notion of signs, and thus fail to attach spiritual significance to the symbolism of the book of Revelation.

"The Revelation of Jesus Christ"

Revelation 1:1 (together with verse 2) consists of an isolated noun phrase *the revelation of Jesus Christ*, which is in turn modified by a relative clause, *which God gave to Him (Christ)*, with *God* as its subject, and contains additional embedded relative clauses. As an isolated noun phrase *the revelation of Jesus Christ* can be interpreted as either a subjective genitive (Jesus Christ is the revealer) or an

objective genitive (Christ is being revealed). However, although this phrase is isolated grammatically, it is not isolated contextually; it functions as the title to the book of Revelation. The question then is, What is this book about? Most scholars take a position similar to Ladd, who states, "the object of the revelation is the last things which God gave Christ, who in turn shows to his servants what must soon take place" (21). Ladd's understanding of *the revelation of Jesus Christ* clearly associates the concept of revelation with things that must shortly take place, and as such, these become the main focus of the book of Revelation for many.

However, only superficially is the book of Revelation about future events. Indeed much more is revealed in this book. Mauro states,

[W]hat we have before us is the Revelation of *Jesus Christ*. It is not the revelation of things to come, though it has to do largely therewith. It is not the revelation of the four horsemen, nor of the woman clothed with the sun, nor of the ten horned beast, nor of the scarlet woman, nor of the fall of Babylon, nor of the New Jerusalem, but—of JESUS CHRIST. Therefore we should ever be on the alert to observe how, and in what various connections, Christ is revealed in the different divisions of the Prophecy. For Christ is central in every part of the Book, and every group of symbols derives its significance from Him. (11)

The first five chapters are much more a revelation of Christ who is in the midst of the seven churches and in the heavens, prior to or at the time of writing, than a revelation of future events.¹ When future events begin to be revealed in chapter six, Christ is revealed still further.

It would be better to take *the revelation of Jesus Christ* as an objective genitive with Jesus Christ as the object of the revelation. Hort points out that both the verb *apokalypō* (reveal) and the noun *apokalypsis* (revelation) are used elsewhere in the New Testament, just as here, to point to "the unveiling of the hidden Christ to man" (4).² He acknowledges that Revelation reveals future events, but does not divorce them from the revelation of Christ (6). Thus, future events primarily should be viewed as providing a background and context for a further revelation and indeed a consummation of the revelation of

Christ in the Bible.³ This seems to be the deeper significance of this phrase.

Commentators do not dispute that God is the source of revelation in verse 1. In the New Testament, however, God's main concern and delight is to reveal Christ: "But when it pleased God, who set me apart from my mother's womb and called me through His grace, to reveal His Son in me" (Gal. 1:15-16a). The revelation of other things are even subservient to the revelation of Christ (Matt. 17:5, 8). The main purpose of the Scriptures is to testify and reveal Christ (John 5:39). After Christ accomplished eternal redemption, He entered "within the veil" (Heb. 6:19, 20; 9:24)...The final book of the Bible assumes to draw aside the veil" (Mauro iii-iv). Revelation reveals the heavenly Christ, the One who entered within the veil and who also wants to bring us within the veil (Heb. 10:19-20).

The grammatical structure of verse 1 also allows for God to be the subject of the verbs in the relative clause following the phrase *the revelation of Jesus Christ*. It is quite natural to understand God as the subject of the verbs which follow (*show, make known by signs, and send*; cf. 22:6) since no other subject is supplied for these verbs. Mounce acknowledges that "it is possible that 'signified' is parallel to 'gave' and God is the subject of both" (65). In addition, the verbs *show* and *made known by signs* are also semantically similar to the noun *revelation*. Therefore, it is logical from the context to take the source of revelation, God (who reveals Christ), as the subject of these two verbs. The clause *the things that must quickly take place* according to this view then would refer to the things which Christ is about to do for the carrying out of His economy. This is also consistent with the content of the book of Revelation. Indeed, it is He alone who is counted worthy to open the scroll of God's economy (5:5).

The phrase *Jesus Christ* occurs in the New Testament with the noun *revelation* in five additional places other than Revelation 1:1. In four of these five places it occurs as an objective genitive referring to the revelation of Him at His second coming (1 Cor. 1:7; 2 Thes. 1:7; 1 Pet. 1:7, 13; cf. Luke 17:30). Only in Galatians 1:12 is its usage as a subjective genitive the likely interpretation. Although it can be argued that *the revelation of Jesus Christ* is a subjective genitive in Revelation 1:1, a far deeper and more meaningful interpretation (based on the content of the book of Revelation and the context of the Bible) can be derived from viewing it as an objective genitive.⁴

"He Made It Known by Signs"

The main clause of verse 1, *and He made it known by signs*, indicates the method or principle used to present this revelation of Jesus Christ as well as the things that must shortly take place. Commentaries on the book of Revelation recognize the symbolic nature of its presentation and many point out that the verb *sēmainō*, which underlies this translation, means "make known by signs, signify," and "symbolize." This is a crucial indicator.⁵ John used the principle of making the revelation known by signs in his writing because of the nature of what he was revealing. He "was faced with the task of seeing the invisible, painting the unpaintable, and expressing the inexpressible. The writing is therefore full of imagery and symbolism...in which qualities, ideas, principles, etc. are represented by things concrete" (Summers 19). He was not simply symbolically portraying things from his own

In the New Testament,
God's main concern and
delight is to reveal Christ.
The revelation
of other things must
be subservient to the
revelation of Christ.

historical context, such as the Roman emperor or the city of Rome, or describing complex events or advanced technologies in the future. Rather, he was conveying the invisible and spiritual things of a divine and mystical realm, especially the things concerning Christ and His counterpart, the church, which consummates in the New Jerusalem. To do this he drew heavily on symbols which had been used by writers of the Bible, especially in the Old Testament.

This is the key to unlocking the meaning of the John's symbols. In addition to borrowing from the Old Testament, he also used some symbols in novel ways. For example, Witness Lee writes,

Several aspects concerning Christ, such as the vision of Christ as the High Priest in the midst of the churches, caring for them in love yet with a judging attitude (vv. 13-16), the vision of Him as the Lion-Lamb in the midst of God's throne and of the four living creatures and in the midst of the twenty-four elders of the universe, opening the seven seals of God's universal administration (5:1—6:1), and the vision of Him as "another strong Angel" coming down out of heaven to take possession of the earth (10:1-8; 18:1), etc., were never unveiled as they are in this book. (Recovery Version, Rev. 1:1, note 1)

Although most scholars recognize that Revelation is full of symbolism, there is debate as to the extent of the symbolism in the book of Revelation. Some commentators prefer to minimize the number of signs in Revelation to those signs that are explained in the text (Govett lists 14 such signs in his commentary and Walvoord lists at least 26) and a few others that are not explained. Others stress the symbolic nature of the book, minimizing its literal

sense, and take virtually everything as symbolic. Mauro proposes a balanced approach to the book:

Such being the character of the Book, we must be ever on our guard against looking for literal fulfilments of the symbols.... Many, we believe, have gone astray through not observing this most necessary caution.

But it is also possible, and indeed easy, to err on the other side also. For not everything named in the Book is a symbol. Hence it is sometimes a difficult matter to decide whether a certain thing is presented in its own proper character, or as a representation of something else. (23)

Some things revealed in the book of Revelation may have both a literal and symbolic referent. For example, the numbers mentioned in the book of Revelation may be taken literally, although they may also have symbolic significance. For example, there literally *were* seven churches in Asia (Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamos, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea—1:11), but the seven Spirits symbolically refer to the Spirit of God in His intensified operation (1:4; 4:5; 5:6), and the seven eyes of the Lamb refer to the observing and searching function of Christ as the intensified Spirit (5:6).

When it comes to the translation of the verb *sēmainō* a number of versions minimize the importance of the word in their translation, overlooking this crucial key to unlock this mysterious book. A number of modern translations merely translate this verb as “made it known” (Phillips, RSV, NEB, Jerusalem, NIV). However, if the writer of Revelation had merely wanted to say “make it known” he would probably have used another verb *gnōrizō* (which occurs 25 times in the New Testament and 3 times in the writings of John). Other versions utilize “communicated it” (Amplified), “he sent the communication” (Berkeley), and “disclose the pattern of it” (Knox); as opposed to the older literal versions, which have “signified it” (ASV, KJV, Darby) and “he shewed them by signs” (Rotherham).

It is best to understand Revelation 1:1 as part of the title to the book of Revelation. A careful reading or translation of this verse, which pays attention to the nuances of the original Greek within the context of the verse and of the whole book, is a crucial first step to unlock the book of Revelation. This reading should inform us that this book is mainly concerned with revealing Christ and that He is revealed by signs. It should also alert us to the possibility that there is a deeper and more mysterious revelation of Christ (especially in the stage of His intensification), which has been made known to us primarily through the use of symbolic language.

by Roger Good

Notes

¹At least from the point of view of the narrative, chapters two and three address the present situation in the churches. However, symbolically the situation in the churches can be interpreted as referring to future stages of church history.

²The Greek word *apokalypsis*, from which the English word *apocalypse* derives, literally means “an unveiling or an uncovering of something that is concealed or hidden.”

³For the significance of this revelation of Jesus Christ see “The All-inclusive Christ in Revelation” in the January 1998 issue of *A&C* (27-37).

⁴Many of the recent translations of the Bible translate Revelation 1:1 as if it were a subjective genitive: “a revelation from Jesus Christ” (Phillips, Knox), “the revelation given by God to Jesus Christ” (Jerusalem, New English Bible), “what Jesus Christ revealed” (Today’s English Version), “the revelation of Jesus Christ [His unveiling of the divine mysteries]” (Amplified), and “this book unveils some of the future activities soon to occur in the life of Jesus Christ” (Living Bible). This pattern of recent translations, which no doubt draws support from some of the prevailing exegetical approaches, also obscures the deeper significances of the phrase. Other versions, such as the King James Version, the Revised Standard Version, and New International Version preserve the ambiguity of phrase *the revelation of Jesus Christ* allowing the possibility of both subjective and objective interpretations.

⁵The verb *sēmainō* occurs six times in the New Testament and is used four times by John. It is related to the noun *semeion* and *sēma* (“sign” or “symbol”; cf. *semantics* and *semaphore* in English). *Semeion* occurs 77 times in the New Testament and is particularly important in John’s writings (cf. John 2:11).

Works Cited

- Govett, Robert. *The Apocalypse Expounded by Scripture*. London: Chas. J. Thynne, 1920.
- Hort, F. J. A. *Apocalypse of St. John*. London: Macmillan and Co., 1908.
- Ladd, George Eldon. *A Commentary on the Revelation of John*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972.
- Mauro, Philip. *Things Which Soon Must Come to Pass. A Commentary on the Book of Revelation*. Swengel: Reiner Publications, 1984.
- Mounce, Robert H. *The Book of Revelation, NICNT*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977.
- Recovery Version of the New Testament. Anaheim: Living Stream Ministry, 1991.
- Summers, R., *Worthy is the Lamb: an Interpretation of Revelation*. Nashville: Broadman Press, 1951.
- Walvoord, John F. *The Revelation of Jesus Christ*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1966.