

Revelation 1

Ancient Literary Context

John's vision begins with the words 'Apocalypse (revelation) of Jesus Christ', indicating the origin and authority of what follows. It is the only time the term 'revelation' is used in the book, which is characterized either directly or indirectly as prophecy (22:18). The use of 'revelation/reveal' links this apocalypse with a range of texts written in the last centuries BCE and in late first century CE (the closest contemporary parallel is 2 Esdras (4 Ezra) 3–14). The description of John's vision as an 'apocalypse' (1:1) is distinctive as compared with the ancient Jewish texts that resemble it. Texts like *1 Enoch*, *2 Enoch*, and the *Apocalypse of Abraham* contain accounts of ascents to heaven and revelations concerning the divine mysteries, particularly with regard to the future (Rowland 1982; see above, 2). Links with biblical prophetic texts are obvious throughout (see the excursus for possible biblical allusions). The opening chapter includes a call vision (1:9–20) with affinities to Dan 10 and Ezek 1 and 9, affirming John's place in that prophetic tradition, though, as the occasional reference in

1:1, 5, 9 indicates, one that is influenced by Jesus Christ. John becomes an intermediary, like Enoch in *1 Enoch* 12–15. Indeed, in the later Johannine apocalyptic tradition, e.g. the *Third Apocalypse of John* (Court 2000: 108), John becomes a key intermediary of heavenly secrets.

The terms ‘revelation/reveal’ (*apokalypsis*) are used occasionally in literature contemporaneous with Revelation to describe the unveiling of God or divine secrets (M. Smith in Hellholm 1989: 9). For example, in the New Testament *apokalypsis/apokalupto* is found in Simeon’s song (Luke 2:32; cf. 1 Pet 1:11–12) and in contexts dealing with the eschatological revelation of human secrets (Matt 10:26/Luke 12:2; Luke 2:35), divine secrets (Matt 11:25/Luke 10:21; Matt 16:17) or God (Matt 11:27). It is also central to Paul’s description of his conversion to the way of Jesus Christ (Gal 1:12), and he also used it in reference to a future hope (1 Cor 1:7; cf. 2 Thess 1:7; 1 Pet 1:7; 1:13; 4:13). In Revelation the term ‘apocalypse’ is followed immediately by a reference to the book as prophecy (1:3), suggesting that for John prophecy and apocalypse are closely related (Mazzaferrri 1989; cf. Barton 1986). The vision of the ‘one like the Son of Man’ is paralleled in several ancient Jewish texts, all of which are probably inspired by the vision in Dan 10:5–10 (Rowland 1985).

John’s call has its closest parallel in a text (probably Jewish-Christian) which in its original form is roughly contemporary, the *Ascension of Isaiah* (6:10–12; Knight 1996). John’s experience is linked with the Lord’s day, probably a reference to Sunday rather than the sabbath (cf. 1 Cor 16:2; Acts 20:7; Matt 28:1). This was the day when the Risen Lord had appeared to disciples in the past (Luke 24:13–35; John 20:1–29). Worship as the context for a vision recalls the Temple vision of Isaiah (Isa 6). Worship was often seen as a communion with heaven, in which the earthly saints join with the heavenly hosts in lauding God, as when Isaiah witnesses the song of the seraphim. Patmos has, at least temporarily, become sacred space, hallowed by the vision. The tension between past, present and future, which plays a great role in interpretation of the Apocalypse, may reflect a liturgical sense of time, in which different times seem inextricably mixed. What is expected in the future is experienced in the present celebration of the cult. John tells his readers that his apocalyptic experiences occurred when he was ‘in the spirit’ on ‘the Lord’s day’, when in both heaven and earth the resurrection of Christ is celebrated. Paul also repeatedly designates the parousia of Christ as ‘the day of the Lord’ (1 Thess 5:2; 2 Thess 2:2; 1 Cor 5:5; 2 Cor 1:14; Funk 1969b: 249–68). To celebrate the resurrection of Jesus on the Lord’s day is to experience already the day of the Lord (Flanigan in Emerson and McGinn 1992: 340–1; cf. Wainwright 1993: 253).

The Interpretations

This opening chapter offers interpretative clues regarding the character of the Apocalypse. According to the eighteenth-century Roman Catholic commentator Robert Witham, there are three ways of expounding its visions:

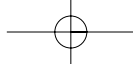
The Visions are only to be fulfilled in Antichrist's time, a little before the End of the World . . .

The visions may be applied to particular Events which happened in the first three of four Ages of the church, under the persecuting Heathens, by Constantine, and the succeeding Christian Emperors . . .

Finally, 'by the great city of Babylon, is signified all wicked great Cities in the World, all the multitude of the wicked in all nations, their short and Vain Happiness; their Persecutions and oppressions of the good and faithful Servants of God, who live piously in this world, and who are call'd to be Citizens of the Celestial Jerusalem in the Kingdom of God' (*Annotations*, ii.510–11 in Newport 2000: 86)

It is the last of these options which Witham is inclined to accept.

For sixteenth-century writer John Bale, the Apocalypse has supreme value as a key to the nature of the Christian religion: 'He that knoweth not this book, knoweth not what the church is whereof he is a member' (Bale 1849: 252). Since all are citizens of either Jerusalem or Babylon (Rev 17:5; ch. 21), the true believer has to learn the nature of the two churches and take a stand with Abel rather than Cain (in Bauckham 1978: 60). Hildegard of Bingen similarly writes: 'And whoever tastes this prophecy and fixes it in his memory will become the mountain of myrrh [cf. Rev 21:10] and of frankincense, and of all aromatical spices, and the diffusion of many blessings; he will ascend like Abraham from blessing to blessing' (Hart and Bishop edn 536). Hildegard claims divinely given insight into the meaning of Scripture ('Scivias Declaration', Hart and Bishop edn 59), as does the sixteenth-century visionary Ralph Durden, who was given the 'gift of interpretation' (in Bauckham 1978: 188–9). Similarly, Joachim of Fiore finds in the Apocalypse the key to the inner meaning of Scripture and the whole history of salvation (in McGinn 1979: 99). The Apocalypse, according to Joachim, was no afterthought, a book to be tolerated but ignored, but rather the culmination of the whole of Scripture. David Koresh agrees: 'All the books of the Bible meet and end there. This is what we have learned over the years' (in Newport 2000: 212).



'what must soon take place . . . what is, and what is to take place after this': interpretative clues (1:1, 19)

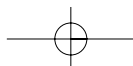
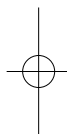
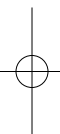
Victorinus, living at a time when Christians were persecuted (he himself died a martyr), seems to have understood 'what must soon take place' (1:1) as a reference to his own time and to have taken the warnings and promises of the Apocalypse as addressed to his own church (Matter in Emmerson and McGinn 1992: 39; ANF vii.344). That sense of immediacy has presented problems for interpreters, nowhere more so than for those like the Millerites who had a detailed apocalyptic timetable for the end of the world and the consummation of scriptural promises. When Christ failed to return in 1843–4 as they had predicted, they searched the Scriptures and concluded that the error was not in the word of the Lord but in their own understanding of it (in Foster in Numbers and Butler 1987: 173–88). Such interpretation of experience through expectations based on authoritative texts has been a feature of prophetic and apocalyptic interpretation down the centuries. Failure of hopes to materialize often, as in this case, does not lead to abandonment of the hope but to questioning of human interpretative capacity and a channelling of eschatological enthusiasm into practical action (Foster in Numbers and Butler 1987).

'to the seven churches' (1:4)

The universal character of the vision is often noted. According to Victorinus, the seven stars (1:16) are the seven churches that John addresses (1916: 26.17, ANF vii.344), and together they represent the one church, as Paul also teaches by writing to exactly seven churches (Victorinus 1916: 26. 4–11). In the *Geneva Bible* likewise, the seven churches mean the church universal. According to Bede, 'the Apocalypse speaks of the seven churches of Asia which are really the one Church of Christ' (in Matter in Emmerson and McGinn 1992: 47). The *Scofield Reference Bible* says the message to the seven churches has a fourfold application: to the churches actually addressed; to all churches in all time ('so that they may discern their true spiritual state in the sight of God'); as exhortation to individuals; and, as a prophetic disclosure, to the seven phases of the *spiritual* history of the church (Scofield 1917: 1331–2).

'I, John, your brother, who share with you in Jesus the persecution . . . was on the island called Patmos' (1:9)

The location of John's vision and the reasons for John being on Patmos have been a matter for discussion, not least because of the long tradition that he was



imprisoned there and subsequently released. John's situation and the nature of his vision are portrayed in the various artistic depictions. The christological significance of the attributes of the 'one like the Son of Man' has also received extensive attention, and John's vision prompted visionaries in succeeding centuries to look to him as their apocalyptic mentor, just as he followed in the footsteps of his visionary predecessors.

Patmos is an island off the west coast of Turkey, and the seven letters are addressed to communities in cities on the mainland. John writes little about himself. He mentions tribulation in 1:9, possibly suggesting persecution (cf. 7:14). Elsewhere this word is used in a general way for upheavals expected in the last days (Rom 8:35; Mark 13:18), so it does not necessarily imply systematic persecution, of which there is little evidence in this particular area in Domitian's time (L. Thompson 1990). Early Christian tradition had John in Ephesus confronting false teachers (Irenaeus *AH* ii.22.5). In the Johannine apocalyptic tradition, *The Second Apocalypse of John* (probably fourth century CE) has a revelation to John set on Mount Tabor, the mount of the Transfiguration, which is in some ways explanatory of eschatological features of the original Apocalypse (in Court 2000: 33). There is, however, a long tradition that John was persecuted; for example, Albrecht Dürer's sequence depicts an apocryphal story in which John is seated in a cauldron of boiling oil in front of the Roman emperor. According to second-century Christian tradition, after Domitian's death John returned from exile and lived until the age of Trajan (well into the second century CE; Irenaeus *AH* ii.22.5; iii.3.4).

Irenaeus dates the text to Domitian's reign and is the first to propound a view that continues to have wide currency, that the book's genre was chosen to conceal its real message, for fear of imperial retribution (*AH* v.30.3). In the middle of the second century Justin appeals to John and his vision to support belief in God's future reign on earth (*Dial.* lxxxi.4).

Robert Browning's poem 'Death in the Desert' (1864) explores the relationship among different writings attributed to John in the light of the challenges of higher criticism of the Bible pioneered by Renan and Strauss (Browning had recently read George Eliot's translation of Strauss's *Das Leben Jesu*). He offers the poem as a newly found manuscript recording the last words and death of John. The different periods of John's life coincide with three modes of knowing: from statement of what he heard and saw (the Apocalypse), to 'reasoning from his knowledge' (the Johannine epistles), to a final penetration of the essential meaning (the gospel), when 'what first were guessed as points, I now knew stars' (lines 135–75; Shaffer 1972: 191–224).

'I, John': doubts about the Apocalypse (1:9)

Positive testimony to the book's significance has to be balanced by a long tradition of suspicion that questions its origin and how it has been used. Erasmus invoked the authority of 'very many very learned men', all of whom claimed that the book lacks 'apostolic gravitas' and is no more than a history expressed in figurative or allegorical terms. He claimed that John's repeating 'I, John' (1:9) shows that he was drawing attention to himself rather than Christ. This contrasts with the less direct self-references in the gospel of John and with the writings of Paul, who also had visions but describes them as if they were someone else's (cf. 2 Cor 12:2). While there were defenders of the book's canonicity in the sixteenth century, the challenge of Erasmus caused much suspicion (Backus 1998).

Martin Luther likewise famously denigrated the book's importance in his original preface to *The German Bible*:

About this book of the Revelation of John, I leave everyone free to hold his own ideas, and would bind no man to my opinion and judgement: I say what I feel. I miss more than one thing in this book, and this makes me hold it to be neither apostolic or prophetic. First and foremost, the Apostles do not deal with visions, but prophesy in clear, plain words, as do Peter and Paul and Christ in the gospel. For it befits the apostolic office to speak of Christ and his deeds without figures and visions but there is no prophet in the Old Testament, to say nothing of the New, who deals so out and out with visions and figures. And so I think of it almost as I do of the Fourth Book of Esdras, and I can in nothing detect that it was provided by the Holy Spirit. Moreover, he seems to be going much too far when he commends his own book so highly, – more than any other of the sacred books do, though they are much more important . . . Let every one think of it as his own spirit gives him to think. My spirit cannot fit itself into this book. There is one sufficient reason for me not to think highly of it – Christ is not taught or known in it; but to teach Christ is the thing which an apostle above all else is bound to do. (1522 *Preface to the New Testament* 12)

Luther takes a more positive approach in his 1546 *Preface to the New Testament*, however, where he offers advice about how to interpret the Apocalypse:

The first and surest step toward finding its interpretation is to take from history the events and disasters that have come upon Christendom till now, and hold them up alongside of these images, and so compare them very carefully. If, then, the two perfectly coincided and squared with one another, we could build on that as a sure, or at least an unobjectionable, interpretation.

It is a book 'for our comfort' and 'for our warning'. He encourages readers 'to read this book and learn to look upon Christendom with other eyes than those of reason', thereby enabling them to do justice to its imagery. This is reflected in the way translations were illuminated and the imagery of the book informed popular culture of the Reformation period (Scribner 1994).

Luther's early doubts continue the qualms of certain church fathers who questioned the book's apostolic character. According to Eusebius *HE* iii.28.3, Dionysius of Alexandria regarded the expectation of a reign of God on earth as evidence of authorship by the heretic Cerinthus rather than the apostle John (in Backus 1998: 654). Luther's unease is also echoed by Tyndale, though in less trenchant form: 'The Apocalypse or Revelations of John are allegories whose literal sense is hard to find in many places' (2000: 156). Tyndale was deeply suspicious of allegorical exegesis. The preface to the *Geneva Bible* likewise urges: 'Read diligently; judge soberly and call earnestly to God for the true understanding hereof. This is a tacit admission of the difficulties and threats posed by the book, something exemplified also in the severely circumscribed opportunities to hear it liturgically (Brightman 1915: i.51; see above, 29–31). Other criticisms of the book were occasioned by its use as licence for visions and dreams (Taves 1999: 18).

The vision of 'one like the Son of Man' (1:12–17)

The details of this vision of Christ have been understood as a mine of information about christological and ecclesiological matters. According to Irenaeus, Jesus' appearance as 'one like the Son of Man', with seven candlesticks, shows his sacerdotal nature and the glory he has received (*AH* iv.20.11). He wears priestly garments which Moses saw in a vision and copied in the vestures of the high priest. His feet of burning brass suggest the power of faith, which is tested and refined in the fire of the end of time (*ibid.*). Hippolytus links the vision with Daniel 10:5–21, claiming that Daniel sees the Lord but not in his perfect form (*Daniel* iv.36.5–6; cf. Rowland 1985). In *Antichrist* 12 he says that the eyes of Christ in 1:14 symbolize the prophets who foresaw both his suffering and his glory.

Despite his chiliastic views, Victorinus also emphasizes the meaning of the Apocalypse for the present, especially in the first six chapters, which describe the presence of Christ in the church and in Scripture. The Apocalypse is a recapitulation of all of Scripture, in which the resurrected Christ unlocks the meaning of the figures of the law (Victorinus 1997: 29–32). The vision of 1:12–20, for example, is an initiation into the mysteries of faith, encapsulating central points of christology and soteriology. It reveals Christ's double nature:

his divinity in his white head and shining face and his humanity in his priestly garment, which symbolizes the body of the incarnate one, offered as a sacrifice by the eternal priest. This vision also expresses the unity of Christ as head with his body the church: the white hair symbolizes the baptized, and the golden sash believers who drink pure milk of doctrine from the breast of Christ. The means by which humanity is united with Christ in the church are indicated by the two-edged sword (Scripture: law and gospel), the 'sound of many waters' (baptism), and the seven stars (the Holy Spirit; ANF vii.344–6). Chapters 2–3 then go on to show how Christ dispenses the sevenfold spirit (cf. Isa 11) to the universal church (ANF vii.346–7).

The two-edged sword (1:16) has its analogies in contemporary texts like Wis 18:16 and Heb 4:14. The Valentinian Gnostic text of the late second century, *The Gospel of Truth*, echoes Rev 1:16 in speaking of the divine Logos as a naked, two-edged sword which causes division between the spiritual and material within the individual person (26.1–15).

Lady Eleanor Davies, one of several women prophets in England in the 1640s and 1650s, identifies the figure of John's call vision (1:13) as a female divine being who will bring peace (drawing also on other scriptural texts like John 1, Isa 9:2 and Heb 7):

She whose throne heaven, earth her footstool from the uncreated saying, I am A and O first and last, both beginning and ending, by whom all things were done: not without anything done or made; Trinity in Unity, of manhood the head; who of death have the keys, and of hell: than the Queen of the South a greater, born a greater not of woman: Malea, by interpretation, Queen of Peace, or She-Counsellor. And so much for this without contradiction, she his executioner made like unto the Son of God, the Ancient of Days' likeness: owner of the title of tithes, to whom the patriarch offered a tenth. ('The Appearance or Presence of the Son of Man' (1650) 7–8 Cope edn 174–81, in Hobby 1988: 28)

'the Alpha and the Omega . . . the first and the last' (1:8, 17; cf. 21:6; 22:13)

Origen uses 1:8 to argue that Christ shares in the Father's omnipotence (*First Principles* i.2.10; on Origen's interpretation of 'the Alpha and the Omega', see below, commentary on Rev 22:13). Joachim of Fiore broke with the medieval tradition of interpretation as he 'translated images into a kind of cosmic geometry', to borrow a phrase from Marjorie Reeves (in Reeves and Hirsch-Reich 1972: 38; cf. 46–7, 171, 192, and McGinn 1979: 104). In his later years Joachim complemented his literary expositions of the Apocalypse with 'figures' (*figurae*)

that encapsulate his beliefs about history and salvation. In one, he uses the circle as symbol of the Godhead, indicating its trinity and unity (Joachim of Fiore 1953: plates 11a, 11b; cf. Reeves and Hirsch-Reich 1972: plate 26). The three overlapping circles show how the Trinity relates to history. At the far left are Alpha and Omega, as a kind of presupposition. The green circle on the left is that of the Father and is the time of the Old Testament; the middle, blue circle, that of the Son, interlocks with the two outer circles. The third circle is that of the Holy Spirit and indicates that the Spirit is from the Father and the Son since it overlaps with both the other circles. This third circle contains a reference to the 'Novum Testamentum', indicating that the New Testament is not superseded in the final age of the Spirit. Dante may have been aware of Joachim's *figura* in *Paradiso* 33.115–20:

That light supreme, within its fathomless / Clear substance, showed to me three spheres, which bare / Three hues distinct, and occupied one space; / The first mirrored the next, as though it were / Rainbow from rainbow, and the third seemed flame / Breathed equally from each of the first pair. (In McGinn 1979: 106; cf. Herzman in Emmerson and McGinn 1992: 398)

Joachim also uses the Alpha and Omega in the 'psaltery with ten strings', a 'figure' that came to him in a mystical vision (1953: plate 13; Reeves and Hirsch-Reich 1972: plate 27, cf. pp. 46–58). After passing through a time of struggle to a higher plane of understanding, Joachim sang to God and began to understand the meaning of the words 'blessed are they who dwell in thy house' (Ps 84:4). He had striven to be an inhabitant of the city of God through his own efforts and had come to know 'inner peace' by the grace of vision (in Reeves and Hirsch-Reich 1972: 51–2; cf. McGinn 1979: 99 and 1985). The 'psaltery', like the Trinitarian circles, encapsulates the character of God, but here the angelic hierarchies are attached to the strings on one side of the diagram, with the gifts of the Spirit on the other. Milton also uses Alpha and Omega: 'In highth or depth, still first and last will reign' (*Paradise Lost* ii.324; cf. v.165). Karl Barth writes of Jesus as Alpha and Omega (1958: 463–516).

Depictions of John's call (1:9–11, 17–19)

Depictions of John's call bring out the various facets of its visionary character. Velasquez's painting emphasizes the moment of ecstasy: John's eyes are clearly focused on something beyond the picture (London, National Gallery). An open book with an empty page sits on his lap. It contrasts with large books at John's

feet, perhaps representing the earlier Scriptures that are being supplemented by the revelation of Jesus Christ now taking place, thereby reminding us of the high authority which attaches to this particular book (cf. 22:18). In the portrayal of John's call in Paris BN lat. 11534, fol. 341 John's eyes are closed, and he is in ecstasy, as also in Giotto's work in the Cappella Peruzzi in Santa Croce Florence 1335 (in Van der Meer 1978: 25, 189). One is reminded of how Thomas Phillips (1807), when he painted William Blake (National Portrait Gallery, London, in Hamlyn and Phillips 2000: frontispiece; cf. Bentley 2001: 290–1), asked him to give rapt attention as if he were looking at a heavenly being. Velasquez's evocation of the ecstatic state is much more obvious, however (for a modern example of the depiction of a visionary trance see Stanley Spencer's painting *Sarah Tubb and the Heavenly Visitors* in Bell 1992: 110).

John on Patmos is often portrayed as a solitary figure on a rock: for example, in *St John on Patmos* by Hieronymus Bosch (Berlin Gemaeldegalerie). This is also emphasized by Victor Hugo in *Les Misérables*:

We need not speak of the exile in Patmos who mightily assailed the world as it was with a protest in the name of an ideal world, a huge, visionary satire, which cast upon Rome-that-was-Nineveh, Rome-that-was-Babylon, and Rome-that-was-Sodom the thunderous light of his *Revelation*. John on his rock is the Sphinx on its pedestal; he is beyond our understanding; he was a Jew and a Hebrew. But Tacitus, who wrote the *Annals*, was a Latin, and, better still, a Roman. (1996: 888)

The rock also appears in an allusive reference in Dante's *Divine Comedy*, where Dante follows the Joachite tradition in linking the stigmata of Saint Francis with a seal of the Apocalypse. He describes the moment of Francis's receipt of Christ's stigmata: 'Then on the harsh rock between Tiber and Arno he received the last seal which his limbs bore for two years' (*Paradiso* 11.106–8). This points to the seal sequence of the Apocalypse (6:1–8:5) and also to John's situation on the rock of Patmos, where he is often shown marooned, as in Memling's altar-piece 'The Mystic Marriage of Saint Catherine' in Saint John's Hospital, Bruges, and in Dürer's woodcuts on Rev 10 and 14 (in Herzman in Emmerson and McGinn 1992: 406). Francis, like the apostle Paul (1 Cor 4:15; Gal 4:10; 6:17; Phil 3:10), became a bearer of Christ and a mediator of Christ's eschatological presence in the present, by bearing the marks of his death. That the angel in Dürer's depiction of Rev 7:2 holds a cross may reflect the identification of this angel with Francis, which became a feature of Franciscan interpretation of the Apocalypse, following Joachim (see below, 100, on Peter Olivi and Bonaventure). The *Divine Comedy* connects more generally with the Apocalypse in that it relates Dante's personal experience and God's plan for the cosmos: 'Apocalypse' involves the continual attempt to try to see

things more and more from God's perspective (Herzman in Emmerson and McGinn 1992: 412).

Hieronymus Bosch also portrays John on a rock as he gazes up to a vision of the Woman Clothed with the Sun (Rev 12:1; Gemälde galerie, Berlin). She appears in a circular form in the top left-hand corner of the picture, as in several other contemporary depictions – for example, Hans Memling's altarpiece. In Bosch's picture John gazes in rapt attention at the vision of heaven, while around him, visible over his shoulder, are scenes of death and destruction (Rev 6:8–9, 16). While the visions John records are happening around him, his gaze is focused on almighty God. That gives perspective for everything else. A sharp contrast is set up between the violence below and the glory above. Also, John seems to be engaged in a kind of ecstatic automatic writing, an interpretation of what it means to be writing 'in the spirit' (in Blake 1991–5, Viscomi edn 42–3).

What most distinguishes Bosch's portrayal, however, is that John is accompanied by creatures, a bird (a raven, perhaps a parody of John's eagle or even a sign of death) and a little imp-like figure. The sublime moment is characterized as one of threat. The bird threatens to spill the ink, and the imp-like figure wears spectacles, evincing a certain donnish quality, and suggesting that the gently sceptical observer might have a question about the authenticity or validity of the vision.

One of the most remarkable openings of any sequence of illustrations of the Apocalypse is the frontispiece by Jean Duvet (1555) (see plate 1). Duvet's illustrations were completed at the end of his life, and he seems to have developed an affinity with the aged John who, according to tradition, died as an old man in the reign of Trajan (Eusebius *HE* iii.32.1). In the frontispiece Duvet represents himself as John on Patmos, with this inscription: 'Jean Duvet aged seventy has completed these histories in 1555'. An open book nearby is the Apocalypse of St John, and in the bottom left-hand corner is written: 'the sacred mysteries contained in this and the other following tablets are derived from the divine revelation of John and are closely adapted to the true letter of the text with the judgement of more learned men brought to bear.' Elsewhere Duvet writes: 'The fates are pressing; already the hands tremble and the sight fails, yet the mind remains victorious and the great work is completed.' His illustrations, then, involve a 're-seeing' of John's vision as one old man enters into the visions of another (cf. Hölderlin's fusing of his poetic inspiration with John's in 'Patmos', in Shaffer 1972: 303–9).

The sense of struggle amidst tribulation and temptation pervades Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*, in which the Red Cross Knight is introduced as 'faithful and true' (cf. Rev 19:11). He endures tribulations similar to those described in the Apocalypse and is led astray by 'antichrist' figures. Nevertheless he perseveres,



Plate 1 Jean Duvet as John on Patmos (Rev 1:9–20). British Museum, London.

learning greater discernment about the way of darkness and the way of light (in Sandler in Patrides and Wittreich 1984: 150). The progress of personal pilgrimage is also found in Ingmar Bergman's film *The Seventh Seal*; key existential moments are linked with the seven seals (Carey 1999: 334–5).

Interpretations that take the form of visionary appropriation

An example of a more general influence of the apocalyptic revelation is found in the *Apocalypse of John Chrysostom*, in which an early Christian theologian receives information about liturgical matters through a dialogue with Jesus Christ (fifth century CE, in Court 2000: 67–103). Hildegard of Bingen's *Scivias* contains a new vision inspired by John's (Hart and Bishop edn 482–3; Emmerson in Emmerson and McGinn 1992: 298).

John's apocalyptic vision also inspires Blake's visionary world and informs his understanding of his own political situation. Indeed, Blake explicitly links his own mythical world with the vision seen by John, much as Duvet does in his frontispiece. Blake makes this clear at the conclusion of the Eighth Night of *The Four Zoas* when he sees his own mythological creations as in direct continuity with the visionary apocalypticism of John (*Four Zoas* 8.597). Blake also looks back to Milton for inspiration, taking up and embodying the poetic genius of his predecessor in his *Milton*. The departed poet reappears, and the Muse has another opportunity, in Blake's writing, to express thoughts aright. Blake sees Milton's spirit enter into his left foot (*Milton* 14:49). In both appropriations the blurring of identity and time is apparent as the eternal and the temporal merge, and the mental dislocation this brings about is experienced by the reader. The effect is to plunge us into a kind of madness and make us see that what we regard as 'normal' is not the only imaginable way of reading, seeing, or thinking (so Essick and Viscomi in Blake 1991–5: 10). This may help explain John's own apocalypse, in which images and texts of the past are minted afresh in John's own vision. It is what happens when the prophet's visions are seen again at a different time and place, as David Halperin says about the appropriation of Ezekiel's vision of God's throne (*merkabah*) in later apocalypses: 'When the apocalyptic visionary "sees" something that looks like Ezekiel's *merkabah*, we may assume that he is seeing the *merkabah* vision as he has persuaded himself it really was, as Ezekiel would have seen it, had he been inspired wholly and not in part' (Halperin 1988: 71).