

## Authorship of Revelation

Unlike most apocalypses, Revelation does not pretend to be written by some famous religious figure from the distant past. The person responsible for this book identifies himself as a Christian named “John” who was on the island of Patmos “because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus” (1:9). The latter reference probably indicates that he had been banished from the mainland for witnessing to his faith and sent into exile on this island. But who was this man? Even in the early church, there was no agreement as to which John wrote the book of Revelation.

### The Tradition of Apostolic Authorship

Several early authorities (Irenaeus, Justin Martyr, Polycrates) volunteer that the John who received this vision on Patmos may have been John the apostle, one of Jesus’ twelve disciples. This seemed sensible for a couple of reasons:

- Similarities can be traced between Revelation and the Gospel of John, which was commonly thought to be the work of the apostle.
- Various traditions connected the apostle John with the city of Ephesus, which is not very far from Patmos and is the location of one of the churches to which the book is addressed.

In time, this tradition of apostolic authorship for Revelation became firmly established in Christian piety, and it has been widely reflected in popular expressions of the Christian faith (hymns, artwork, etc.).

### The Challenge to Apostolic Authorship

Even in the early church, however, there were voices that challenged this identification. In particular, Dionysius of Alexandria (third century) thought that the literary styles of Revelation and the other Johannine writings were so distinct that the same person could not have written both. Over time, the tradition came to be discounted by scholars for many reasons:

- The literary and linguistic style (as noted by Dionysius) is in fact radically different: Revelation is less refined in terms of its use of Greek grammar, vocabulary, and syntax.
- Key themes from John’s Gospel are completely absent in Revelation: there is no mention in the latter of “eternal life,” of “knowing the truth,” or even of “believing.”
- The author of Revelation uses scripture differently than does the author of John’s Gospel: the Gospel quotes scripture frequently, whereas Revelation is rich in biblical imagery but never actually cites scripture as such.
- The theological perspectives of Revelation and the Gospel of John are completely different: for example, the Gospel of John evinces very little interest in such future events as the final judgment or the second coming of Christ—themes that dominate Revelation.

- The author of Revelation actually refers to the apostles (18:20; 21:14) without any indication that he is one of them. Indeed, if the twenty-four elders mentioned in 4:4 are to be identified as the twelve patriarchs of Israel and the twelve apostles of Jesus, then are we to imagine that John is watching himself among their company?
- Most scholars also think that this book was written in the 90s, and they question whether the apostle John is likely to have lived to so advanced an age (if, indeed, he escaped the martyrdom that Jesus predicts will befall him in Mark 10:39).
- The book of Revelation had considerable trouble finding acceptance in the Christian canon of scripture. This would not have been the case if authorities in the early church had thought that it could be traced with any confidence to the apostle John.

### **Minority View: Supporters of Apostolic Authorship**

Apostolic authorship of this book is not impossible, and a few prominent interpreters hold to it:

- D. A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 700–707.
- Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, rev. ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 932–48.
- Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, rev. ed., NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).
- Stephen S. Smalley, *Thunder and Love: John's Revelation and John's Community* (Milton Keynes: Word, 1994).

The most significant defense of apostolic authorship is found in a work, cited by many of the above authors and yet to be translated, by Gerhard Maier, *Die Johannesoffenbarung und die Kirche*, WUNT 25 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1981).

These supporters of apostolic authorship think that the differences (literary and theological) between Revelation and John's Gospel can be attributed to the diverse circumstances under which the books were composed. John's Gospel was produced under controlled and ideal conditions; the apostle may have used a secretary (as Paul did for his letters), or he may have written only an early draft that later was expanded and edited. Revelation, by contrast, perhaps preserves the apostle's unedited work, possibly produced while he was in an ecstatic state.

Despite such explanations, however, most scholars think that attributing Revelation to the apostle John is a stretch. As an alternative, some scholars suggest that the book could have come from "John the elder," another first-century Christian who may have written the Johannine Letters and served as a final editor for John's Gospel. The dominant trend in recent scholarship, however, has been to view the author of Revelation as simply a Christian prophet named "John" who is otherwise unknown to us.

## What We Can Gather from the Book Itself

The preference of most scholars is not to make claims for the book of Revelation that it does not make for itself. The book does not claim to be written by the apostle John, and so we should not make that claim for it (or imply that its authority somehow rests on the establishment of such a claim).

Scholars do seek to surmise what they can about the author from the book itself. These facts may be noted:

- He is steeped in the Old Testament.
- He is more familiar with the imagery and style of Jewish apocalypses than any other first-century Christian author.
- He appears to write Greek as one whose native language was Hebrew or Aramaic. Accordingly, it seems possible that he may have been a Jewish Christian from Palestine who emigrated to Asia Minor at some point during or after the Jewish war with Rome.
- He assumes that the churches in Asia Minor will regard him as a prophet (1:3; 22:7, 10, 18–19). He does not feel the need to do or say anything to establish his credentials; thus he must be well known and respected among Christian congregations in that part of the world.

## Conclusion

The author of Revelation was a Jewish Christian named “John” who addressed fellow Christians living in Asia Minor during the last third of the first century. He was regarded as a prophet by these Christians, and he may have served them in an itinerant capacity similar to that described for the prophet Agabus in Acts 21:10–11. Eventually, he ended up on the island of Patmos, probably banished from the mainland by political authorities. There, he had a vision that he put into writing and sent to the churches.