

## **DETERMINISM AND GRACE: AN INVESTIGATION IN THE PROLOGUE AND EPILOGUE OF THE BOOK OF REVELATION**

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### **Introduction**

A fundamental issue in studies on the book of Rev is whether or not it is oriented toward grace. Is the Apocalypse of John a graceless, deterministic book that expresses a legalistic outlook? Is the book perhaps sub-Christian in its spirit and outlook? To determine answers to such questions we shall examine the prologue and epilogue of the book.

Rev is written in a general epistolary format. The prologue and epilogue have many, though not all, of the epistolary form. For example, in the prologue we have several characteristics that indicate this form: the identification of John as the writer (1:1,4,9); the recipients, the seven Churches which are in Asia (v. 4); and the greeting, which includes the invoking of divine grace (vv. 4-6). Notably, the elements of prayer and thanksgiving are missing in this introduction. It may be noted that the epilogue also contains the invoking of divine grace on the recipients (22:21) but includes no personal comments. A question to be settled is whether or not this epistolary format is merely incidental or done by specific design of the author. Certain features of this epistolary introduction would suggest a specific purpose by John in using the letter format in his composition. This feature will be discussed later.

While there were many more churches in Asia Minor, the choice of these specific seven may have been influenced by a number of considerations, most important of which may have been the symbolic significance of these particular seven. Leon Morris observes that if one were to visit these churches according to the order in which they are named, one would make a complete circle, an idea that communicated the symbolism of completeness.<sup>1</sup> The number seven, as students of

<sup>1</sup>Leon Morris, *The Revelation of St. John: An Introduction and Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969), 47.

the Apocalypse generally note,<sup>2</sup> becomes a characteristic number for the rest of the document.<sup>3</sup> The meanings of the names of these seven churches and their specific inner spiritual qualities may also have played a determinative role in their selection.

We must carefully examine the prologue of Rev, for an author often includes leading elements of the main body of the epistle in the greeting. As Craig S. Keener has correctly observed, “The preface, or exordium, of a work sets the tone for a work . . . ; expansions on any part of the traditional letter introduction, including the blessings, often provide clues to themes in the rest of a letter.”<sup>4</sup>

### Determinism in the Apocalypse

The basic outlook of apocalyptic prophecy points in the direction of unconditional prophetic outcomes. The warnings and passionate prophetic pleas for a people to come to repentance in order to avert possible divine judgment are generally missing, or at least, are not explicitly stated in apocalyptic literature. In this literary genre, human events are portrayed as having gone beyond certain preliminary stages, leading to an almost inevitable divine response. In the controversy between good and evil, certain powers have taken an irrevocable stance of opposition against God and His people. Thus, while individuals may yet change sides, and are urged to do so, the beast powers will not change their attitude of antagonism against God. In describing the kings associated with the beast we find deterministic language in the declaration that they

will receive authority as kings along with the beast. They have one purpose and will give their power and authority to the beast. They will make war against the Lamb, but the Lamb will overcome them because he is Lord of lords and King of kings—and with him will be his called, chosen and faithful followers.<sup>5</sup> 17:12b-14

<sup>2</sup>John Wilcox, *The Message of Revelation: I Saw Heaven Opened*, The Bible Speaks Today (Leicester: Inter-Varsity, 1975), 33; George Beasley-Murray, *The Book of Revelation*, New Century Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdsman, 1981), 53; Morris, 47.

<sup>3</sup>For example, there are septenary series such as the seven churches in chaps. 2-3, the seven seals in chaps. 6-8, the seven trumpets in chaps. 8-11, and the seven plagues in chap. 16. There are also seven golden lampstands (1:12); seven stars (1:16); seven spirits (1:5); seven thunders (10:3); seven thousand people killed in the great earthquake (11:13); seven heads of the dragon with seven crowns (12:3); seven heads of the leopard-like beast (13:1); and seven mountains that are also seven kings (17:9,10).

<sup>4</sup>Craig S. Keener, *Revelation*, The NIV Application Commentary Series (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 69.

<sup>5</sup>Unless otherwise stated, all Scripture quotations are from the NIV.

D. S. Russell has argued that one of the primary functions of apocalyptic literature is to address the problem of unfulfilled prophecies.<sup>6</sup> What were the people of God to make the glorious prophecies that had apparently not been fulfilled? How were they to reconcile the divine promises of deliverance and glory for the faithful with the dire situations of present repression, persecution, and defeat? What had become of the great prophecies promising glory? Apocalyptic literature provides an answer pointing beyond the intermediate time of suffering to the ultimate consummation. This may partly suggest why this genre alludes continuously to the prophetic writings.

Further, in apocalyptic literature, history is portrayed as having been determined beforehand. As Russell points out, "There was therefore an inevitability about history; through travail and persecution it would move unerringly to its predetermined goal—the defeat of evil and the establishment of God's kingdom in the time of the End. The past was fixed; the future was fixed also."<sup>7</sup> Thus, according to this deterministic understanding, *what must be will be*. But if the future has already been predetermined, what is the place and function of divine grace? What is the function of human freedom and will? How does the sovereign God of history act graciously to allow the exercise of human freedom in a situation of predetermined history? H. H. Rowley reflects on this issue from the perspective of the OT. He says, "The divine activity in history does not override human freedom. It but uses it to serve the divine will."<sup>8</sup> Rabbi Akiba had already provided an answer that represents standard Judaism, "All is foreseen, but freedom of choice is given."<sup>9</sup> While several examples of determinism and human free will are present in Jewish apocalyptic,<sup>10</sup> this study limits itself to the prologue and epilogue of the book of Revelation.

Even though the book of Rev presents a cosmic sweep that is cast in the setting of the universal conflict between Christ and Satan, there are conditional statements within its larger prophetic profiles which suggest grace. For example, while Laodiceans are threatened to be expelled from the Lord's mouth if they remain in a lukewarm condition (3:16), there are also great promises reserved for the overcomers in Laodicea (vv. 20-22). Similar promises are given to overcomers in each of the seven churches ( 2:7,11,17,26; 3:5,12,21). However, it must be

<sup>6</sup>D. S. Russell, *The Method and Message of Jewish Apocalyptic* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1964), 181-87.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 230.

<sup>8</sup>H. H. Rowley, *The Relevance of Apocalyptic: A Study of Jewish and Christian Apocalypses from Daniel to the Revelation* (London: Athlone, 1944), 144.

<sup>9</sup>Mishnah *Pirke 'Abot* 3:16.

<sup>10</sup>For example, the Book of Jubilees (5:13; 41:24 ff.) expresses the idea of an individual's future as being fixed in the heavenly tablets, but at the same time urges each person to choose righteousness so that condemnation may not be recorded against him or her in the heavenly annals. Cf. Psalms of Solomon 14:5 and 2 Enoch 53:2 for additional examples that express the same sentiment.

observed that none of the conditional elements or offers of grace are big enough to change the larger, predetermined prophetic outcome. Thus, we may say that insofar as the larger prophetic outcome is concerned, apocalyptic literature in general is bound by a strong element of unconditionality. There are no large variables that can now alter its historical forecast. What has been decreed is now unfolding according to the determinate sovereignty of God. Babylon *must* fall, break up, and come under the final judgments of God. The dragon, the beast, and the false prophet *must* come under divine judgment and punishment. Armageddon *must* come with unnegotiable certainty.

Some have seen in the harsh language of biblical apocalyptic an indication of a vindictive divine Sovereign.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, the language of fire and brimstone is sobering; and the fate of the persecutors of the saints is portrayed in grim pictures. But it must be noted that within this determinism of the destruction of the strongholds of evil, there is a persistent conditionality of grace for individuals. A divine window of hope is left open for the repentant.

In the letters to the seven churches, Jesus' self-introduction always inspires hope and implies an invitation. Christ, the author of the seven letters, "holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven candlesticks" (2:1). He "is the First and the Last who died and came to life again" (2:8). He is "the faithful and true witness" (3:14). To each church He holds out hope and promise for the overcomer. He appeals to all who have ears, to hear what the Spirit says to the churches (2:7,11,17,29; 3:6,13,22). Clearly, these invitations and appeals offer a conditionality of grace for individual salvation. They also underscore the tender compassion of the sovereign God of the Apocalypse. The God who has determined the larger outcomes of history has also made gracious provision for individuals making determinant decisions for their eternal destiny. This is grace.

### Grace in the Prologue

Interestingly, the word "grace" (*charis*) occurs only twice in Rev, once each in the prologue (1:4) and epilogue (22:21). Our examination is to see if the occurrence of the word, used specifically and only at these two points in the document, is merely customary or has definite theological intention. A careful study of Rev shows that while the word "grace" appears only in the prologue and epilogue of the book, the theme of grace is evident in a number of other passages. This study, however, focuses only on the prologue and epilogue.

<sup>11</sup>For example, Walter Bauer, "Das Gebot der Fiendesliebe und die alten Christen," *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 27 (1917): 40, says, "The Apocalyptist breathes a glowing hatred against all enemies and persecutors of Christianity and assuages himself with thoughts about the terrible sufferings which await them." See also W. D. Davies, "Ethics in the New Testament," *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (1962), 2:176; J. Massyngberde Ford, *Revelation*, Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1975), 4.

In the use of *charis* in the prologue, some have seen only a traditional formulary, perhaps borrowed from Paul as a form of Christian greeting, with no special significance.<sup>12</sup> But this seems hardly possible in the light of several Johannine innovations connected with this word in the Apocalypse. First, it is notable that John has lengthened the usual greeting formula from “grace and peace,” to a longer formula that includes the source of grace and peace as the Father, the Spirit and the Son. While we have evidence of a lengthened greeting formula in a number of other NT epistles,<sup>13</sup> this one is by far the longest, spanning three verses (1:4-6). Second, we may also note that while Paul consistently uses the expression (with practically no variation), “Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ,” John, in addition to using a longer formula, varies the order of the source of grace to Father, Spirit, and then Son, and not the traditional trinitarian order of Father, Son, and Spirit. In his description of the Father as the source of grace and peace, John describes Him as “him who is, and who was, and who is to come” (1:4). This is unique to John. What is particularly interesting and noteworthy here is that John’s construction goes contrary to Greek grammar. He uses the nominative case of the personal pronoun (*ho*) three times in this construction (*apo ho ōn kai ho ēn kai ho erchomenos*) referring to God. Grammatically, John should have used the genitive case, which normally follows the preposition (*apo*). William Barclay suggests that John employs such an unusual grammatical construction in order to preserve the correct Hebrew form of the divine personal name.<sup>14</sup> It seems that God’s self-revelation to Moses in Exod 3:14, “I AM WHO I AM,”<sup>15</sup> stands behind this expression. The Septuagint rendering correctly uses a nominative case, but this is because the pronoun here does not follow the preposition as in Revelation. George Beasley-Murray also suggests that this awkward Greek expression probably reflects John’s attempt to translate a Hebrew original.<sup>16</sup> George B. Caird comments that by keeping the divine title in the nominative case John is indicating that “God is, so to speak, always in the nominative, always the subject; he holds the initiative, and things happen because he chooses, not because men force his hand and so put him into the accusative.”<sup>17</sup> This may recall the Exodus, a movement initiated by the grace of God. By this connection we may view John’s audience as a community of grace called out by

<sup>12</sup>This may be seen in that commentators often see the expression “grace and peace” as merely a customary Christian salutation that combines the Hebrew “*shālôm*” and the Greek “*charis*.”

<sup>13</sup>Cf. Rom 1:7; 1 Cor 1:3; Eph 1:2; 1 Thess 1:1; 2 Thess 1:2; 1 Pet 1:2; 2 Pet 1:2; 2 John 1:3.

<sup>14</sup>William Barclay, *The Revelation of John*, rev. ed., The Daily Study Bible Series, (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976), 30.

<sup>15</sup>NIV indicates that this may also be expressed as “I WILL BE WHAT I WILL BE.”

<sup>16</sup>Beasley-Murray, 54.

<sup>17</sup>George B. Caird, *The Revelation of Saint John*, Black’s New Testament Commentary, (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1966), 16.

God to a new Exodus—a new call of grace to become God’s special people.<sup>18</sup> The divine intention to make the people of the old exodus movement “a kingdom of priests” (Exod 19:6) was an expression of grace. It seems that John creates a marked connection between the implied divine name in Rev 1:4 and its explicit use in Exod 3:14. He underlines that connection with the description of this new people of God as “a kingdom of priests” (Rev 1:6), just like their OT counterparts. Such a linkage seems too clear to be incidental and unintended. Additionally, the recurring exodus motif under different images in the rest of the book points strongly in this direction. For example, the symbolism of the trumpets (chaps. 8-11) and the plagues (chap. 16), the Song of Moses and the Lamb, as well as the Sea of Glass mingled with fire (15:1-3), all emphasize the exodus theme. Hence, in the greeting of grace we are ushered into the motif of the new exodus of grace. John reminds his readers that they constitute a movement initiated by God’s grace; they are a new exodus people.

From the foregoing argument it seems evident that grace in the Prologue is not a traditional greeting; rather, John uses it to introduce a major theological framework for the whole book. The Church of Revelation may be understood as the people of grace. They came into existence by the grace of Yahweh, and they live by His grace.

The second source of grace and peace in the greeting is from “the seven spirits before the throne” (1:4). The seven spirits are not synonymous with the stars who are defined as the seven angels (1:20). This may be deduced from the fact that in the Greek text of Rev 3:1 (*ta hepta pneumata tou theou kai tous hepta asteras*, “the seven spirits of God and the seven stars”), each substantive stands with its own definite article, thereby denoting distinct entities. Probably the seven spirits allude to the seven-fold Spirit of Isa 11:2, thus pointing to the third member of the Godhead. In this way John may be describing his audience as the community of the Spirit, a relevant NT motif. Therefore, this audience may be understood as a community that came into existence through the activity of the Spirit and it continues to live by the Spirit.

The third source of grace and peace in this initial greeting is the longest and is placed in an unusual order. The description of Jesus Christ (vv. 5-6) is placed last:

and from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.

<sup>18</sup>The new Exodus motif is also found in the book of Jeremiah. See Kenneth D. Mulzac, “The Remnant and the New Covenant in the Book of Jeremiah,” *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 34 (1996): 240-42.

To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father—to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen.

Perhaps this placement of the description of Christ, coming as it does at the end of the greeting, is intended to put special focus on Him in order to introduce and concretize the Christological focus and foundation that is so self-evident in the whole document. I submit that on the basis of this extended greeting in the prologue, John intended to communicate the centrality of grace as the underlying motif for his whole presentation and proclamation. We find that as an added expression of this grace, the doxology of vv. 5-6 outlines from the very beginning, the basis of the saints' standing with God. This is cause to burst into joyous worship and adoration: "To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood . . . to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen." Such is John's passionate response to Jesus Christ.

### Grace in the Epilogue

The closing benediction of Revelation also makes reference to grace. Textual variants noted in Rev 22:21<sup>19</sup> do not affect the meaning and significance of the word "grace." Perhaps it may be argued that its brief expression in a very customary way simply closes the book in an appropriate manner. Martin Kiddle sees in this closing benediction John's desire "that his readers will be given that grace which brings to birth good deeds."<sup>20</sup> Allan F. Johnson sees the mention of grace in the epilogue as having theological significance for the message of the book itself. He says insightfully, "We may, however, agree that nothing less than God's grace is required for us to be overcomers and triumphantly enter the Holy City of God, where all shall reign for ever and ever."<sup>21</sup> The book opens with the mention of grace and closes with the mention of the same. Ranko Stefanovic notes correctly, "John closes his book by reminding God's people that in the midst of all

<sup>19</sup>Textual variants of *kuriou Iesou* include *kuriou Iesou Christou* and *kuriou hēmōn Iesou Christou*. The first is found in Codex Sinaiticus and Codex Alexandrinus among others, and is given an A rating as being most certain. Other variants include *meta pantōn* ("with all") or *meta pantōn hēmōn* ("with you all") or *meta pantōn tōn hagiōn* ("with all the saints"). Still other variants either include or exclude the final word "Amen." The word "grace" is present except for the Coptic manuscript from the 9<sup>th</sup> century C.E. (Cop<sup>bo</sup>), which omits v. 21 altogether. See Barbara Aland, Kurt Aland, et. al.; ed., *The Greek New Testament*, 4th rev. ed. (Stuttgart: Biblia-Druck, 1993), 886.

<sup>20</sup>Martin Kiddle, *The Revelation of Saint John* (New York: Harper), 457.

<sup>21</sup>Allan F. Johnson, *Revelation*, The Expositor's Bible Commentary, vol. 12 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 603.

the confusion and fears regarding the things that are about to come upon the world, their only hope is in the grace of Christ. His grace is sufficient for them.”<sup>22</sup>

Finally, the last two chapters of Rev climax the great conflict between good and evil on a rich note of grace. In this section, grace is not expressed verbally but is clearly indicated in the final display of divine actions toward sinners who were once lost. Rev 21 opens with John seeing “a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and earth had passed away.” He views the New Jerusalem being prepared as a bride dressed in festal array for her husband. The New Jerusalem then comes down to the new earth. God changes His dwelling to earth and lives among His people. The use of tabernacle language in the phrase *idou he skēnē tou theou meta tōn anthrōpōn, kai skēnōsei met autōn* (“Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them,” 21:3), again recalls the exodus theme that was already introduced in the prologue. The same God who had commanded the construction of a Tabernacle or Sanctuary so that He might dwell among His people (Exod 25:8), now comes in His unfiltered glory to dwell among the new humanity (21:1-3).

When one recalls the history of sin, rebellion, and shame that has characterized fallen humanity, one appreciates that it is only by grace that one may be saved. Indeed, the dramatic portrayal of God’s final initiative in coming to dwell with humanity presents a picture of grace that is greater than all human sin. The universe itself finds a final climactic demonstration of the meaning of grace. If in the parable of Luke 15, the lost son was treated with grace by his father, lost humanity is treated with ultimate grace in Revelation. The book is one that demonstrates the final display of divine grace.

### Conclusion

The book of Rev is not set in a deterministic mode; rather, it is framed by grace both in the prologue and epilogue. Indeed, these are the only places in Rev where the word “grace” occurs. But while the explicit mention of grace occurs only in 1:4 and 22:21 the motif of grace is threaded throughout the book. In the prologue and epilogue the work is part of an epistolary greeting, but is expressed in an extended manner that suggests a clear theological purpose. Within the context of the suffering and persecution, John wished to reassure his audience that just as they came into existence by God’s initiative of grace, they will be sustained in the hour of trial by that same divine attribute. Therefore, grace provides the theological framework within which we are to read and interpret the message of Revelation.

<sup>22</sup>Ranko Stefanovic, *Revelation of Jesus Christ: Commentary on the Book of Revelation* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2002), 610.