

A Quick Guide to the Book of Revelation

The Book of Revelation is minefield for biblical exegetes. If they do not trip up in one place, they trip up in another, and the consequences are always dramatic. No wonder that the majority stays well clear and very few seminarians are exposed to this text in their studies. There are a variety of approaches and a multitude of interpretations. According to St. Dionysius, Bishop of Alexandria in the 3rd century AD, even the faithful of the early Church had difficulty understanding this book.¹ Writing in the 4th century, Eusebius, Bishop of Caesarea, did not want it in the canon² and indeed none of the Eastern Churches accepted it formally until the 7th century, a good 500 years after it was written. After nearly two millennia of exegetical effort, there is still no consensus. Just as in the time of St. Jerome, the main lines of interpretation remain an enigma, or as he expressed it: “*The Apocalypse of John has as many mysteries as words*”.³ Since St. Jerome also said “*Ignorance of Scripture is ignorance of Christ*”,⁴ members of the Church may feel uneasy about this unresolved enigma at the conclusion of the biblical canon. Since this book concerns the future fulfilment of all the divine promises, our ignorance means we do not know exactly where the Spirit is taking us. Shouldn't we be asking ourselves why the Lord has not yet revealed the complete understanding of this book to his Church?

If the key to the interpretation of every New Testament text is Christ, the problem with the interpretation of the Book of Revelation in the Church is clearly not the absence of a key, but ignorance of where to insert it; we simply cannot find the door to enter into its complete meaning.⁵ The door is not at the start of the text, as we tend to assume. The start of the text is just the gate into the garden, which we must enter before we can find the door. However, at the gate into the garden, right at the start of the text, there is a signpost telling us where to find the door we are looking for: “*The Revelation of Jesus Christ that God gave him to show his servants what must happen soon, and he made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, who bears witness of the Word of God and the Witness of Jesus Christ of all that he saw*” (Rev 1:1-2).

Where exactly do we see the angel of the Lord transmitting the “Revelation of Jesus Christ” to the author John? It is near the centre of the text, just after we are told to expect the imminent fulfilment of God's mysterious plan for mankind (Rev 10,7): there we read that the author, John, is given a little scroll by a mighty angel and is asked to swallow it. He is then told he will have to “*prophecy again about many races and nations and tongues and rulers*” (Rev 10,8-11). What follows in the text is the prophecy that John was given to ‘prophecy again’.

¹ St. Dionysius, Bishop of Alexandria (c. 250 AD) wrote: “*Some before us have set aside and rejected the book altogether, criticizing it chapter by chapter, and pronouncing it without sense or argument, and maintaining that the title is fraudulent. For they say that it is not the work of John, nor is it a revelation, because it is covered thickly and densely by a veil of obscurity*” as reported by Eusebius, Bishop of Caesarea, in his *Historia Ecclesiastica*, VII, 25.

² In the early fourth century, Eusebius lists it as one of the texts whose inclusion into the New Testament canon was disputed and opposed, even by himself, *Historia Ecclesiastica* III, 25, 3-5.

³ In his Letter to Paulinus, Bishop of Nola (*Ad Paulinum*, LIII, 8 dated to A.D. 394) Jerome wrote “*Apocalypsis Joannis tot habet sacramenta, quot verba. Parum dixi pro merito voluminis. Laus omnis inferior est: in verbis singulis multiplices latent intelligentiae*”.

⁴ *Commentariorum in Isaiam libri xviii* prol.: PL 24,17B. See also Documents of the Second Vatican Council, *Divine Verbum (DV)*, 25 and Catechism of the Catholic Church, para 133: “*The Church ‘forcefully and specifically exhorts all the Christian faithful. . . to learn the surpassing knowledge of Jesus Christ, by frequent reading of the divine Scriptures. Ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ.’*”

⁵ This metaphor needs further explanation. Exegetes and scholars know the meaning of many parts of this text. What is lacking is the way of putting all the parts together and arriving at its complete meaning. It is to this we refer, when we speak of the door. The door leads us to the meaning of a part of the text which is not presently apparent – the central message, as we shall see.

According to the context, the subject of this new ‘wave’ of prophecy is the period of time immediately preceding the fulfilment of God’s promises (cf. 10,7) and, according to the ‘signpost’ at the beginning of the book, the Lord’s purpose in giving it is “*to show his servants what must happen soon*” (Rev 1:1). *Soon!* Maybe that is why the Lord has not yet revealed the meaning of this central part of the text to his Church, because he is keeping it for when she really needs to know, just before the divine promises are going to be fulfilled – when the consummation of his kingdom is indeed ‘soon’.

So immediately after John is told he will have to prophecy again (10,11), we come to the door: “*And a cane similar to a rod was given to me while saying: ‘Get up and measure the Sanctuary of God and the altar and those worshipping in it. And reject the court which is outside the Sanctuary and do not measure it, because it was given to the nations, and they will trample the Holy City for forty-two months’*” (Rev 11,1-2).

This enigmatic passage about measuring some parts of the temple seems to be out of place, *fuori luogo!* It is also very obscure. Perhaps that is why it has never been recognized as the door to the central message of the text. It is certainly not to be interpreted literally since John, as a Christian disciple, had no interest in knowing the precise dimensions of the inner parts of the temple that stood on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem (cf. Mk 12,17; 13,1-2; 15,58; Jn 2,19). Furthermore, according to tradition, John was writing after the destruction of that temple by the Romans in 70 AD. So, even at the time of writing, this instruction must have had a non-literal, or metaphorical, meaning. To open this door, we need to use the key. The key, as always, is Jesus Christ, who said “*Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up*” (Jn 2,19) and with his Resurrection, the Church became the new temple (cf. 1Cor 3,16-17; 2Cor 6,16; Eph 2,19-22; 1Pet 2,4-10; Heb 12,22-24; Rev 3,12).

So the instruction given to John has nothing to do with the measuring of the second temple, but of its spiritual replacement, the new temple of Christ’s body, the Church, which is here described like the first and second temples in Jerusalem, with an inner court, consisting of a sanctuary, an altar and many worshippers, and an outer court that even the Gentiles were allowed to visit. John is commanded to measure the components of the inner court, but to reject the outer court.

The metaphor obviously needs to be decoded further, remembering that this temple is the Church and that just as the temple was perceived as having grades of holiness, with the structures in the inner court being the most holy, so the inner parts of the Church refer to its most holy and faithful parts: John should “measure” the inner, more holy, parts of the Church,⁶ and “reject” the outer, more profane parts,⁷ which will then be given over to the ‘nations’, or ‘Gentiles’ – the people who do not believe in the God of Israel. John is being asked to participate in the rejection of a large part of the Christian Church, permitting it to “apostatize” in a way that recalls the “great apostasy” prophesied by St. Paul (cf. 2Thess 2:3). But how are we to interpret the ‘measuring’ of the three different components of the inner court, termed “*the sanctuary of God, the altar and those worshipping there?*”⁸

On a simple verbal level, “measuring” means identifying, defining and taking the dimensions of. It is also an activity that accompanies building and construction work. So, in

⁶ I.e. Christians who have kept their faith in Christ and live according to the Church’s teachings.

⁷ I.e. Baptized Christians who have rejected their faith and spurned the teachings of the Church.

⁸ The model is Ez 40–48, when the prophet reported a prospective vision of the restored post-exilic temple, in which an angel does the measuring and Ezekiel records his measurements. These then form a plan for the rebuilding of the temple at a future time (Ez 43,10-12). The plan was not used after the exile because of discrepancies with the Torah of Moses, which the Messiah was expected would resolve when he comes. Here, precisely, the Messiah is resolving the discrepancies through this Revelation: John himself has the measuring rod and was asked to perform what Ezekiel only recorded in writing. It appears that John is helping to fulfil the plan of temple restoration given to Ezekiel, with the Church as the restored temple—a spiritual temple formed by the community of believers. The negative aspect of the command to reject apostate Christians, along with the nations (Rev 11,2), recalls the injunction to exclude the nations completely from Ezekiel’s plan for the restored temple (Ez 44,5-9).

complete contrast to what is happening to the outer court, John is instructed to participate in the edification of the inner court, as an architect or surveyor would do.⁹ The inner, therefore most faithful and devout, part of the Church will be edified by the activity that John is commanded to perform. But to what, in literal terms, does this activity correspond, bearing in mind that this is a metaphorical instruction? The answer is given in the previous verse: “*you must prophesy again about many nations and tongues and nations and rulers*” (Rev 10,11). The instruction given to John in these verses (Rev 11,1-2) is simply the command to prophesy which, in the previous verse (10,11), he was warned he must do. With this insight, the rest of the metaphor can be decoded very easily: the act of ‘measuring’ is the act of ‘prophesying’ and the ‘measuring cane like a rod’ is the prophecy he was given to prophesy in writing.

Put simply, John is now being given a prophecy to write, which not only builds up and unites the faithful members of the Church, but also divides and separates them from the unfaithful members, in a kind of judgment. It acts as a canon (‘measuring cane like a rod’,¹⁰) within the canon of the New Testament.

So the next question is about the start of the prophecy that John was given to write, which we have identified with the ‘measuring cane like a rod’ and with “*The Revelation of Jesus Christ that God gave him to show his servants what must happen soon...*” (Rev 1,1-2). The simple answer to this question is that it starts with what John wrote next: “*And I will give to my two witnesses and they will prophesy for one thousand two hundred and sixty days clothed in sackcloth. These are the two olive trees and the two lampstands standing before the Lord of all the earth*” (Rev 11,3-4).

This is interesting, because the text returns to the theme of prophesying, but this time it is not John who is prophesying in writing, but two witnesses of Christ, who will prophesy publicly, in person, *viva voce*, dressed in sackcloth for a period of time lasting about three and a half years (11,3-13). In the prophetic context in which it is described, it is impossible to avoid the conclusion that these two witnesses, or prophets, are the public announcers of the prophecy that John is asked to write.¹¹ But their mission is also the first event mentioned in John’s prophecy. This striking convergence has important implications: the start of the mission of these two witnesses, who publicly announce John’s prophecy, is also the start of

⁹ Like the surveyor on a construction site, John is metaphorically commanded to measure the various inner parts of the temple so that they fit together perfectly. This is certainly not the only instance of a metaphorical command in the New Testament: another example is when Jesus commanded the Apostle Peter to “*Feed my sheep*” (Jn 21,17). Just as neither Jesus nor Peter was a sheep farmer, we must not assume that John is here being told to go and work on a building site. We can only start to make sense of these commands when we realize they are metaphorical expressions, and as such they convey a deeper, more spiritual meaning than would be possible with ordinary speech. As St. Peter received his pastoral role in a metaphorical way, so here John is being given a prophetic role in metaphorical terms that convey its spiritual purpose and significance.

¹⁰ It is surely no coincidence that the word for this object in Hebrew (מִקְלָה) is etymologically related to the word ‘canon’ (κανών), which is the term given to that ‘rule of faith’ that Christ’s faithful should follow in order to be of one mind (Phil 3,16 TR). In a metaphorical context, then, the measuring cane given to John represents the prophecy as a rule of faith for the faithful, enabling them to be of one mind (cf. Acts 4,32; Phil 1,17). But why should the cane be like a ‘rod’ (ῥάβδος)? The mention of the rod here evokes the ‘rod of God’ with which Moses performed his miracles (Ex 4,17.20). Elsewhere in the text, the rod refers to the instrument with which the Messiah will ‘shepherd’ (rule over) the nations (Rev 2,27; 12,5; 19,15) and, as such, it can be understood as a symbol of the prophetic Word of God.

¹¹ The symbolical description of the two witnesses as “*the two olive trees and the two lampstands standing before the Lord of all the earth*” (Rev 11,4) offers further confirmation of this assumption. The significance of the description can be grasped from Zechariah’s vision of two olive trees standing on either side of a single lampstand (Zech 4,1-14), and especially from its association with the completion of the second temple. This vision offered divine assurance that the second temple would be completed, in spite of all the difficulties, through the leadership of the two ‘sons of oil’. These two leaders are understood to be Zerubbabel, the governor of the community at that time, and Joshua, the high priest. Through their service and cooperation, these two leaders would establish and maintain the divine presence among the community, by successfully rebuilding the temple institution. A similar significance extends to the two witnesses: through their prophetic mission they will help to bring to completion the true temple of God, the Church, in whose construction the author John has been participating by measuring its inner parts (Rev 11,1-2).

the realization of that prophecy. The two witnesses not only witness the prophecy, but they also bring it into realization. The prophetic words, which they announce, also initiate the fulfilment of, they ‘actualize’, John’s prophecy.

A much more important question now needs to be answered: what precisely is the content of this divine prophecy. What is it all about? We know where it starts in the text (11,3), but where does it end and what does it contain? The answer to this question lies in the metaphorical command given to the author John. By means of the prophecy he was given, John is metaphorically doing the measuring in the construction of the new temple, the Church. It is a task that will be completed only with the completion of the new temple and the realization of the prophecy.¹² We would therefore expect the completion of the temple to coincide with the conclusion of the prophecy. Later in the text, the completion of the temple is indeed signified in the traditional biblical way, by the consecration of the sanctuary with the “*smoke of the glory of God and of his power*” (Rev 15,5-8).¹³ So this phenomenon indicates the end of the prophecy which John was asked to “prophesy again” in writing (Rev 10,11), and which the two witnesses are empowered to prophesy publicly at a certain time (11,3-13).

The content of this “central prophecy” therefore includes all the text between these two points (11,3 and 15,5): it concerns the mission of the two witnesses for 1260 days (11,3-13), the flight of ‘Zion’ to the wilderness over a period of 1260 days (12,1-18), to a mountain called Mt. Zion (14,1-5, which links up with 7,1-8), the global rule of the ‘beast from the sea’ and his false prophet for 42 months (13,1-8) and the trampling of the Holy City of Jerusalem during this time (11,2), the great persecution of the people of God (13,9-18, which links up with 7,9-17), the angelic warnings of eternal judgment (14,6-13; 15,1-4), including the judgment of Babylon (14,8; which links up with 17,1-19,6), and finally the eschatological harvest of the faithful represented by the grain (14,14-16) and the faithless represented by the grape (14,17-20), concluding with the sounding of the last trumpet (11,14-19, which links up with 15,5-8). In brief, this “central prophecy” makes up 155 out of a total of 405 verses in the Book of Revelation, 38% of the total, a significant proportion. As pointed out previously from the context (10,7), this is an eschatological prophecy that describes events immediately

¹² John ‘measures the inner parts of the temple’ by witnessing the prophecy given to him. He does this by writing it in a book (1,19) and sending it to the seven churches. His task will continue all the time that the prophetic words of his book are witnessed in and by the Church, and will finish only when there is no longer a need to witness them—with the realization of the prophecy itself. Given that the prophecy concerns events in the eschatological period (cf. 10,7)), it is clear that the task entrusted to John will continue up until the end of history, well beyond his mortal life-span. So even though he is no longer present physically, he continues to perform his task as long as his prophecy is witnessed in and by the Church. This spiritual presence of the author precisely recalls the enigmatic passage in the fourth Gospel about the future of the beloved disciple, whom the risen Jesus wants “to remain until I come” (Jn 21,20-24). This lasting presence of John in the Church not only fulfils Jesus’ prophecy about the beloved disciple, but also identifies John, the author of Revelation, with the same beloved disciple. On this purely internal evidence, and beyond all questions of literary style, it identifies John, the author of Revelation, with the author of the fourth Gospel.

¹³ This phenomenon vividly recalls the way that God revealed himself to the Israelites on Mt. Sinai, when smoke and cloud appeared over the mountain (Ex 19,16-25). In the vision of the divine throne described both by Isaiah (Is 6,1-6) and here by John (Rev 15,8), the glory and power of God is represented by smoke. Moses had only just completed the tent that God wanted as his dwelling, when the Lord manifested his glory in a very similar way: “Then the cloud covered the Tent of Meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the dwelling. And Moses was not able to enter the Tent of Meeting because the cloud remained above it, and the glory of the Lord filled the dwelling” (Ex 40,34-35). The same phenomenon occurred at the completion of the temple built by King Solomon, immediately after the ark of the covenant was installed there (1Kgs 8,10-13). Similarly Ezekiel prophesies the glory of the Lord filling the Sanctuary on the completion of the renewed temple (Ez 43,7) in his final vision (Ez 43,1-12). In Revelation, therefore, the filling of the Sanctuary with the smoke of the glory and power of God signals the completion of the new temple, in whose construction John had been participating with the prophecy he was given (Rev 11,1-2). More importantly, since contact with the glory of God brought about the consecration of the place that God had chosen as his dwelling (Ex 29,43-45), the filling of the Sanctuary with the smoke of the glory and power of God, in this passage, can be understood as the divine act that brings about the consecration of the new temple.

preceding the consummation of God's plan for mankind at the end of history and it is the central message of the Book of Revelation – the Word of God for the end of history.

The rest of the text consists of a basic narrative prophecy which has a defined structure and follows a precise order. It is the order of a liturgy for Atonement taking place around God's throne within a Sanctuary in heaven.¹⁴ This liturgy starts with the ritual sacrifice of Christ the Lamb (cf. 4,1; 5,6), ends with his return for the final Judgment at the end of history (cf. 20,11-15) and represents the entire course of the God's Plan of Redemption through Christ and his Church on earth.

In many ways the Church is well justified in leaving the “central prophecy” unexplained and undetermined, for when the time is right for its announcement, the two witnesses will be empowered by the Lord to interpret, explain and announce it publicly. Although they are based in Jerusalem (cf. 11,8), their mission and their prophesying will have a global reach (10,11; 11,9-13). Until that time, it is sufficient that the Church continue to regard the entire Book of Revelation as the “*Word of God and the Witness of Jesus*” (1,2.9), while also awaiting the clarification of its meaning through the mission of the two chosen witnesses at the appointed time. From the text, the appointed time appears to be a short while before the coming of the ‘beast from the sea’ (13,1; 11,7),¹⁵ whose global dominion will last only 42 months. He will then be defeated and condemned at the second coming of Christ (19,11-21).

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¹⁴ Cf. *The Apocalypse in the Light of the Temple: A New Approach to the Book of Revelation*, by John and Gloria Ben Daniel, Jerusalem: Beit Yochanan, 2003, also at www.newtorah.org.

¹⁵ The combination of murderous hostility to Christ and his followers, together with emulation of Christ (in Rev chs. 11,13 and 17), the true Messiah, leads to the conclusion that this ‘beast’ is the last and most powerful manifestation of the antichristian spirit—the false messiah known in Christian tradition as the ‘Antichrist’. This is confirmed by his position in a hierarchy of three evil figures (the devil, the beast and the false prophet) which the author contrasts with God, his Christ and their prophet, John (Rev 13; 16,13; 20,10).