JOHN C. LENNOX

GOD, AI & THE END OF HISTORY

UNDERSTANDING THE BOOK OF REVELATION

‘John Lennox skilfully weaves together the academic and the practical with the result that his commentary is both highly informative and eminently devotional. The reader is in for a very engaging study of Revelation designed to lead to the worship of the Triune God as Creator and Redeemer and to heighten one’s desire for the Son’s return to establish his kingdom in righteousness.’
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Tim Costello, Director of Ethical Voice and Executive Director of Micah Australia

‘A fascinating chapter-by-chapter exposition of the book of Revelation’s futurist eschatology. It includes a judicious consideration of whether Revelation may picture an end-time use of artificial intelligence in some form that dehumanizes and dominates people in that future day. Lennox’s expertise as a Christian scientist with a solid grasp of Scripture makes him the perfect guide for such issues. Highly recommended!’
Buist M. Fanning, Senior Professor Emeritus of New Testament Studies, Dallas Theological Seminary, USA

‘This book offers a contemporary reflection on the imagery and symbolism of the book of Revelation, wisely focusing on the “what” rather than the “who” that they represent. John passionately and uncompromisingly reminds us of the horror of the judgement to come and the true Homo Deus in whom alone is our hope for the future, a truth that will resonate with readers of all eschatological perspectives. We are challenged and spurred on throughout the

book to faithfully serve Christ as ambassadors of the gospel and the hope that it brings to our morally confused world, torn between the techno optimism around AI and the prospects for transcendence that it might offer, and its potential existential threat.'
Jeremy Peckham, author of *Masters or Slaves? AI and the Future of Humanity*

'John Lennox proves once again to be a brilliant guide, one with the wisdom, skill and care to write in a way that leads readers to think with him about matters of consequence. In a world brimming with new treatments of the future and of artificial intelligence, Professor Lennox demonstrates that taking the time to look back at the Bible – to read with the Bible – doesn't bog us down in a bygone past but rather propels us forward into the future, one already seen and secured by Jesus Christ.'
Jacob Shatzer, Provost, Union University, Jackson, Tennessee, and Executive Director, BibleMesh

'Panoramic, passionate and deeply personal, John Lennox's new book provides a compelling and detailed interpretation of the book of Revelation in the light of contemporary events.'
John Wyatt, co-editor of *The Robot Will See You Now*

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He has also written several major expositions of biblical themes: *Determined to Believe? The sovereignty of God, faith and human responsibility* (2017); *Joseph: A story of love, hate, slavery, power and forgiveness* (2019); *A Good Return: Biblical principles of work, wealth and wisdom* (2023); *Against the Flow: The inspiration of Daniel in an age of relativism* (2024); *Friend of God: The inspiration of Abraham in an age of doubt* (2024).

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Dedicated to the past and present members of the Myrtlefield Trust
and to
the memory of its chairman and teacher, Professor David W. Gooding
MRIA

GOD, AI AND THE END OF HISTORY

Understanding the book of Revelation
in an age of intelligent machines

John C. Lennox

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Preface

Future shock

In 1970, American futurist Alvin Toffler wrote a groundbreaking book, *Future Shock*,[1] which sold over 6 million copies within the first five years. Shock is a psychological state usually connected with a sudden, unexpected, very unpleasant change of situation. According to Toffler, future shock is the state of mind produced by too much change in too short a period of time. If the concept gained traction in 1970, how much more so now, fifty years later in the 2020s when the rate of change has become accelerated beyond anything we have hitherto experienced? The Covid-19 pandemic produced so much change in a short time that, in many countries, it overwhelmed the health service and then the economy. Climate change, due to relentlessly increasing temperatures, is endangering our future with violent weather patterns, flooding and wildfires. The deserts grow and the forests shrink, forcing populations to move in order to find stable living space. And there is war in many places. In particular, the Russian invasion of Ukraine early in 2022 caught the Western nations off guard and led to a sudden flow of millions of Ukrainians into neighbouring countries, threatening to overwhelm their local resources, to say nothing of the shock of having a major war in Europe with all its undesirable side effects, such as rampant inflation, when we all thought such horror and madness was a thing of the past.

The cumulative knock-on effects of such shocks have been deep anxiety, even fear, about the future, as the cost of fuel, energy and food rocketed to unprecedented levels and led to rampant inflation and an energy crisis. More and more people unexpectedly find themselves out of a job and being forced to live on or below the poverty line. Sector after sector is on strike – transport workers and even nurses and ambulance drivers, doctors and consultants – thus exacerbating a general sense of misery. Politicians seem out of their

depth and, unable to cope, they content themselves with filling the airwaves with undeliverable promises. In addition, all of us face what looks like irreversible climate change as devastating floods, droughts and extreme heat become the new normal, where they used to be 'once-in-a-hundred-year' occurrences. We are constantly asked to think about the kind of world that we wish to leave to future generations – and to act before it is too late.

Added to that are concerns about where we are being taken by advanced technology in general and artificial intelligence in particular. We are now living in the age of intelligent machines – that is, machines that can do things that normally require human intelligence, such as devising vaccines or interpreting X-rays. Such machines are increasingly replacing humans, and they threaten many jobs.

At a more advanced level, not only science-fiction writers but also leading scientists are worried about the way in which technology continues to outpace the ethical underpinning needed to keep it under control. Some, such as the late Cambridge astrophysicist Stephen Hawking, even speculated about an eventual takeover of the human race by robots whose aims may not be aligned with ours. Others are concerned with the drive to modify humans genetically or cybernetically to create a future world populated by transhumans or posthumans. For instance, the UK's Astronomer Royal, Lord Rees, wrote:

> Abstract thinking by biological brains has underpinned the emergence of all culture and science. But this activity – spanning tens of millennia at most – will be a brief precursor to the more powerful intellects of the inorganic post-human era. So, in the far future, it won't be the minds of humans, but those of machines, that will most fully understand the cosmos.[2]

Institutes to both study and influence the future of humanity have been set up in some leading universities, for instance the Centre for the Study of Existential Risk in Cambridge and the Future of Humanity Institute in Oxford.[3] I have written about these issues in

my book *2084 and the AI Revolution: How artificial intelligence informs our future* (updated and expanded edition),[4] where I discuss, in particular, the relevance of the biblical book of Revelation to the subject. That in turn has formed part of my motivation for writing this book about Revelation in its own right.

Since life at the calmest of times is inevitably fraught with uncertainties, we humans have always been concerned about the future. We are now in the grip of an unprecedented maelstrom of change that has left many people feeling rudderless, disoriented and vulnerable. Information we have in spades, but information overload is part of our problem: we cannot process it all to our advantage. Many people are suffering from what is now called 'anticipatory anxiety' or chronophobia.[5] It is highly debilitating. Despair is on the march with hope in short supply.

In the Western academy, research is dominated by a materialistic philosophy that has placed science on the throne to such an extent that its offshoot, technology, especially computer technology, has now replaced religion in many minds as the provider of any credible hope of saving humanity in the future. But is it a hope or a threat? In a 2009 debate, the biologist E. O. Wilson said: 'The real problem of humanity is the following: we have palaeolithic emotions, medieval institutions, and godlike technology. And it is terrifically dangerous.' He continued: 'Until we answer those huge questions of philosophy that the philosophers abandoned a couple of generations ago – Where do we come from? Who are we? Where are we going? – rationally, we're on very thin ground.'[6] I think Wilson is right about the question, although it needs to be said that there are still leading philosophers who think about them – but not enough.

And the ground is thin! In 1945, Albert Einstein, J. Robert Oppenheimer and University of Chicago scientists who had developed the first atomic weapons as part of the Manhattan Project launched the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists; two years later they created the Doomsday Clock, using the imagery of apocalypse (midnight) and the contemporary idiom of a nuclear explosion (countdown to zero) to convey threats to humanity and the planet.

It is set every year and is globally recognized as the indicator of the world's vulnerability to man-made catastrophe.[7] The Doomsday Clock was set in 1947 to seven minutes to midnight. In 2024, it was moved forward to 90 seconds to midnight!

It has been well said that evil and pain look very different depending on whether you are directly experiencing them or simply observing them from a distance. And that is the problem with doomsday scenarios. They are scarily real as you watch a digital clock counting down in the corner of a control-room screen that shows a terrorist (or civilian, alas) target about to be annihilated by an AI-guided drone. But they may seem very distant if your part of the world has seen no war and little disruption for the best part of a century.

That distance is increased by a vast array of psychological defence mechanisms that tell us that what we see and hear from the media in other parts of the world will 'never come here'. We find all kinds of reasons to discredit those pundits who say it will – accusing them of doom-mongering, of conspiracy theories and all the rest – when it is totally obvious that we are on the cusp of being engulfed by any number of major man-made catastrophes.

Of course, imaginative, indeed powerful futuristic scenarios have been around for a long time and have been given credence by the fulfilment of many of their elements, once thought improbable.

Two of the most famous futuristic scenarios are the 1931 novel *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley and George Orwell's novel *1984*, published in 1949. Both novels are dystopian; that is, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*: 'They describe an imaginary place or condition that is as bad as possible.' And Orwell memorably put a date on it: 1984.

The bad places that these dystopias describe are very different, as was succinctly explained by sociologist Neil Postman in his highly regarded work *Amusing Ourselves to Death*. Postman wrote:

> Orwell warns that we will be overcome by an externally imposed oppression. But in Huxley's vision, no Big Brother is required to deprive people of their autonomy, maturity and history. As he saw

> it, people will come to love their oppression, to adore the technologies that undo their capacities to think.
>
> What Orwell feared were those who would ban books. What Huxley feared was there would be no reason to ban a book, for there would be no one who wanted to read one.
>
> Orwell feared those who would deprive us of information. Huxley feared those who would give us so much that we would be reduced to passivity and egoism. Orwell feared that the truth would be concealed from us. Huxley feared that the truth would be drowned in a sea of irrelevance. Orwell feared we would become a captive culture. Huxley feared we would become a trivial culture . . .
>
> In short, Orwell feared that what we hate will ruin us. Huxley feared that what we love will ruin us.[8]

Nowadays, it very much looks as if both these things are already happening simultaneously: we increasingly love our technology, particularly our smart phones and watches, our tablets and laptops, and yet we fear what they are facilitating: all-intrusive surveillance with its potential for totalitarian control. Orwell's world is well and truly here with its misinformation, fake news, disinformation, and deep fakes driven by artificial intelligence that make sure that truth is both concealed and debased so that no one knows what to believe any more about the present, let alone the future.

Attempts to map the future, particularly by the 'high priests' of artificial intelligence (AI), succeed one another with what C. S. Lewis, in another context, called 'the restless fertility of bewilderment'.[9] Some technologists dream that we shall eventually be able to make superintelligent beings, either by building them from scratch on a non-organic base such as silicon, or by modifying existing human beings by genetic engineering and merging them with cyborg technology to produce a transhuman species – part human, part machine. Then the key question is: will they like us or dispense with us? Will they be totalitarian or benign? Will they control us, or we them?

There are many books addressing the topic, such as *On the Future: Prospects for humanity* by the Astronomer Royal Martin Rees;[10] *Superintelligence: Paths, dangers, strategies* by Nick Bostrom, former director of the Future of Humanity Institute in Oxford University;[11] Shoshana Zuboff's *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The fight for a human future at the new frontier of power*;[12] Yuval Noah Harari's *Homo Deus: A brief history of tomorrow*; and my own *2084 and the AI Revolution: How artificial intelligence informs our future*.[13]

Astrology and prophecy

A frequent companion to concern about the future – especially, but not only, on the part of the scientifically literate – is suspicion of people who claim to know anything about it beyond what science can tell them. In spite of that, according to Google Trends, interest in astrology and wellness has doubled since 2010. Not surprisingly, concern about the latter fuels the former. The roots of astrology lie in the dim mists of time. In the second millennium BC the ancient Babylonians had a highly organised astrological system, and from then until the seventeenth century astrology was widely viewed as a scholarly pursuit. For instance, even as late as the mid-twentieth century, famous psychoanalyst Carl Jung wrote:

> In cases of difficult psychological diagnosis, I usually get a horoscope in order to have a further point of view from an entirely different angle. I must say that I very often found that the astrological data elucidated certain points which I otherwise would have been unable to understand.

Later still, in 2014, a study by the National Science Foundation in the USA found that more than half of 18- to 24-year-olds believed that astrology was a scientific tradition. The fact that astrology is trending on social media is evidence that Gen Z is obsessed with it.[14] Psychologist Graham Tyson has produced evidence that 'under

conditions of high stress, the individual is prepared to use astrology as a coping device, even though under low-stress conditions he does not believe in it'.[15]

The bottom line is that we want to know about the future; we simply cannot leave it alone. We want some good news to assuage our increasing sense of insecurity and rootlessness. Many suspect that there is no solution to be found inside themselves, so they look outside their world into the wider universe of planets and stars. They then hope that, with the aid of their star signs and horoscopes, they can bring some orientation and meaning into their lives. We – and that includes world leaders as well as ordinary people – long to hear a credible voice that says: 'Fear not!'

There is another story, very different from astrology, that also takes us back to Babylon. It is not as well known as it should be, even though it is readily accessible in the best-selling book of all time, the Bible. It concerns a certain group of Jews – Daniel and three of his friends – who, in the sixth century BC, were forcibly taken from Jerusalem by the armies of the invading King Nebuchadnezzar and resettled in the capital city of Babylon itself. They were enrolled in the university there to study the language, literature, culture and laws of the empire in order to become civil servants. As even a brief visit to the British Museum in London will confirm, the Babylonian Empire was a highly developed civilisation in terms of culture, literature, legislation, building, engineering, medicine, music, mathematics and astronomy. It was also the most idolatrous nation on earth at the time, and its many gods – often associated with, or regarded as deifications of, the sun, moon, stars and planets – were regarded as the influencers of life who determined all that happened in the past, present and future.

Daniel and his friends benefited from the most advanced education of the time. However, they remained remarkably untouched by the essentially materialistic, idolatrous world view that permeated the entire culture of Babylon. The reason for this was that they believed the teaching of the Hebrew Bible (the Tanakh) that there was one true God, creator and upholder of heaven and

earth, who was neither part of the universe nor an emanation from it. The integrity and credibility of these four Jews was of such impeccable quality that even the king of Babylon at the time, Nebuchadnezzar, came to see that their God was real and that his gods, by contrast, were mere deifications of natural forces and projections of human desires.

I have been intrigued by the Daniel narrative for all of my life. As literature, it is powerful and grips the imagination. And just there lies an important question: what do we mean by imagination? It is usually associated with creativity but has two connotations. For instance, we say that something is a figment of the imagination if we think that it is not real. In that spirit, Daniel challenged the existence of the ancient gods, as most intelligent people do today. Yet Daniel was no atheist. With great courage he and his friends stood in that ancient public space for the existence of the one true God, who not only created the universe and us in it but also is concerned for us and our well-being. Why did Daniel believe such things? Was it because he was ignorant of what we would now call 'science', which has helped dismiss many of the ancient gods as figments of the imagination? Or were there deeper reasons for it that remain valid today? Yes, there were, and those reasons have to do with another aspect of imagination. As Holly Ordway explains, 'Imagination is the human faculty that assimilates sensory data into images, upon which the intellect can then act; it is the basis of all reasoned thought.'[16] Reasoned thought includes science but is far from exclusive to it. Speaking as a scientist, but for both scientific and non-scientific reasons, I fully support Daniel's conviction that this is not the only world there is.

I have spent many years thinking about these issues, a process that has led me to write *Against the Flow: The inspiration of Daniel in an age of relativism*.[17] Part of my motivation was the fact that Daniel, even in high old age, was prepared to stick his head above the parapet and protest against the idolatrous world view of the Babylonians and their inadequate, though deeply held, materialistic, astrological belief in a starry realm that determined the affairs of this

world. By contrast, Daniel believed in a supernatural realm that was ruled by a sovereign Lord God, who was both the Creator and Sustainer of the universe yet was interested in him and communicated with him to such an extent that he even revealed aspects of the future to him. Daniel learned that prophecy and astrology belonged to very different categories. Astrology was, at best, a human guess at what might happen, based on close study of trends in politics, economics and social dynamics, whereas biblical prophecy was genuine revelation from a supernatural God. In the book that bears his name, Daniel, as a Hebrew prophet as well as a statesman, provided evidence for the existence of another world that is higher than this one in every sense imaginable. He gives us, not a 'view from nowhere', a place that doesn't actually exist, but a view from an eternal perspective, allowing us to understand our present age as one in which God will eventually intervene – a concept that is absent from most thinking about the future.

The role of the book of Revelation

The New Testament (NT) book that corresponds to Daniel in the Old Testament (OT) is the book of Revelation. It carries forward ideas and imagery from Daniel and other OT prophets and was expressly written to give hope to believers facing hardship and oppression in the first-century Roman Empire. That may partly explain why some parts of the book are not so easy to understand, since one can imagine that, in the dangerous and volatile context of the pervasive Roman imperial cult, politically sensitive statements needed to be couched in language that was deliberately obscure to outsiders. The book carries forward a claim that Christ made privately to his disciples and publicly to his judges, namely that he would return as the Messiah, a king long expected by the Jews, to rule on the earth and to judge the nations. If this claim is true, as I believe it to be, it ought to dominate our thinking about the future, which is why the book of Revelation is of such immense importance and is neglected at our peril. Our future will not rest ultimately in the thrall of artificial

general intelligence or intelligent machines but in the return of Christ.

Questions about the status of the book of Revelation have rumbled on for a long time, and still do. In the third century, Dionysius of Alexandria wrote that many Christians said that the book was 'without sense and without reason . . . covered with such a dense and thick veil of ignorance'. In his *Ecclesiastical History* in AD 325, Eusebius of Caesarea said that the divine inspiration of Revelation was undisputed for some but disputed for others. In AD 367, Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria, included it in his New Testament canon, whereas his contemporary, Cyril of Jerusalem, excluded it. At the time of the Reformation, Martin Luther opined in his 1522 edition of the NT that he saw no evidence of its inspiration, that no one knows what it means and that there were 'many far better books for us to keep'. Such impressions linger, and many still turn away from the book as if it was dangerously infectious and difficult to fathom, sometimes citing conspiracy theories or extreme cults that claim to derive wild and dangerous practices from it – such as the Heaven's Gate cult whose members committed mass suicide in Rancho Santa Fe, California, in 1997, or the horrific happenings in Jonestown in 1978 with the mass murder and suicide of over 900 people. However, such claims are erroneous, as even superficial investigation shows.[18]

After all, the book of Revelation itself is what its name announces: a revelation or an unveiling, not so much of something but of Someone – the one 'who loves us and has freed us from our sins' (Rev. 1:5), the Messiah, the Son of God, our Saviour. It is inconceivable that he would give us a book whose main thrust led to crazed behaviour or was impossible to grasp. In fact, its inspired message has subsequently revealed Christ to every generation of his followers and filled their horizons with hope of ultimate deliverance from pain and evil through his return to rule and judge the world. Its final triumph is God's creation of new heavens and a new earth, where there is no pain, sorrow or death, and where all believers will eternally dwell with Christ, their God, Saviour and King. As such, it

contains a vital part of the core Christian manifesto. New Testament scholar Richard Bauckham sums up the impact of the book as follows:

> Revelation has persistently inspired the whole church's vision of God and his purpose for history and the eschatological future, perhaps especially in its liturgy, hymns and art. It has been the book both of martyrs and of visionaries: the two groups which have so often saved the church from betraying its witness in compromised conformity to the world. It has been a recurrent source of prophetic critique both of the church itself and of the state and society.[19]

I share that conviction, and it is my main motivation for writing.

And, speaking of manifestos, no one would take a political manifesto or commercial proposal seriously if it had nothing to say about the future and therefore no hope to offer. Similarly, the Christian world view would have little or no credibility if it did not hold out a realistic vision of the future. Revelation shows that there is something of real substance to which we can look forward. History is moving towards a goal under God. Christians do not hope in him in vain. C. S. Lewis suggested that history shows that Christian contribution to the world of now was directly proportional to their interest in the next.[20]

Putting this another way, Revelation is not merely a book; it is primarily an event, an event both present and future: the ongoing unveiling of Jesus Christ to believers now and, in the future, to the world in power and great glory at the climactic event of his return. His disciples saw him ascend, literally and physically in the clouds of heaven. They were told that he would return in the same way (Acts 1:11). I join them in believing that he did and that he will – and I do so fully aware of the scientific and technological world picture.

Revelation, therefore, fills the vital role of completing the biblical metanarrative that encompasses all of this earth's history. God wants us to see the whole picture, not merely to satisfy our curiosity but rather so that we can get to know him better, worship him more

intelligently and see where we fit in this grand narrative. That involves him taking us behind the scenes and showing us aspects of reality that are not normally on view, so that we can better understand what is going on. What could be more thrilling than getting to know about the business of heaven and the world to come?

Yes, I did say 'worship' just now, for one of the striking things about Revelation is that it has more to say about worship than any other book in the NT. If it doesn't get us singing praise to God, then we have missed the point of it and need to read it again. Here is one way of singing about it that means a great deal to me. It is a beautiful and powerful expression of the hope that Revelation awakens in me and comes from one of the world's favourite hymns: 'How Great Thou Art!'

When Christ shall come with shouts of acclamation,
And take me home, what joy shall fill my heart!
Then I will bow in humble adoration,
And there proclaim, my God, how great Thou art!

Then sings my soul, my Saviour God, to Thee:
How great Thou art! How great Thou art!
Then sings my soul, my Saviour God, to Thee:
How great Thou art! How great Thou art![21]

Is belief in supernatural revelation rational?

Some of you might be tempted to think that it borders on the absurd to imagine that a book written nearly 2,000 years ago could have any relevance to the twenty-first century. You might also think that, in an advanced and sophisticated scientific culture, it is completely irrational and anachronistic to believe in *manifestly supernatural revelation.* Now, objection to the supernatural is no modern phenomenon. Even at the time of the NT we find scepticism, even

on the part of those who ostensibly believed in God. For instance, Luke the historian, at the beginning of his Gospel, records the reaction of Zechariah – a priest, no less – who believed in God and yet refused, on the basis of his understanding of how nature works, to believe a divine message that he and his wife would have a child when they were well past child-bearing age (Luke 1:5–23).

However, it is not irrational to believe in the biblical accounts of the supernatural, and many scientists, myself included, are neither embarrassed nor ashamed to say so publicly. In fact, Zechariah's attitude betrayed a common lamentable failure to understand either science or the supernatural.[22] The unparalleled message of Daniel and Revelation – for it is the same message – has buoyed up the hopes of millions of people for centuries. I shall argue that its power lies in the fact that it satisfies the usual criteria for truth in that it is coherent and also corresponds to our experience of reality.[23] That should not surprise us, since it is nothing less than a direct message from the one true eternal God, Creator and Upholder of the universe, and from his Son, Jesus Christ, the Son of Man, who did not only claim to *say* the truth but also, far beyond that, claimed to *be* the truth (John 14:6). Ultimate truth is a person with whom we can have a living and loving relationship, not merely a collection of facts. We should constantly bear this in mind since, above all, Revelation reveals that person. Of course, it does other important things as well. For example, it has had considerable influence in cultural history, inspiring great literary works such as Milton's *Paradise Lost* and Bunyan's *Holy War*, as well as powerful artistic and musical creations, including Michelangelo's *Last Judgement* and Handel's *Messiah*.

Admittedly, Revelation is, to a certain extent, an enigmatic book. On the one hand, it contains the most wonderful promises for believers in Christ. On the other, it details God's judgements on unrepentant humanity. And judgement tends to be a countercultural topic, particularly in the secular world. Many even feel that it is anti-Christian. Yet, rather paradoxically, most people want law and order. The thought of anarchy scares them. They believe in having a police

force and a judiciary that brings criminals to book and punishes them for their crimes. The problem is that, deep down, most of us know that we are not as good as we pretend to be or would like to imagine. We have thought and done things of which we are ashamed, so that the very mention of God makes even atheists and agnostics think of disturbing ideas such as accountability and judgement. What, for instance, might God, if he exists, have to say to me?

What also makes Revelation somewhat daunting to many people is that it is full of strange, even bizarre imagery and symbolism, depicting the most sinister of beings and the most fearful of judgements: the warring horsemen of the apocalypse; a swarm of terrifying locusts with human faces, lion's teeth and iron scales; horrific animals with multiple heads and horns that wreak vengeance on the earth and enslave its people; the colossal battle of Armageddon; the return of Christ; the final judgement; the world to come, and much else.

Do we really have to take this kind of thing seriously? Surely, these images are the kind of stuff of ancient myths and legends and have no counterpart in reality? It would be a mistake to think that way. Certainly, there are echoes of the ancient past. However, etymology can be misleading. For instance, when we have our *cereal* for breakfast, we rarely think that the word is derived from Ceres, the Roman goddess of agriculture and grain. Most chemists using ammonia are unaware that its name derives from the Ammonians, who were worshippers of the Egyptian god Amun (or Amon) and used ammonium chloride (NH_4Cl) in some of their rites. Cereals and ammonia are very real entities, even though the words have mythological roots. As we come to the book of Revelation – or any other book – we need to take into account that the meanings of words develop over time, so that their use is not necessarily determined by their origin.

It is also important to realise that imagery, symbolism, metaphor and other figures of speech in literature are designed not only to greatly enrich our imagination as we read but also to give us a

handle on an underlying reality. We use metaphor to do this in daily life all the time. For example, if I say that my heart is broken, I am using the metaphor of a damaged pumping mechanism in my body to express the fact that I am going through very real emotional anguish. Symbols not only help us to identify the reality to which they point; they also often serve to tell us more about it, as we shall see when we discuss the details.

Admittedly (again!), parts of the book of Revelation look surreal, even scary and off-putting, although one cannot help observing that many people, these days, gleefully engage with strange and violent creatures in virtual reality games and have little or no idea of what this exposure is doing to their minds. For instance, in the game *Gears of War*, designed by Epic Games for Xbox 360 in 2006, humanity is threatened by a locust horde, like the one in Exodus and Revelation chapter 9. In 2010, Vigil Games brought out a video game called *Darksiders*, which also uses some of the imagery of Revelation. How such games will prepare young minds and hearts for the future, compared with the book of Revelation, is another matter. The danger is that confining such creatures to cyberspace and virtual reality and playing games with them will inoculate people against ever coming to see that the images in Revelation stand for important realities that may well have to be understood in terms of the technologies we are creating in the contemporary world. In particular, Revelation has a great deal to say about the reality of God's ultimate judgement of evil because of, and not in spite of, his goodness and love for humanity.

Most people instinctively recognise the importance of justice and at least want the grosser evils and sins of human beings to be judged, so long as it does not disturb their own life too much. All of us have an inbuilt sense of fairness since we are moral beings made in the image of God.

The backbone of the book of Revelation consists of three sequences of judgements that are triggered, respectively, by seven opened seals, seven blown trumpets and seven poured-out bowls. These sequences lead up to the final judgement, which is followed by the dissolution of the present heavens and earth and the creation

of the new. They contrast dramatically with the singing and praise that breaks into the narrative at various points. Such interweaving of singing and judgement in one book raises the hardest question that all of us face: how can one sing with joy when evil is rampant? An OT psalm helps us to begin to think about this deeply existential issue:

> Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice;
> let the sea roar, and all that fills it;
> let the field exult, and everything in it!
> Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy
> before the LORD, for he comes,
> for he comes to judge the earth.
> He will judge the world in righteousness,
> and the peoples in his faithfulness.
> (Ps. 96:11–13)

The psalmist could encourage all creation to sing because there was hope of ultimate justice. The Lord was coming to judge the earth. Yet even genuine Christian believers can find this topic uncomfortable. For it signals a warning not only that their lifestyle is going to be disrupted but also that they are going to be held accountable before God. Hence, they often content themselves by pushing it off into the distance, and because it is out of sight, it is out of mind. The book of Revelation is designed to hurl a strong warning into that situation and shake all of us out of our complacency, so that we keep short accounts with God during our lifetime in order not to be ashamed when we stand before Christ. It is easy to forget that Jesus himself said: 'I tell you, on the day of judgement people will give account for every careless word they speak' (Matt. 12:36).

Others react against the idea of God coming to judge, since, in their view, it is incompatible with his love. However, true and genuine love demands judgement, does it not? A God who did not eventually judge the evil that destroys people's lives would not be a God of love. This is a moral universe, and it is to be noted that the

very first lie recorded in Scripture was an explicit denial of God's judgement. The serpent told the humans that God's commandment not to eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil was not to be taken seriously; the humans would not die if they ate it. They fell for the temptation, ate the fruit and died – in the sense that their relationship with God was broken and sin entered the world with all the consequences that we know only too well (see Gen. 3). Yet God graciously prepared a magnificent plan of rescue and salvation for them, as explained in the wonderful affirmation of his love for his human creation that we find in John 3.16: 'For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.'

However, some people fail to see that this very verse not only tells us of God's deep love but also contains the solemn warning that it is possible for a person to perish. Paul's magisterial explanation of the gospel in his letter to the Romans begins by pointing out that human beings need to be saved because they are in real danger of perishing: 'For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of [human beings] who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth' (Rom. 1:18). We should note that God's righteous anger is directed against the suppression of truth, which, as we pointed out earlier, has become a major issue in our relativist, postmodern culture. Paul spells out the consequences of such behaviour:

> We know that the judgement of God rightly falls on those who practise such things. Do you suppose, O man – you who judge those who practise such things and yet do them yourself – that you will escape the judgement of God? Or do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance? But because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgement will be revealed. He will render to each one according to his works.
> (Rom. 2:2–6)

As I write such things I am very conscious of the danger of sounding moralistic as if there were no implications of this for me to fear. The book of Revelation will unpack in detail what God's judgement means against the background of God's love for us in Christ, which alone can save us from the wrath of God. For God combines love and righteousness – a feat humans find it almost impossible to achieve, but one that we see in Christ in the way he dealt so sensitively with the broken and distressed, and in the way he welcomed children. We can therefore trust him in his judgements, which are likely to be different from ours.

Others react to judgement with fear and a deep-seated desire to escape it somehow. That fear has in the past been exacerbated and even exploited by highly speculative interpretations of Revelation involving dogmatic statements about contemporary geopolitical scenarios in the Middle East. Such material has been widely disseminated in book form and in many dramatic films, particularly in the USA.

I am personally grateful that I was inoculated against extreme views at an early age by learning that this kind of speculation had been going on for centuries, and that many predictions and identifications made by previous interpreters had turned out to be wrong. For instance, the beast of Revelation 13 has been interpreted as representing a whole succession of kings, emperors and popes, Hitler and Mussolini during the Second World War, the Soviet leaders during the Cold War, several US presidents, and so on. In consequence, teachers promoting such ideas were discredited when their predictions failed. One unfortunate result was a backlash against even attempting to understand Revelation, so that many church congregations were deprived of any exposure to it. The net result was that the book was all but abandoned to the lunatic fringe.

However, Revelation promises to do two things: fill our hearts with praise to God, and simultaneously prepare us for God's inevitable cataclysmic intervention in this world to judge evil righteously at the return of Christ. It will challenge us to think hard about what we are really living for. It will also give us a way of coping with the ongoing problems of evil, pain and death by

revealing how God will finally deal with these issues, and so give us a credible hope of ultimate victory.

A book on Revelation by a mathematician?

Judging from historical precedent, you may well think it rather foolhardy for a mathematician like me to attempt to write about the biblical book of Revelation, since the track record of members of my profession in that area has not been particularly impressive. Take, for instance, the Scottish mathematician John Napier (1550–1617), nicknamed Marvellous Merchiston,[24] who gave us logarithms and made common the use of the decimal point. In January 1594 he addressed a letter to King James VI containing the dedication to him of his *Plaine Discovery of the Whole Revelation of Saint John*, a book that Napier regarded as his most important contribution. It was a commentary on the book of Revelation in which he risked dating the end of the world in either 1688 or 1700. It is reported that book sales dropped off drastically after 1700!

Long before Napier, Augustine (AD 354–450) warned against mathematicians, placing them among those who utter 'empty prophecies'. Augustine was not a mathematician, but Sir Isaac Newton (1643–1727) was, perhaps the most famous of all. It is well known that he spent a great deal of time trying to unravel biblical prophecies. In his posthumous *Observations upon the Prophecies of Daniel, and the Apocalypse of St. John* (1773), Newton expressed his belief, rather more cautious than that of Napier, that biblical prophecy would not be understood 'until the time of the end', and that even then, 'none of the wicked shall understand'. He held that, as he put it, 'the last age, the age of opening these things, be now approaching', and he opined that 'the general preaching of the Gospel be approaching' and also that 'the Gospel must first be preached in all nations before the great tribulation, and end of the world'.

I hasten to say that I am not writing for mathematicians but rather for any thoughtful reader interested in the big questions that

life throws at us – world-view questions such as those asked by the philosopher Immanuel Kant: What can I know? What can I hope for? What must I do? We could add to these a further three: What is the nature of ultimate reality? Is there a God and, if so, can he be known? What is the best narrative framework in which our lives can fit and flourish? These are the questions that all of us face, whether or not we are mathematicians and whether or not we believe in God. It has not escaped my attention that none of the disciples was a mathematician!

I would like, however, to mention one or two things that I have learned from my study of mathematics and science. First, the credibility of a theory depends on its ability to account for all the available data. This common-sense principle has been of great value to me and many others in studying Scripture. It has often been justifiably said that the Bible does not purport to be a textbook of science. However, parts of Scripture talk about the same universe that is also the concern of science. I have found that not only the methods but also the results of science have helped me to get to grips with the early chapters of Genesis, as well as giving me deeper insight into phenomena described in Scripture in connection with the biblical miracles. If, then, science can help us to understand the scriptures that relate to the past, is there any a priori reason why it could not help with biblical texts about the future? Robert E. D. Clark, a chemist, in his book on Revelation entitled *Tomorrow's World*, complained that most commentaries on Revelation ignored technology. He regarded that as a mistake:

> if as Christians we are right in believing that God created the world . . . he must have known from the beginning what technological and scientific advances were possible to man who is also his creation. What sense can there be, then, in interpreting this book – if indeed we take it seriously at all – without reference to technology? Of course, John, the author, knew nothing of all this, but if the book is what it purports to be – a revelation by Jesus Christ – it is difficult to believe that it contains no reference to such matters.[25]

This seems a sensible and balanced view, and it accounts for the subtitle of this book: *Understanding Revelation in an age of intelligent machines*. For instance, I have found Revelation to be highly relevant to thinking and writing about artificial intelligence and the future of humanity with special reference to transhumanism.[26]

More generally, reading Clark's books in my late teens gave me an invaluable initial understanding of the relationship of science to theology. I got to know Clark personally at Cambridge during my student days, and I still think that his perspective is important enough to be brought into the picture – in a judicious manner, of course, since some of what he wrote is inevitably rather dated, as will also be the case with some of *this* book, even before it appears in print.

I make no claim to be a professional theologian but write as someone who has loved Scripture for many years and wishes not only to learn as much as he can about God but also to get to know him better through his Word – both the living Word: the Lord Jesus, and the written word: the Scriptures. It will, however, rapidly become obvious that I owe a great debt to the experts, since I have long since learned that, if you wish to see further, then you need to choose tall shoulders to stand on. I shall frequently reference such authors for the kind of information that they alone can supply. Like G. K. Chesterton I take courage from the assertion of H. G. Wells that the amateur has the 'reasonable right . . . to do what he can with the facts which the specialists provide'.[27]

Over thirty years ago, I spent a number of weeks in intensive study of Revelation with the late Professor David Gooding, Member of the Royal Irish Academy, a lifelong friend, mentor, colleague and co-author. He was professor of Ancient Greek and Latin at Queens University Belfast, as well as a world authority on the Greek Septuagint version of the OT. Based on his study of such literature, he developed certain principles for understanding biblical texts that many people, including myself, have found of immense practical help. For instance, he memorably said that the more time spent on

seeing what a text actually said, the easier it was to see what it meant and how it applied to reality, both in its original setting and today. In that connection, he emphasised the importance of grasping narrative thought flow and structure, and their contribution to meaning.[28]

Gooding introduced me to his approach in 1963 when I was a second-year mathematics undergraduate at Cambridge, where he was spending a sabbatical researching at the Tyndale Library. His logical, rigorous, text-based, literary approach appealed to my mathematical instincts, and his use of 'disciplined imagination' to my Irish storyteller heritage. I have found this combination to be of inestimable value over the past sixty years and will therefore try to preserve something of his legacy by demonstrating in this book how it worked for me.

However, before I attempt to do so, it is important to say that Gooding made no claim, and nor do I, that this is the only way to approach a book of Scripture. If you have found a way that works for you, stick with it. In any case, I have learned a great deal from exposure to different perspectives on the structure of the book of Revelation. I wish simply to share with my readers what has helped me to mine the riches of Scripture in the hope of stimulating them to do the same. This means that my treatment may be somewhat uneven. I shall look at the first chapters of the book in considerable detail as they introduce so many of its major themes. Thereafter, I shall largely content myself with the broad themes of thought flow and the structure that carries it, trusting that this will provide enough of a basis for readers' own study. I say 'largely' because there will be times when more detail is called for – for instance when controversial issues come up and/or when additional background information is necessary.

As a biblical reference text, I shall use the excellent *Greek-English New Testament* produced by Tyndale House in Cambridge, UK, which presents on facing pages the English Standard Version (ESV) with an authoritative new Greek translation. Most readers will know that, in contrast with other literature, the chapter and verse divisions in the

Bible are not the work of the original authors but were added for the reader's convenience long after the originals were composed. The first English Bible to have both chapter and verse divisions was the Geneva Bible of 1560.

Biblical references will be by book, chapter and verse, except for the book of Revelation, where we shall simply give chapter and verse numbers. I shall reproduce many quotations in full, rather than simply giving the reference. The reason for doing so is to encourage immersion in the biblical text, especially if a passage comes from the OT and may be somewhat less familiar than those in the NT. The more we read – slowly, meditatively and, where possible, aloud – the more we shall gain from our study.

I have consulted commentaries from a wide spectrum of perspectives in order to be as fair as I can, and I encourage my readers to do the same, depending on their level of interest in the book of Revelation. I realise of course that, like everyone else, I have my prejudices. I only hope that some of them are reasonably well grounded.

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Introduction

What kind of book is Revelation?

Most commentaries on Revelation start with a lengthy introduction that covers topics such as authorship, date of composition, setting, genre, purpose, structure, interpretation and theology. As I am writing for the general interested reader, rather than the specialist, I shall leave a great deal of the technical detail to the experts and will often content myself with brief explanations and comments, including appropriate references to my sources.

As for literary structure, the book itself informs us that it falls into two segments, as explained to its author, John, in 1:19: 'Write therefore the things that you have seen, those that are and those that are to take place after this.' The two segments are as follows.

1 The things that are. The first three chapters contain a vision of Christ walking among lampstands that are said to represent seven churches in Asia Minor at the time of writing. John is instructed to write pastoral letters to each of these churches, giving them encouragement and criticism, as appropriate.

2 The things that are to take place after this. The rest of the book concerns future events, although there are occasional flashbacks to give context. One prominent structural feature in the main body of the book is three series of seven judgements in the form of seals, trumpets and bowls. Each series arguably leads up to the great day of God's wrath, the coming of Christ and the setting up of God's kingdom on earth, which introduces the final part of the book. The book then describes a last-ditch human rebellion against God, after which the heavens and the earth pass away, and the final judgement sits. We then see the new heavens and the new earth, with the city of God, the new Jerusalem, descending from the former to the latter. The ages to come have dawned.

However, it is important to realise from the outset that the fact that much of the book concerns the future does not make it irrelevant for the present. The contrary is true – for the simple reason that the whole book was intended to be read, first of all, by each of the seven contemporary churches to which it was initially sent, and then, of course, by extension, by all subsequent churches. I stress this, because it is easy to get the impression that each church received its own letter that applied to it alone, and then the rest of the book is for future generations. Not so. It might be better to say that the whole book is a letter for everyone, containing brief special messages for seven individual churches that, nevertheless, have wide applicability. What Revelation says about the future gives us deeper, large-scale teaching that will help us flourish as Christians and be more effective witnesses for Christ.

The opening self-description of the book makes far-reaching claims as to its status:

> The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants the things that must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, who bore witness to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw. Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written in it, for the time is near.
> (Rev. 1:1–3)

The book states what it is before it informs us about its human author. However, it will help us to have some familiarity with the author before we examine the concept of revelation. He identifies himself as John, a servant (Greek: *doulos* = slave) of God. At the time of writing, he was living in exile on Patmos, a small Aegean island measuring 13 square miles (34 sq. km) at the northern end of Greece's Dodecanese island group. It lies about 30 miles from the coast of Turkey, 60 miles from the site of Ephesus, and 90 miles south-east of Smyrna, modern-day Izmir.[1]

There has been a great deal of scholarly discussion as to the precise identity of John, the human author of the book.[2] In the second century, Irenaeus (AD 130–202) ascribed the work to 'John, the disciple of the Lord', saying that the book was written 'no long time ago, but almost in our own day, towards the end of Domitian's reign'.[3] This view, supported by other early patristic writers, was first questioned at the end of the second century and the beginning of the third by theologians from a Greek cultural background living in Alexandria, such as Dionysius. Some even thought that Revelation was written by the gnostic Cerinthus, traditionally regarded as a contemporary and an enemy of John. As evidence, Dionysius pointed to linguistic differences in vocabulary, grammar and style between the Gospel of John and Revelation; for instance, the Greek words used for 'lamb' in John and Revelation are different.[4] However, the terms used to describe Christ – Word, Lamb and Son of Man – are common to both the Gospel and Revelation. The Greek term *logos* (= word) is unique to these two books. That consideration carries weight for me, especially when we find John saying that he 'bore witness to the word of God' (1:2). For no one did this more clearly than the John who wrote the fourth Gospel, and the letter 1 John.

In any case, linguistic differences are not an insuperable objection to common authorship, since a single author can write in different linguistic styles according to subject matter. For example, a book written by me about science is different in genre from a book like this one on Scripture, and they will each be very different from a letter to my wife or a letter to my electricity supplier.

Furthermore, Dionysius's rejection of common authorship may also spring from his antipathy to the notion of a future 1,000-year reign of Christ (millennium) as described in Revelation 20, since Dionysius imagined that John the apostle would not have believed in such a thing and therefore would not have written about it. A rather shaky argument – especially in light of the fact, as we shall later see, that two earlier writers, Justin Martyr and Irenaeus, interpreted Christ's future reign as literal.

Eusebius[5] in his *Ecclesiastical Histories* tells us a little more about John's life after his exile: 'In Asia, moreover, there still remained alive the one whom Jesus loved, apostle and evangelist alike, John, who had directed the churches there since his return from exile on the island, following Domitian's death.'[6] That he survived so long is proved by the evidence of two witnesses who could hardly be doubted, ambassadors as they were of the orthodoxy of the Church: Irenaeus and Clement of Alexandria. In book 2 of his work titled *Against Heresies*, Irenaeus writes: 'All the clergy who in Asia came in contact with John, the Lord's disciple, testify that John taught the truth to them; for he remained with them till Trajan's time.'[7] The church at Ephesus was founded by Paul, and John remained there till Trajan's time; so it is a true witness of what the apostles taught.

It is therefore not surprising that Ephesus is first on the list of recipients of the letters – a circumstance to which we shall later refer.

Authorship by the apostle John, to which I and many others hold, is further supported by the existence of themes common to his Gospel and to Revelation, such as Jesus as the Word of God and the Lamb, already mentioned, and a strong emphasis on light and darkness. It should be noted, however, that there are heavyweight scholars on both sides of this issue. I would simply make the obvious point that, since the Scriptures are all inspired by the same God, whether or not the authors of both books are identical, we would surely expect common themes not only between the two but also with the rest of Scripture. I shall leave interested readers to pursue the extensive literature on this subject.

John wrote in Greek, which was then the main language of Asia Minor, inherited from the time of the earlier Greek Empire. The Romans did not try to impose Latin, although many educated people, the elite, and especially the military, spoke it throughout the empire. Official documents, such as birth certificates, had to be written in Latin. Many bilingual inscriptions of that era have been unearthed by archaeologists. It has been suggested that John's

Greek was partially Semitised,[8] so that he wrote Revelation in what was his second language, rather than in his mother tongue, Aramaic.

John describes his work as his witness 'to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw' (1:2). He repeats the first part of this phrase in 1:9 to explain why he was on Patmos in the first place. He had been exiled to the island because of his witness to Christ. The words 'witness' and 'testimony' are directly related to the Greek term from which we get the English word 'martyr' – a person who has paid the ultimate price for witnessing to Christ. There is irony here. John had clearly been stirring up opposition with his teaching, so they, whoever they were, had isolated him on an island to silence him and stop his influence. Yet, while in that isolated place, he received a unique supernatural revelation of Christ that has echoed around the world for centuries in a magnificent demonstration of the fact that 'the word of God is not bound' (2 Tim. 2:9). The message that John's persecutors didn't want to hear needs to be circulated more than ever in our politically correct 'cancel culture', where every effort is made to stifle Christian public witness in the interests of a dominant secular mindset. Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor points out that this secularism has had three effects on our societies, particularly in the West.[9] First, it has pushed the religious world view in general, and Christianity in particular, either to the margins or completely out of the public space; second, it has pressured people to internalise their religion, so that it becomes more a matter of feeling than of doctrine; and third, it has created a world in which religious conviction is only one option among many, instead of being the default. These developments leave the field clear on the one hand for any and every religion, both ancient and modern, and on the other hand for a dominant secular scientism that claims that the universe is a self-explanatory closed system of cause and effect. The book of Revelation challenges these views head on in saying that there is a world other than this one from whence supernatural revelation can and did come.

C. S. Lewis has helped large numbers of people to see this from an early age. In his wonderful book *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, which enthralled many of us as children, he weaves a marvellous tale about a door leading from earth into another world, Narnia. The door was first discovered by a little girl, Lucy Pevensey, in the back of a magic wardrobe in the house of the eccentric Professor Kirke, with whom she and her siblings have been billeted during the Second World War. One memorable scene in the book is the appalled reaction of the white witch when she is told by Lucy's brother Edmund that there is a door from the 'outside' into what she thinks of as her world. She is terrified because she thinks that her world is all that exists.

And that is the key world-view question that all of us face: is this world the sum total of reality, or is there an 'outside', another world that transcends it? C. S. Lewis answered the question by saying that 'if we find ourselves with a desire that nothing in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that we were made for another world'.[10] Revelation, a book geared to stimulate the imagination, says that Lewis got it right. We were made for another world, a world just as real as ours, if not more real. In addition, there is a door into it from this world. And God himself, whose home that world is, invites us not to be afraid but to come to the door, have a look in – and eventually enter.

Lewis brilliantly expressed this thought in one of his most famous sermons, 'The Weight of Glory', which he preached at the Church of St Mary the Virgin in Oxford.[11]

What is revelation?

'The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants the things that must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John' (1:1).

As noted above, the very first thing John does in his book, even before introducing himself, is to state its contents. The first word of the text, in its original Greek language, is *apokalypsis* – the source of

our English word 'apocalypse'. This term has come to denote a major catastrophic event, and it is true that the book depicts great disasters that have given us concepts such as Armageddon and the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse. The derived word 'apocalyptic' denotes a genre of literature depicting end-of-the-world scenarios that are often filled with fantastical, colourful imagery of wild things of different kinds involved in various events, including great battles between good and evil. There are other, non-canonical apocalyptic writings that appeared among the Jews between 200 BC and AD 100, for example *The Book of Enoch*, *The Assumption of Moses*, and the *Apocalypse of Ezra* and *Apocalypse of Baruch*.

Thomas Schreiner gives the following informal definition:

> Apocalypse is a supernatural unveiling of what is about to take place. A divine disclosure is given, usually by angels to some prominent person, in which God promises to intervene in human history, destroy evil, and bring in his kingdom.[12]

The biblical apocalypse was given to help people through times of trial and persecution by offering the hope of ultimate triumph.

Revelation is not a conventional apocalypse in that:

1. the language is much more restrained;
2. the author is named (other apocalypses are pseudonymous, taking the name of some great person from history, such as Ezra);
3. the book claims to be a prophecy of the risen Christ.

Etymologically, the Greek word *apokalypsis* is formed from *apo* (= away from) and *kalyptein* (= to cover), and means an uncovering, unveiling, disclosure or revelation, usually of something hitherto obscure or hidden. Both the source and the subject of disclosure is Jesus Christ – a person. Matthew records Christ's key statement about the nature of revelation:

> At that time Jesus declared, 'I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. Come to me, all who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.'
> (Matt. 11:25–30)

Luke also records this statement but with a slight difference of emphasis in connection with the knowledge that comes about through revelation: 'No one knows who the Son is except the Father, or who the Father is except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him' (Luke 10:22). In Matthew it is knowing the Father and the Son, and in Luke it is knowing who the Son and Father are. Combining the two, the idea seems to be that both objective and subjective, personal, knowledge of the Father is conveyed by such revelation. An example of the former is Jesus' response to Peter's famous confession of him as the Son of God: 'Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven' (Matt. 16:17). Paul describes his conversion in terms of revelation, saying that the God who graciously called him 'was pleased to reveal his Son to [or: in] me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles' (Gal. 1:16).

Hence, revelation delivers knowledge from and about another, non-material realm. Ironically, even scientific study of the human brain seems to confirm that such a realm exists. At least this is the view of neuroscientist Iain McGilchrist as presented in his book *The Matter with Things: Our brains, our delusions, and the unmaking of the world*, published in 2021.[13] It is a massive, two-volume work that develops the thesis formulated in his earlier book, *The Master*

and His Emissary,[14] that, although the two brain hemispheres are both involved in most brain activity, there are certain crucial differences between them that have profound consequences for the way we perceive reality. He argues that we have become dominated by our left hemispheres with the result that we have been persuaded that the materialistic, mechanistic, reductionist, scientistic, manipulative approach gives us the whole picture of reality, whereas it has blinded us to the integrative, holistic and more intelligent meaning-yielding perspective of the right hemisphere. He adduces evidence to show that the right cerebral hemisphere makes the main contribution not only to emotional and social intelligence but also to ordinary intelligence, or cognitive power – that is, to apprehension and not only to comprehension. The main force of his work is that there really is something more. We must, in his view, at least make space for God and the sacred. The book of Revelation will fill that space.

McGilchrist's main idea was summed up in a memorable phrase by the late Chief Rabbi of the UK, Lord Jonathan Sacks: 'Science takes things apart to see how they work. Religion puts things together to see what they mean. Without going into neuro-scientific detail, the first is a predominantly left-brain activity, the second is associated with the right hemisphere.'[15] In fact, there is no real need to go into the neuroscientific detail to see the sense in Sacks's differentiation between science and religion. There is overwhelming supporting evidence from many other rational disciplines – literature, philosophy, history, theology, as well as human intuition. The book of Revelation is a weighty part of that evidence.

If McGilchrist is right with his neuroscience, the drawback of relying only on the left hemisphere should be obvious. But there is also a drawback in relying only on the right hemisphere, as that can lead to, among other things, a rejection of rigorous logical analysis and ultimately to an extreme *apophatic* view, or *via negativa*, that says we can really know nothing about God. In other words, if we particularise and say, God is this or that, then we must be wrong, since God eludes us at every turn. This view, common in Eastern

Orthodox thinking (but not only there), certainly has something going for it, since it is all too easy for us to put God in a box of our own making and lose a sense of humble wonder at his transcendence. We need to be modest about what we claim to know. Nevertheless, the biblical claim is that God has revealed himself, so there is nothing arrogant or immodest in believing what God has revealed. It would be immodest and arrogant to reject it.

McGilchrist believes that 'despite our always contributing to the reality we experience, there is *something* apart from ourselves to which we *can* be true – that reality is not purely *made up by the brain*. There is a relationship there – something to be *true to*.'[16] That insight from neuroscience is pointing us in the right direction since, not only is there *something* to be true to, but also there is *Someone* to be true to, and that Someone can be known. For Scripture tells us that 'anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him' (Matt. 11:27) can know the Father – and that, according to 1:1, includes the vast number of his servants. In his first letter, John has a great deal to say about knowing and knowledge. For example:

> By this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments. Whoever says 'I know him' but does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him, but whoever keeps his word, in him truly the love of God is perfected. By this we may know that we are in him.
> (1 John 2:3–5)

A little later in the same chapter, John also tells us that one of the reasons he wrote the letter is because his recipients, both old and young, know the Father (1 John 2:13–14). And finally, to those believers who may be a bit insecure he says: 'I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God that you may know that you have eternal life' (1 John 5:13). Hence, to deny the possibility of knowing God, that we are in him and that we have eternal life, is not humility but arrogance, because it comes dangerously close to saying that John the apostle is not telling us the truth.

What mediates revelation?

The book of Revelation comprises around 10,000 words. God communicates through words. To be more accurate, God communicates through the person of his Son, the Word, and part of that communication consists of the words that he speaks. Jesus himself explained the process of transmission: 'For I have given them the words that you gave me, and they have received them and have come to know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me' (John 17:8). Note the plural – 'words' – implying that the inspiration of God applies not only to the general sense conveyed by the words but also to the words themselves.

Research in psychology has shown, and we would be wise to take it on board, that, in general, words account for only 7% of how we communicate, our body language accounts for 55% and voice tone 30%. All of these aspects are normally relevant to the process of getting to know a person – a mutual self-revelation, we might say. However, that should not be taken to mean that the book of Revelation is limited in its capacity to help us get to know God, Father and Son, because it is a collection of words. The reason is that these particular words begin by describing a vision of an exalted person and describe aspects of his body and the sound of his voice in such a way as to communicate him as a person in a comprehensive way to our senses via our imagination and intuition. The same is true for the rest of the book to differing degrees. In other words, God enabled John to help us see and hear what he saw and heard so that we might grasp it at a deeper level and respond accordingly.

John also tells us here that another objective of the book is to show to the servants of Christ what 'must soon take place' (1:1). That presumes that such servants will be able to understand it, rather than be confused by it, which would in turn imply that a plain, straightforward interpretation should be preferred to a complex, enigmatic and confusing one. The chain of transmission of the revelation is made evident: God–Jesus–an angel–John. It is an openly and unashamedly supernatural chain of transmission with

openly and unashamedly supernatural content; it is a revelation of the future.

Putting this another way, the revelation of Jesus Christ is not only a *book* that discloses him as a person; it is also an *event* that demands a response. The apostle Peter captures this idea when he expresses the hope that his readers' faith may be 'found to result in praise and glory and honour at the revelation of Jesus Christ' (1 Pet. 1:7). He goes on to encourage them to set their 'hope fully on the grace that will be brought to [them] at the revelation of Jesus Christ' (1 Pet. 1:13). Furthermore, the future revelation of Christ is an event staged by God himself, as is plain from Paul's instruction to Timothy:

> to keep the commandment unstained and free from reproach until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ, which he will display at the proper time – he who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone has immortality, who dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see.
> (1 Tim. 6:14–16)

The Greek word translated 'display' here is translated 'show' in Revelation 1:1. This means that the verse from 1 Timothy quoted above is saying that the 'blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings', is the one who will stage the event.

Hence, the book of Revelation not only *tells* us about Jesus Christ; it also *shows* us the meaning of his future *apocalypse*, that is, his return in glory. Paul speaks of believers waiting for 'the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ' (1 Cor. 1:7). He also talks of the time 'when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God' (2 Thess. 1:7–8). The Greek word translated 'revealed' is actually a noun, *apokalypsis*, not a verb. The phrase is literally: 'in the apocalypse [revelation] of the Lord Jesus from heaven'. Paul does not mean in the *book* of Revelation but in the *event* of revelation. Above all, then, this book is going to present an event to us, a spectacular visual depiction to fire our imaginations to long for the

arrival of that final pivotal event of this earth's history that will herald the dawning of a new age.

Hence the emphasis on the visual – the things that John saw. Researchers at the 3M Corporation say that the human brain processes visual input 60,000 times faster than text, so that visual impact tends to go much deeper than the reading of text.[17] This gives substance to the adage that one picture is worth a thousand words. One reason for the difference is that the elements of images are processed simultaneously, whereas text is processed sequentially and so takes longer. The symbolism of Revelation is designed to stimulate our imaginations, for Revelation is, of all books in the Bible, a book that is meant to be imagined.

The book also exemplifies more than one literary genre. Its prophetic–apocalyptic message is in the form of a lengthy letter sent to seven churches. More precisely, the book begins with seven short letters, each addressed to a different church but with clear instructions that every letter is to be read out to all of the churches. In addition, there is a repeated general invitation: 'He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches' (2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22). At the end of the book, the Lord Jesus speaks to John regarding the purpose of the book: 'I, Jesus, have sent my angel to testify to you about these things for the churches' (22:16). I make no apology for repeating the important fact that the whole book is intended for the seven churches and, by extension, for all Christians, everywhere and at all times.

Some people try to distinguish between *apocalyptic* and *prophetic* genres. Others point out that Revelation has features not found in other apocalyptic literature. For instance, as mentioned above, such literature is usually anonymous, whereas Revelation is not; it is also usually pessimistic about the present age but optimistic about the future, whereas Revelation sees some positive things in the present that are worthy of encouragement.

The prime aim of Revelation is to reveal, particularly to those of us who are already Christian believers, more about Christ than we have hitherto appreciated, so that we get to know him better and

have our faith in him confirmed. It will also give those of us who are exploring the Christian faith more information about its content. After all, it wouldn't be the wisest of strategies, would it, to reject Christianity without even listening to what it has to say?

And listening to what it had to say was how the first recipients of Revelation experienced it, since it was read to them out loud. John says: 'Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written in it, for the time is near' (1:3). It must have been a uniquely memorable experience for the congregations of the seven churches to listen to the first public reading of the final piece in the narrative that is God's written word. One can imagine that the reading may have involved a number of people taking different parts and even some attempt at role-playing because of the theatrical nature of the visions. In any case, as we study, it is always a good idea to read the text out loud, even in an empty room. More is apprehended, understood and retained that way. And as we read it, we are to think about how we shall *keep it* – that is, apply it to the way we live now.

Just here we meet a problem – at least the current generation meets a problem that arises from the recent technological revolution. People don't read much any more. It is important that we take on board the huge change that happened around 2010, which social psychologist Jonathan Haidt calls the 'great rewiring of childhood', for it completely changed the way in which young people engage with one another and separated this generation from all that came before it. Up to that time, social interaction was direct, immediate, natural fun, with all the senses involved. Young people chatted, played, pushed, fought, ran, climbed and generally enjoyed what my generation would call a 'normal' childhood. All that changed with the smartphone and social media, so that young people now spend upwards of six hours a day silently tapping their smartphones or other devices and interacting at a distance in a disembodied way. It was a move from the present, immediate and direct to being 'forever elsewhere' in the memorable phrase of Sherry Turkle, an expert on youth interaction with the internet. The great rewiring has proved disastrous in that it has deprived a generation of children

(Gen Z) of their childhood and led to a frightening increase in youth mental health problems around the world. These issues characterise what Haidt calls the 'anxious generation' – the title of his book,[18] which I highly recommend to those people wishing to engage with Gen Z. This circumstance is going to create another barrier between people and Scripture, and it will take Christian thinkers who have grown up with these new conditions to solve the problem of getting people to read Revelation – or indeed any other text.

We must now get back to that text.

A repeated emphasis on Christ's return

Revelation starts by focusing on the central theme of Christ's return to earth: the idea of *coming* occurs explicitly three times in the first chapter. In 1:4 there is an unusual description of God as the one 'who is and who was and who is to come'. This is repeated in 1:8. In between these two statements we find a description of *how* God will come: 'Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him' (1:7). This time the identity of the coming one is given in the preceding verse. It is he 'who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood' (1:6). God will come in Christ – a strong assertion of the deity of Jesus. It is he who will return. Similarly, at the end of the book, Jesus Christ himself says three times over: 'I am coming soon' (22:7, 12, 20). These six references to *coming*, three at the beginning and three at the end, serve as bookends that focus our attention on the book's key message: the coming of God in Jesus Christ in power and great glory.

There are other elements common to the first and last parts of the book: the description of God as the Alpha and Omega; God's transmitting of the message by sending his angel to show his servant(s); the inevitability and immediacy of the coming as that which 'must soon take place'; the command to write words in a book that is to be not only read but also kept; and the identity of John as 'the one who heard and saw these things'.

Keeping the prophecy: a fundamental principle of continued relevance

The book, therefore, claims to be an authoritative revelation from God via Christ, an angel and John. It shines a powerful light on Jesus Christ and his coming, doing it in such a way that those who read it will be led to *keep it*. That is, its message, although about the future, is meant to be applied in the present. Osborne says pithily: 'Apocalyptic is the present addressed through parallels with the future.'[19] *Keeping it* will mean embodying the impact of its visions and the transformative power of its teaching in terms of a Christlike life. For though the book has many things to say about the future, it also has relevance to all times, including the present. This key principle is laid down by Paul in his second letter to the Thessalonians, where he reminds the believers that, during his first visit to them, he had informed them about the future return of Christ in power and great glory. He had preached it not only as the main Christian hope but also as a message of immediate existential relevance to the Church. The passage is:

> Now concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to him, we ask you, brothers, not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed, either by a spirit or a spoken word, or a letter seeming to be from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come. Let no one deceive you in any way. For that day will not come, unless the rebellion comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction, who opposes and exalts himself against every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God. Do you not remember that when I was still with you I told you these things? And you know what is restraining him now so that he may be revealed in his time. For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work. Only he who now restrains it will do so until he is out of the way. And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will kill with

> the breath of his mouth and bring to nothing by the appearance of his coming.
> (2 Thess. 2:1–8)

Paul gives a number of other circumstantial details here as to the context of Christ's return. He speaks of the coming of a lawless one, a despotic leader who will appear on the world stage and proclaim himself to be God, yet who will be destroyed by the sheer power of Christ's appearing. We shall meet this end-time leader later in Revelation, where he is represented symbolically by one of the hideous monsters for which the book is famous. But why mention him now, since this Thessalonian text clearly refers to a time still future[20] to us? The reason, as Paul explains, is that 'the mystery of lawlessness is already at work' (2 Thess. 2:7). In other words, the ideology and social, cultural and political trends that would eventually lead up to the final opposition of the man of lawlessness to Christ were already endemic in the Roman Empire of the time – a clear reference to the imperial cult's practice of divinising emperors post-mortem. Paul was encouraging the Thessalonian believers to look at the present in the light of the future. That principle, sometimes called the 'telescope principle', is one of the keys to applying Revelation at any time in history. For example, in my book *2084 and the AI Revolution*,[21] I discuss the close parallels between some of the scenarios currently proposed for AI and the visions of Revelation 13.

However, the main intended application of the book to believers is succinctly captured in the apostle John's description of the Christian hope of Christ's appearing:

> Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure.
> (1 John 3:2–3)

Note precisely what is said here: it is not that a person who places their future hope in Christ *should* purify themselves; it is that they *do* purify themselves. In other words, professed hope of Christ's return is only genuine insofar as it actually has a moral and spiritual purifying effect on our lives; that is, we *keep* the prophecy by living it out.

It is obvious that we live *in* the present. Yet elementary logic tells us that we cannot live *for* the present. We live for the future. It is what we expect and believe about the future, even if it is only the short-term future, that influences what we do now. For instance, if I wish to eat this evening, I have to obtain and prepare the food now; if you are doing an exam next week, I would very much hope, as a university professor, that it is affecting what you are doing now to prepare for it; if you are going on holiday soon, you will be preparing for it. And, in sad, extreme cases, it is when some people have nothing to live for that they commit suicide. We humans need to have a future to live for. This brings to mind the famous words of atheist Friedrich Nietzsche: 'He who has a why to live for can bear almost any how.'[22] Revelation defines that 'why'.

Sadly, Christianity often appears to the public as so insipid and watered down that the vibrant hope of Christ's return, which should be its heartbeat, has been all but lost – thoughtlessly relegated to the lunatic fringe of naive prophecy-mongers and dreamers, rather than being put forward as a credible, dynamic and robust transformer of moral and spiritual character. C. S. Lewis's warning not to dilute Christianity by leaving out the supernatural dimension goes unheeded.[23] However, I propose to heed it by enlisting not only Scripture but also science, philosophy, history and reason to argue as coherently as I can.

The key world-view question: is this world all there is?

The claim that Revelation is above all a supernatural revelation from the one true God is diametrically opposed to the polytheism of the

Roman Empire at the time John was writing and also, for very different reasons, to the atheistic, anti-supernatural world view that dominates today's deeply secular Western world and the academy in particular. Yet atheistic materialism–naturalism is beginning to crumble because it does not deliver a meaningful, coherent framework for life. I regularly meet people, including serious scientists and thinkers, who say that there must surely be something more than the bleak reductionism that says we are nothing but molecules in motion. As if viewing a Rembrandt as a mere collection of molecules of paint and canvas could capture its beauty!

Is reason opposed to revelation?

Someone will object: surely the very concept of revelation is opposed to reason? Many people now look to the 'rational approach of science' to gain knowledge of truth, not to ancient texts from a pre-scientific age which claim revelation. Initially, this sounds a very attractive idea – but it is seriously flawed. First, such scientism,[24] the idea that science is the only way to truth, often leads people to think that 'scientific' means the same as 'rational', that is, in accord with reason. However, scientism is false, and obviously so, for, as we mentioned just above, disciplines such as history, literature and philosophy are also rational disciplines. Reason has a far larger scope than the natural sciences; we use it in all areas of life every day.

An illustration will make clear that the natural sciences are limited. Suppose that my Aunt Matilda has baked a cake, and we submit it for analysis to a group of the world's top scientists. The biochemists will inform us about the structure of the proteins, fats and so on involved in its composition; the chemists, about the elements involved; the physicists will be able to analyse the cake in terms of fundamental particles; and the mathematicians will, no doubt, offer us a set of elegant equations to describe the behaviour of those particles. Now we know how the cake was made and what it is made of, but suppose we now ask the scientists why the cake was made?

The grin on Aunt Matilda's face shows that she knows the answer, for she made the cake. But it is surely self-evident that the best scientists in the world will not be able to tell us from their investigations why she made it. Even if we hook her up to the most sophisticated brain-analysing technology, we shall only know what is going on in her brain in terms of electrochemical impulses. We shall never know what is in her mind unless she reveals the answer. The brain story and the mind story are not the same.

The natural sciences can cope with questions about the nature and structure of the cake, but they cannot answer the 'why' question of purpose. Science has its limitations, as the best scientists recognise. For instance, Nobel laureate Sir Peter Medawar pointed out that

> the existence of a limit to science is very likely because of its inability to answer childlike elementary questions. I have in mind such questions as: How did everything begin? What are we all here for? What is the point of living?[25]

As well as that, it is obvious that when Aunt Matilda speaks and reveals to us why she made the cake, far from closing our reason down, we have to use it to evaluate what she says in order to see if it makes sense or not. Putting this another way, revelation involves reason, as does science. To set reason and revelation in opposition to each other is to fail to understand what they are and that they belong to different categories.

If we now scale up to the level of ultimate questions about the universe, the question that arises is this: is there someone who stands in the same relation to the universe as Aunt Matilda does to her cake? Is there someone who has spoken and revealed what the universe is all about? From beginning to end, the Bible claims that it is a revelation from God the Creator himself. We are invited to use our reason in order to understand what it says about who God is, how he acts and what he wishes to say to us. And now, as we proceed to do that together, I trust we shall see that the message of the book of Revelation satisfies the two main criteria for truth,

namely coherence and correspondence with reality, even though that message is no mere product of reason but involves a supernatural input. The natural sciences cannot preclude that.[26] Nor can they preclude that as we read the book, the one who is himself the truth may reveal himself to us personally.

A lesson from Daniel

The question of whether there is such a thing as supernatural revelation is raised in the biblical narrative itself – a fact that shows that it takes this issue seriously. Around 500 years before Revelation was written, the prophet Daniel records that the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar had a dream and asked his experts in astrology to interpret it. Very cleverly, when they pressed him, he refused point blank to tell them what he had dreamed. They were devastated and had to admit complete defeat:

> The Chaldeans answered the king and said, 'There is not a man on earth who can meet the king's demand, for no great and powerful king has asked such a thing of any magician or enchanter or Chaldean. The thing that the king asks is difficult, and no one can show it to the king except the gods, whose dwelling is not with flesh.'
> (Dan. 2:10–11)

Those experts at forecasting were helpless as they had no access beyond the present world. Although claiming to be in touch with the gods, they were philosophical materialists. Their gods were mere deifications of the forces of nature. God revealed the content of the king's dream to Daniel, and Daniel was summoned into the royal presence:

> Daniel answered the king and said, 'No wise men, enchanters, magicians, or astrologers can show to the king the mystery that the king has asked, but there is a God in heaven who reveals

> mysteries, and he has made known to King Nebuchadnezzar what will be in the latter days.'
> (Dan. 2:27–8)

Daniel then proceeded to prove the truth of this statement by telling Nebuchadnezzar both what he had dreamed and what it meant. It was an irrefutable demonstration that there is a God who reveals secrets – and its logic is still valid today.[27] Furthermore, the book of Revelation will pick up on the visions recorded in Daniel.

All of this combines to give us a way forward. On one hand, many of my readers will already be Christians. I would ask them to think about how the contents of Revelation appear not only to them but also to their non-Christian friends and acquaintances. That, if my experience is anything to go by, will help them to understand much more of the wonder of the book than if they just approach it as insiders. On the other hand, I would ask those of my readers (and I hope there are many) who are interested in exploring Christianity to suspend their judgement until they see whether or not it makes coherent sense. The final decision is, of course, up to them.

The God who is to come: Jesus' claim to fulfil Daniel's prophecy

Enough of preliminaries. Let us get back to a further key idea: the thoroughly supernatural claim implied by the greeting in the prologue of Revelation that not only *is* there a God but also that he is the God who *is to come*. Here we meet the first of many allusions to the OT in the book of Revelation that shape and enrich its message. The first reference to the notion of a coming God is in a Hebrew poem:

> Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice;
> let the sea roar, and all that fills it;
> let the field exult, and everything in it!
> Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy

before the LORD, for he comes,
for he comes to judge the earth.
He will judge the world in righteousness,
and the peoples in his faithfulness.
(Ps. 96:11–13)

Another psalm repeats the idea:

Let the rivers clap their hands;
let the hills sing for joy together
before the LORD, for he comes
to judge the earth.
He will judge the world with righteousness,
and the peoples with equity.
(Ps. 98:8–9)

These texts show that the coming of God is associated with the human longing for a judgement day, a final reckoning when God will righteously deal with all the evil and wrong that has ever been perpetrated. Hope will not be disappointed. The fact that judgement will come is a central theme in the biblical storyline. If we further ask *how* God will come, we find the answer in Daniel 7, a powerful vision of God as the Ancient of Days seated on his judgement throne. We then read:

I saw in the night visions,

and behold, with the clouds of heaven
there came one like a son of man,
and he came to the Ancient of Days
and was presented before him.
And to him was given dominion
and glory and a kingdom,
that all peoples, nations, and languages
should serve him;
his dominion is an everlasting dominion,

which shall not pass away,
and his kingdom one
that shall not be destroyed.
(Dan. 7:13–14)

This forms the background to 1:7: 'Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him. Even so. Amen.' In his trial before the then high priest, Caiphas, Jesus Christ claimed to be the 'one like a Son of Man' whom Daniel had seen in his vision. The Gospels record that Caiphas put Jesus on oath and asked him: 'Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?'

> And Jesus said, 'I am, and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming with the clouds of heaven.' And the high priest tore his garments and said, 'What further witnesses do we need? You have heard his blasphemy. What is your decision?' And they all condemned him as deserving death.[28] (Mark 14:61–4; see also Matt. 26:64)

The members of the court (the Jewish high court, known as the Sanhedrin) knew exactly what Jesus was referring to and they were infuriated at what they considered blasphemy – that he, a human being standing before them, could claim to be the exalted figure described by Daniel as seated at God's right hand in heaven. Therefore, for daring to make such a claim, they angrily condemned him to death and handed him over to be crucified by the Romans. It was a turning point in history.

What Jesus claimed publicly before the Sanhedrin, he had earlier said privately to his disciples. John reports that in his talk in the upper room in Jerusalem he said to them:

> Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if

> I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also.
> (John 14:1–3)

The emphases are very different. Before the Sanhedrin, Jesus said he would come in judgement; to the disciples he promised to come and take them to his Father's house to be with him. We find both emphases in Paul's letters. Paul describes in more detail the biblical hope that, throughout the centuries, has brought immense comfort to all believers in the face of evil, pain and death:

> We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord. Therefore encourage one another with these words.
> (1 Thess. 4:13–18)

Earlier in the same letter, he describes what Christian conversion involved for the citizens of Thessalonica as they responded to Paul's initial preaching of the gospel:

> For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.
> (1 Thess. 1:9–10)

The same things should characterise our conversion:

1 a turning in repentance from idols – things in which we trusted that are not God;
2 a turning to serve God with all our hearts and minds in the present;
3 a filling of our minds with an eager expectation of the future return of Christ as expressed at the end of Revelation (22:20): 'Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!'
4 an awareness that we human beings, all of us, are lost without Christ and will have to face the coming judgement.

And each of the chapters of that first letter to the Thessalonians ends with a reminder that Christ is returning.

Paul announced the coming day of God's judgement in unmistakable terms to the members of the Areopagus philosophical court in Athens. They, intelligent people though they were, were lost in hopeless polytheistic idolatry, as Paul courageously pointed out to them:

> Being then God's offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man. The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.
> (Acts 17:29–31)

Notice that Paul presents the resurrection as evidence of Jesus' identity *for everyone*, not just for believers. The resurrection is not a *product* of Christian belief; it is the *foundation* of it. Everywhere the early apostles went, they made the physical resurrection of Jesus the lynchpin of their message. By it, all of Jesus' supernatural claims stood or fell, including, of course, the promise of his return.[29]

The book of Revelation is a prophecy. Its author, John, is the last in a long line of the Hebrew prophets. They were people whose ministry was to declare the word of God about the future and to apply that word to their immediate hearers. The book of Revelation is no different. It foretells the future coming of Christ and brings the implications of that coming to bear on the lives of its readers in order to bless, encourage and challenge them, as John explains: 'Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written in it, for the time is near' (1:3).

Jewish messianic expectation: restoring the kingdom to Israel?

The term 'Christ' is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew 'Messiah' (meaning 'Anointed One'), and the expectation that one day Messiah would come is a central theme of the OT. It identifies him with increasing precision as a descendant of both Abraham and David, who would be born in Bethlehem of a virgin. Isaiah, who prophesied during the reigns of several kings of Judah – Uzziah, Jothan, Ahaz and Hezekiah – roughly from 740 to 700 BC, wrote the words that inspired Handel's magnificent oratorio *The Messiah*:

For to us a child is born,
    to us a son is given;
and the government shall be upon his shoulder,
    and his name shall be called
Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God,
    Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
Of the increase of his government and of peace
    there will be no end,
on the throne of David and over his kingdom,
    to establish it and to uphold it
with justice and with righteousness
    from this time forth and for evermore.

> The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.
> (Isa. 9:6–7)

Jesus is that Messiah. Yet, against all the expectations of his disciples, he did not take over as ruler of the nation of Israel but was rejected by its religious leaders and crucified for his messianic claim. Then, to the utter surprise of his disciples, although he had told them repeatedly to expect it, he rose from the dead. Their despair was transformed into such joy and expectation of his immediate reign that they asked him: 'Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?' (Acts 1:6).

Note that their question was not: 'Are you going to restore the kingdom to Israel?' That was not an issue for them, since it was central to their biblically rooted messianic expectation that the kingdom would be restored one day, which they firmly believed. Their question had to do with the timing of what for them was a certainty. 'Are you going to do it now?' They had forgotten that not long since, they had put to him a very similar question. That time his answer was in the form of a parable:

> As they heard these things, he proceeded to tell a parable, because he was near to Jerusalem, and because they supposed that the kingdom of God was to appear immediately. He said therefore, 'A nobleman went into a far country to receive for himself a kingdom and then return.'
> (Luke 19:11–12)

Jesus, the nobleman in the parable, was on the point of going away. But he would return and set things in order. He had gone away by crucifixion and death, but God had raised him from the dead. Could that be his return? They wanted to know, so they asked him their previous question. Was this really it? Would he now take over power? This time Jesus gave a more comprehensive answer, and Luke the historian records the dramatic event that followed:

> He said to them, 'It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.' And when he had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, and said, 'Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.'
> (Acts 1:7–11)

The restoration would happen, but not yet. When it would happen had been fixed, but they were not going to be told the date. They were to get on with spreading the gospel in the power of the Holy Spirit, who would come to them at Pentecost.

What happened next showed unmistakably that Jesus would not be restoring the kingdom at that time. He left them. He ascended physically to the world from which he had come. This account was not a figment of Luke's imagination based on the assumption of a three-decker universe but rather a straightforward account of what the disciples actually saw. In fact, they saw two things.

First, Christ ascended, rising vertically from the earth to demonstrate that in that deeper sense he was the king – in just the same way as the ascent of King Charles III to the British throne in 2023 was simultaneously a physical movement and a symbol of his assumption of kingly authority. It is technically called a 'concretised metaphor'.[30]

Next, a cloud took Jesus out of their sight. I imagine that C. S. Lewis might have called it a 'junction between two worlds'. The key thing to grasp is the explanation of the ascension event that was given to the disciples as they watched: 'This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.' Hence, the ascension tells us a number of things. First, since Jesus ascended bodily into it, heaven is not only a reality;

it also has a physical dimension. It is not merely a state of mind, as some have suggested. That is confirmed by Paul who, years after the ascension, said of Christ: 'For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily' (Col. 2:9), where the word 'dwells' is in the present, not the past tense. That is, long after his ascension, Christ has a body – a physical body.[31] Second, the ascension forms a thought model to help us visualise Jesus' return. Since they saw him go with the clouds, literally and physically, he will similarly be seen returning literally and physically with the clouds to exercise judgement and rule on earth. This fits in precisely with the prophecy of that return made in Revelation 1:7: 'Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him. Even so. Amen.'

The ascension is offered by Luke as evidence for the return of Jesus Christ. A helpful analysis of that evidence is given by David Gooding.[32] The fact that the first disciples actually witnessed the ascension supports John's claim to have had additional supernatural revelation about that return.

The purpose of biblical prophecy

Christ returning soon – a mistaken prediction?

I can imagine that by this stage some of my readers may be querying the credibility of John's statement, at both the beginning and end of his book, that the events described in it will occur *soon*. Surely, it will be objected, this shows that the early apostles were mistaken; they expected the return of Christ in their lifetimes, and it just didn't happen. End of story. Of course, an even bigger problem for atheists is the very notion of Christ returning, whether sooner or later, in anything but a mythical and non-physical sense. For them, the existence of a supernatural dimension is ruled out a priori by their world view.

Some years ago, in a debate in Melbourne Town Hall, atheist ethicist and academic Peter Singer put it to me that Jesus himself was mistaken about his second coming. He argued his case from a statement that Jesus made to his disciples in a famous passage about discipleship:

> Then Jesus told his disciples, 'If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul? For the Son of Man is going to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay each person according to what he has done. Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.'
> (Matt. 16:24–8)

Jesus promises to return in glory to judge, and then comments that some of those who were standing listening to him would not taste death until they had seen the Son of Man coming in his kingdom. Singer's argument was very simple: they have all died long since, and Jesus has not yet appeared in glory. That, Singer concluded, completely discredited Jesus and meant that such stories are best regarded as pious myths.

However, Singer signally failed to understand what the passage goes on to tell us by way of explanation. Matthew relates that, immediately after making this statement, Jesus selected three of the men standing there – Peter, James and John – and took them up to the top of a high mountain where they saw him 'transfigured' (the original Greek term is one from which we derive the word 'metamorphosed') with his face shining like the sun in its glory. They also saw Moses and Elijah with him, even though those two had lived centuries earlier and at different epochs.

Before we side with Singer, we might be wise to ask how those who shared this experience understood it. Peter was one of them,

and much later, near the end of his life, he wrote about it to encourage his fellow Christians. At that stage, Peter knew he was soon to die as a martyr, as Jesus himself had told him so many years before (John 21:18–19). Yet, when Jesus had invited Peter to go with him up the mountain, he had told him that he would not taste death until he saw the Son of Man coming in his kingdom. Did Peter, who was no fool, see this as a contradiction? Not at all. He explains exactly how he understood the Transfiguration and scotches any idea that it was a myth; incidentally, myth is a vehicle of thought that Peter would have known from his culture better than most of us do from ours. He wrote:

> For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. For when he received honour and glory from God the Father, and the voice was borne to him by the Majestic Glory, 'This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased,' we ourselves heard this very voice borne from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain.
> (2 Pet. 1:16–18)

The significance of the Transfiguration for the return of Christ and our confidence in it

The Transfiguration of Christ is so important that we have four accounts of it.[33] Peter says that it revealed two things to him: the power of the Lord Jesus and his coming.

First, then, the power. Interestingly, Mark, who, it is thought, consulted Peter about the contents of his Gospel, reports Jesus as mentioning power several times in the context of the Transfiguration: 'Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the kingdom of God after it has come with power' (Mark 9:1). On the mountain, again only Mark says that Jesus' 'clothes became radiant, intensely white, as no one

on earth could [lit. had the power to] bleach them' (Mark 9:3). Finally, after they descended from the mountain, Jesus rebuked those who did not 'have the power' (lit.) to heal a spirit-possessed mute boy. The boy's father had said to Jesus, 'If you can do anything, have compassion,' to which Jesus responded: '"If you can!" All things are possible for one who believes' (Mark 9:22–3). More literally, this reads: '"If you have the power to!" All things are within the power of one who believes.' Also, the fact that Moses and Elijah appeared as contemporaries of Jesus and that God's authenticating voice was heard from heaven points to a supernatural power far beyond our comprehension.

Second, the coming. The Transfiguration was a *preview* of the return of Christ. It was not that event itself but bore sufficient resemblance to it that it could justifiably be understood as seeing the coming of Christ and the kingdom of God. For, through this experience, the three disciples discovered that there was another world *above* this one in which Jesus was the sun – the source of all light, energy and power. They saw in his shining clothes the evidence that his character was impeccable and that he was of heavenly origin. They saw Moses and Elijah with him and heard them discussing, as Luke tells us, 'his departure [lit. exodus], which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem' (Luke 9:31). The vision could only become a final reality after Jesus' unique exodus into that other world – through his crucifixion, resurrection and ascension.

How Scripture makes the coming of Christ real

Peter, aware that he was uniquely privileged to stand with Jesus on that mountain, and that his readers would not have the same experience, sensitively adds a statement that will help us understand the purpose of the book of Revelation:

> And we have something more sure, the prophetic word, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark

> place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts, knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.
> (2 Pet. 1:19–21)

Hence, the Transfiguration confirms the prophetic word of Scripture about the coming of Christ for all of us. It is like a lamp: if we allow its light to shine on us, even before the second advent of Christ actually occurs, we shall sense him as the morning star arising in our hearts. This is magnificent poetry to get across a profound reality, since it is a prime role of the word of God to do for us what the Transfiguration did for Peter, which was to make the eternal world and the coming of Christ real.

That tells us what the book of Revelation will do for us if we take it to heart and *keep* it. What a wonderful prospect to have eternity made convincingly real to us by the authentic voice of God! Let's read Revelation with expectant minds and hearts, praying that we may hear that voice for ourselves. After all, that will be the best confirmation that the message is true.

How does Scripture do that? We need first to understand, says Peter, 'that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation'. That is, the prophecies contained in Scripture are not generated by clever people in futuristic think-tanks making deductions from world events, cultural happenings or social trends. No: they are not human interpretations of the world at all but are of an entirely different supernatural category. They are nothing less than human beings speaking from God as they are borne along by the Holy Spirit. That, in fact, makes plain the difference between Nebuchadnezzar's advisers and Spirit-filled Daniel.

In his discourse in the upper room, Jesus explained to his disciples the supernatural way in which Scripture would be produced:

> I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine; therefore I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you.
> (John 16:12–15)

The book of Revelation is a major part of the fulfilment of that promise.

John says that there is a special blessing for those who read Revelation aloud, which would encourage us to make a habit of it as we proceed. Also, we should not forget that the people to whom John wrote were not as literate as people in general are today. In ancient societies, someone who could read (aloud) played a vital role in the community.

The meaning of the term 'coming'

Analysing Peter Singer's misinterpretation of Jesus' words regarding the Transfiguration has, I hope, helped us to see that prophecies about the future coming of Christ are meant to quicken expectation of it in our hearts and minds. For there are several ways in which the term 'coming' is used in Scripture:

1 It relates to the OT expectation of the coming of the Messiah. Many contemporary Jews still understand this literally. Others have adopted a metaphorical view, one version of which is that, if Israel were to keep the law for one day, that would mean Messiah had 'come'. The majority of Jews today do not recognise Jesus as the Messiah who has already come, although there is an increasing number of 'Messianic Jews' who, like the early disciples and Paul, confess Jesus as Lord. We have also seen that the ascension confirms what Jesus himself publicly said to the

Sanhedrin – that he would physically return as the judge of all the world in the clouds of heaven, just as he left.

2 Just before his trial, Jesus promised his disciples that he would come again and take them to himself (John 14:1–3). This was repeatedly confirmed by Paul (e.g. 1 Thess. 1:10; 4:13–18).

3 Jesus also promised his disciples another kind of coming: '"I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you . . . And he who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and manifest myself to him." Judas (not Iscariot) said to him, "Lord, how is it that you will manifest yourself to us, and not to the world?" Jesus answered him, "If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him"' (John 14:18, 21b–23).

This is obviously not Jesus' coming in power and great glory, but it is nevertheless real. It is a coming to manifest or reveal himself to us in order to make a genuine difference in our lives by the indwelling of God's Spirit in our hearts.

It has been well said that the genuineness of our expectation of 'coming' in sense 2 will be demonstrated by the reality of our experience of that coming in sense 3, which is also exemplified in Jesus' solemn warning to the church at Ephesus: 'Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent' (2:5). This clearly does not refer to the second coming of Christ to earth but is a temporal coming in judgement to close down a failing church. Sadly, this has happened many times throughout the course of church history and still does.

Now there is both scholarly and popular discussion about whether the comings in senses 1 and 2 are the same or not. We shall have something to say about that later when we consider various approaches to Revelation. The important thing to bear in mind is that, whatever difficulties we may have with sorting out the *timings* of various events, we should never allow them to stop us believing *that the events will happen*. I say this because it happens too often that someone brought up with one view of Revelation later finds it

challenged by other views, fails to sort it out satisfactorily, gives up in despair, and stops believing and enjoying what the passages individually say. That is both sad and unnecessary.

The coming as a period of time

A very important principle that arises from 'coming' in sense 1 above is that some of the comings of Christ are periods, not points, in time. Think of his coming as predicted in the OT. It turned out to be in two parts, the first of which was a period of around thirty-three years, full of different events, many of them foretold by the prophets, such as the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem, his entering Jerusalem on a donkey, his rejection, death, burial, resurrection, ascension and a host of other things. The second part of that coming will involve not only his appearing in power and glory but also his descending to reign on earth for an even longer period of time.

There are several points to be made here. First, 'the coming' turned out to be much more complicated than anyone could have said, prior to Jesus' birth in Bethlehem. Few if anyone realised that the OT implied that it would be in two parts. Second, it would have been well-nigh impossible to have got the events of what we call the 'first coming' in the right order, based only on a study of the OT. That means that we need to be humble and avoid dogmatism regarding the timetable of Christ's return since it would seem that it, too, will involve a series of events over a period of time that we are unlikely to be able to place in the correct order. We should be prepared to accept that we could easily be mistaken, a danger that the Lord also flagged up when answering the disciples' question about the timing of his return in his most famous teaching on the topic, the Olivet discourse:

> Jesus left the temple and was going away, when his disciples came to point out to him the buildings of the temple. But he answered them, 'You see all these, do you not? Truly, I say to you, there will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down.'

> As he sat on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately, saying, 'Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the close of the age?'
> (Matt. 24:1–3)

Yet this does not mean that we should not think about the future at all. On the contrary, the Lord Jesus positively encouraged his disciples so to do by giving a lengthy answer to their question. In it he details a long sequence of events that must happen first; for instance, there will be wars and rumours of wars and nation shall rise against nation, but that does not mean the end has come. Also, Jesus repeatedly warns them not to be deceived by false claims on the part of some people that they are the Christ. Indeed, those events will be only the beginning of birth pangs (Matt. 24:6–8). We need to take this on board, especially when we come to thinking about the chronology of events in the future, as it is very easy to get things wrong – and some are indeterminate, in any case. It is, however, also important to say that not all prophecy is concerned with giving us a timetable of future events, although some of it clearly is, such as chapter 24 of Matthew.

Jesus next outlines a number of specific events that will lead up to his return. The first of them is the appearance of what is called 'the abomination of desolation spoken of by the prophet Daniel' (Matt. 24:15), the meaning of which we shall discuss later. Jesus says that when that happens, the inhabitants of Jerusalem should flee to the mountains of Judah because a great tribulation is imminent. Immediately after that, there will be cosmic disturbances just before the return of Jesus in power and great glory.

From this account, it would seem that no one alive in those future days could be in any doubt as to what was happening. However, Jesus now introduces a completely different and, at first sight, surprising perspective – that his return will be so sudden and unexpected that it will catch many people unawares just as the Flood did in the time of Noah: 'Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect' (Matt. 24:44). Jesus then tells a number of parables to reinforce this,

including the parable of the ten virgins. He finally tells the parable of the talents to teach that at his return he will hold his servants accountable, after which the final judgement will take place. It must have been clear to his disciples that they, and many generations after them, would have died long before he returned, and yet he warned even them to be ready because he would arrive suddenly.

Two timelines

A number of questions arise from the apparently paradoxical juxtaposition of these two radically different aspects of Jesus' teaching about his return – that it will not happen until X, Y and Z have happened, yet it will happen unexpectedly so you had better be prepared. One way of looking at it is to consider two timelines. First, the world history timeline: Jesus entered the world at a specific date and time, lived, died, rose and ascended, and will return at a specific date and time. But then, second, there is the much shorter timeline of our own personal history. The return of Christ will usher us into eternity, but so also will our death, at which point the actual time of Christ's return will lose its relevance for us. For, with our death, those biological mechanisms on which we depend for our perception of time will perish. It is therefore unwise to take the world-timeline-of-events perspective on its own, as we may begin to think that, since Jesus' return may be a long way off, we needn't bother living in the light of it.

No, we are to live in immediate expectation of his return, for only then will it have the desired purifying effect on our lives. As John explains:

> Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure.
> (1 John 3:2–3)

The implication is that, if there is no evidence in our lives that our professed hope of the coming of Christ is leading to moral and spiritual purity, then there is reason to doubt that our hope is real.

Another possible resolution of this apparent paradox is the view that, before the trigger events mentioned above, Jesus will return unexpectedly *at any moment* to take the Church to heaven in an event called 'the rapture'. Since this would take place before the major signs that Jesus gave of his public return, surprise would be complete. We shall discuss this view in an appendix.[34]

Another relevant detail is found in the minor contretemps between Peter and the Lord concerning John that is found in John 21. It shows how easily words can be misunderstood:

> Peter turned and saw the disciple whom Jesus loved following them, the one who had been reclining at table close to him and had said, 'Lord, who is it that is going to betray you?' When Peter saw him, he said to Jesus, 'Lord, what about this man?' Jesus said to him, 'If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? You follow me!' So the saying spread abroad among the brothers that this disciple was not to die; yet Jesus did not say to him that he was not to die, but, 'If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you?'
> (John 21:20–3)

Jesus' words could have given some people the impression that John might live until Christ's return, which would make people think that it could be fairly soon. Jesus did not do anything to disabuse them of that idea, presumably because it would strengthen their desire to live in the light of his coming. Hence: 'Behold, I am coming soon' (22:7, 12). It would seem that, from a biblical perspective, there is sometimes a compression of what might otherwise seem to be a long timescale.

Another biblical concept that should also be factored into our discussion is that of *the last days*. Hebrews 1:2 tells us that 'in these last days he [God] has spoken to us by his Son'. In Acts 2:17 we read that the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost occurred in the

last days. Peter, speaking of Christ's return, says that 'scoffers will come in the last days' (2 Pet. 3:3). Once more, we sense that we are in the presence of a different perspective on time where, with the advent of the Lord Jesus and his life, death, resurrection and ascension, we are ushered into the last days.

The main interpretative schemes of Revelation

The reference in Revelation 1 to what 'must soon take place' raises the more general question of how we are to understand how the book relates to history and chronology. There are four main answers to this question:

1 It refers to events that took place in the past around the time when John and those to whom the book is addressed lived. This is the *preterist* approach, from the Latin *praeter*, meaning 'past'.
2 It refers to the Church and the world during the entire period from the time of John to the final consummation of the ages. This is the *historicist* approach.
3 It refers mainly to events in the future around the time of the return of Christ. This is the *futurist* approach.
4 It concerns broad principles regarding the battle between good and evil, the Church, and the world and the devil that are applicable at all times. This is the *idealist* approach.

These approaches are clearly not all mutually exclusive, and nowadays, most commentators on Revelation mix several of them, since taking any one view to be the definitive method of interpretation tends to lead to difficulties of one kind or another. For instance, the sheer multiplicity of attempts to relate the scenes in the book to events or people in history, whether popes or world leaders such as Napoleon and Hitler, has brought an exclusively historicist view into disrepute, since no two writers agree on the identifications. By contrast, the preterist view leaves the book without application to the present or the future, whereas an

exclusively futurist view removes application to the past or the present. My own approach, for what it is worth, tends to be a mixture of 1, 3 and 4.

The fact is that most of these views have something to contribute. First, the book self-evidently refers to the time of John, since it is addressed in its entirety to seven contemporary churches in one of which John himself had served. It is equally apparent that the application of the book is not exhausted by the first century, as it contains many enduring principles and ideals that are relevant at all times everywhere to a greater or lesser degree. For example, the violence of the beasts made sense in the first century with the persecutions of Rome as well as in the twentieth century with the raging of Hitler, Stalin and Mao, and in the current century with Putin, Xi and Kim Jong-un plus a great number of vicious, less well-known tyrants in Nigeria, Sudan and elsewhere. According to Open Doors World Watch list, 1 in 7 Christians is suffering persecution. Finally, the book of Revelation has explicit things to say about the future coming of Christ and the consummation of the ages in order to provide believers with a real hope. The sheer complexity and subtlety of the levels of application of the book form part of its enduring appeal.

G. E. Ladd gives a helpful explanation of the overall way in which the book works that is worth quoting at length, even though it anticipates a number of topics that will be discussed in more detail as they arise:

> This brings us to a characteristic of Old Testament prophecy which is also characteristic of the Revelation, and which solves this problem of distance and relevance. As we have just pointed out, the prophets had two foci in their prophetic perspective: the events of the present and the immediate future, and the ultimate eschatological event. These two are held in dynamic tension often without chronological distinction, for the main purpose of prophecy is not to give a program or chart of the future, but to let the light of the eschatological consummation fall on the present (II Pet 1:19) . . . Isaiah pictured the overthrow of Babylon in

apocalyptic colours as though it were the end of the world (Isa. 13:1–22) . . . Joel moved imperceptibly from historical plagues of locust and drought into the eschatological judgments of the Day of the Lord.

In other words, the imminent historical judgment is seen as a type of, or a prelude to, the eschatological judgment. The two are often blended together in apparent disregard for chronology, for the same God who acts in the imminent historical judgment will also act in the final eschatological judgment to further his one redemptive purpose… Thus, while the Revelation was primarily concerned to assure the churches of Asia of the final eschatological salvation at the end of the age, together with the judgment of the evil world powers, this had immediate relevance to the first century. For the demonic powers which will be manifested at the end in the great tribulation were also to be seen in the historical hatred of Rome for God's people and the persecution they were to suffer at Rome's hands.

Therefore, we conclude that the correct method of interpreting the Revelation is a blending of the preterist and the futurist methods.