To turn from the gospels to Revelation is always a shock. We feel we are entering a different world, full of frightening spectacle, bizarre imagery and wholesale violence. Revelation, says D. H. Lawrence, is the Judas Iscariot of the New Testament, and he is echoed by C. G. Jung, who sees it as an eruption into consciousness of pent-up negative feelings denied or repressed by Christians attempting to live according to the conviction that perfect love casts out fear. Like Jung, commentators have often felt uneasy about the frightening excess of John’s visions: Amos Wilder points to their ‘archaic and acultural’ character; John Sweet is concerned about the ‘lethal concentration’ of negative elements found only ‘in small deposits’ elsewhere in the New Testament, and he worries lest Revelation should propagate vengefulness.

Much of the power of Revelation indeed resides in its turbulent imagery. As Austin Farrer says, the book depicts ‘a realm which has no shape at all but that which the images give it’, as they strive to uncover the spiritual principles at work within human history. Such principles are obscured by the deadening weight of familiar experience, which John’s imagination in turn defamiliarises to have us detect anew how the perpetual, archetypal drama of good and evil is at work even in ordinary events. One result is that Revelation is also an encouragement to Christian martyrs: spiritually regarded, their perseverance and suffering are victory blows for the forces of good against the dragon and his beasts, despite the fact that from a worldly perspective martyrs seem only to suffer defeat and immersion. By the same token, we are warned against slackness and complacency: beneath the comfortable surfaces of life in the cities of this world, a spiritual warfare is in full tilt. By our behaviour we are aligned either with the forces of good or evil, and we will be called to account.

One way of helping to explain these striking characteristics of Revelation is to describe the book as an apocalypse. The word apokalypsis means ‘revelation’ or ‘uncovering’, and apocalyptic writing offers a vision of the world’s end in which present suffering and
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alienation are overcome and God's elect will reign in a new paradise. Jewish apocalypses flourished especially under the domination of the Greeks and Romans between approximately 200 BC and AD 100. The main example is the Book of Daniel, which, like others of the kind, is pseudonymous and attributed to a prophet of an earlier age. In Daniel, an unknown author looks back to the heroic perseverance of Jewish exiles in Babylon six centuries before Christ, as a means of encouraging the second century Maccabean revolt against Antiochus Epiphanes (175–164 BC). There is a series of visions in which terrifying beasts from the sea represent the empires of this world, destroyed at last by the Son of Man. Angels offer advice on the course of events, and veiled allusions to second-century politics are delivered by means of a 'book of truth'. Other works like Daniel are Zechariah, Joel, the Ezra Apocalypses, Ehtiopian Enoch, and the Syriac Apocalypse of Baruch. There are also apocalyptic elements in St. Paul and the gospels, for instance I Thessalonians 4:13–5:11; II Thessalonians 2:1–12; I Corinthians 15:20–28, and the so-called 'synoptic apocalypse' in Mark 13 and its parallels. Indeed, there is good reason to see Christianity itself beginning as an apocalyptic sect, and the expectation of a new, transformed reality endures as a central element of Christian hope.6

Scholars have attempted to describe the main components of apocalyptic writing, but the debate is complex and intricate. J. Christiaan Beker, drawing on Vielhauer and Koch,7 stresses three main ideas: '(1) historical dualism; (2) universal cosmic expectation; and (3) the imminent end of the world' (136). Beker insists that 'historical dualism' is not to be confused with utopian fantasy: an Apocalypse is 'not to be understood without the existential realities of martyrdom, persecution, moral fibre, and encouragement and the longing for a final theodicy' (137).

Revelation conforms well to these broad criteria, and scholars have charted a dense tissue of allusions, especially to Daniel, Ezekiel, the synoptic apocalypse, and also to a widening spectrum of scriptural and rabbinic sources with apocalyptic leanings.8 Revelation should therefore be understood not as a grotesque anomaly in the New Testament, but as an example of a literary type. John of Patmos adapts a set of well-tried conventions to declare Christ's victory at the end of history as the slain and triumphant lamb, and to encourage Christian hope and perseverance in the present when evil and complacency seem ascendent, and God's purposes obscure. However, Revelation differs from other examples of the kind in not being pseudonymous.9

Still, John's peculiar power and originality are not diminished by