



Revelation

Revelation

Catherine A. Cory

with Little Rock Scripture Study staff



LITURGICAL PRESS
Collegeville, Minnesota

www.littlerockscripture.org

Nihil obstat for the commentary text by Catherine A. Cory: Robert C. Harren, *Censor deputatus*.
Imprimatur for the commentary text by Catherine A. Cory: † John F. Kinney, Bishop of St. Cloud,
Minnesota, December 29, 2005.

Cover design by John Vineyard. Interior art by Ned Bustard. Photos and illustrations on pages 19, 33, 43,
58, 69, 89, and 109 courtesy of Getty Images. Map on page 10 created by Ann Blattner.

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biblical text and commentary. Some of these inserts first appeared in the *Little Rock Catholic Study
Bible*; the charts on p. 30 and p. 93 first appeared in the New Collegeville Bible Commentary, *The
Book of Revelation*, by Catherine A. Cory; other inserts were created specifically for this book by
Michael DiMassa.

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Liturgical Press, Saint John's Abbey, PO Box 7500, Collegeville, MN 56321-7500. Printed in the United
States of America.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Cory, Catherine A., author. | Little Rock Scripture Study Staff, contributor.

Title: Revelation / Catherine A. Cory with Little Rock Scripture Study staff.

Description: Collegeville, Minnesota : Liturgical Press, [2022] | Series: Little Rock scripture study |

Summary: "A seven-lesson Scripture study on the book of Revelation, including commentary, study and
reflection questions, prayers, and access to online lectures"— Provided by publisher.

Identifiers: LCCN 2021036042 (print) | LCCN 2021036043 (ebook) | ISBN 9780814667095 (paperback) |
ISBN 9780814667101 (epub) | ISBN 9780814667101 (pdf)

Subjects: LCSH: Bible. Revelation—Textbooks.

Classification: LCC BS2825.55 .C67 2022 (print) | LCC BS2825.55 (ebook) | DDC 228/.07—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021036042>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021036043>

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Wrap-Up Lectures and Discussion Tips for Facilitators are available for each lesson at no charge. Find them online at

Welcome

The Bible is at the heart of what it means to be a Christian. It is the Spirit-inspired word of God for us. It reveals to us the God who created, redeemed, and guides us still. It speaks to us personally and as a church. It forms the basis of our public liturgical life and our private prayer lives. It urges us to live worthily and justly, to love tenderly and wholeheartedly, and to be a part of building God's kingdom here on earth.

Though it was written a long time ago, in the context of a very different culture, the Bible is no relic of the past. Catholic biblical scholarship is among the best in the world, and in our time and place, we have unprecedented access to it. By making use of solid scholarship, we can discover much about the ancient culture and religious practices that shaped those who wrote the various books of the Bible. With these insights, and by praying with the words of Scripture, we allow the words and images to shape us as disciples. By sharing our journey of faithful listening to God's word with others, we have the opportunity to be stretched in our understanding and to form communities of love and learning. Ultimately, studying and praying with God's word deepens our relationship with Christ.

Revelation

The resource you hold in your hands is divided into seven lessons. Each lesson involves personal prayer and study using this book and the experience of group prayer, discussion, and wrap-up lecture.

If you are using this resource in the context of a small group, we suggest that you meet seven times, discussing one lesson per meeting. Allow about 90 minutes for the small group gathering. Small groups function best with eight to twelve people to ensure good group dynamics and to allow all to participate as they wish.


Some groups choose to have an initial gathering before their regular sessions begin. This allows an opportunity to meet one another, pass out books, and, if desired, view the optional intro lecture for this study available on the "Resources" page of the Little Rock Scripture Study website (www.littlerockscripture.org).

Every Bible study group is a little bit different. Some of our groups like to break each lesson up into two weeks of study so they are reading less each week and have more time to discuss the questions together at their weekly gatherings. If your group wishes to do this, simply agree how much of each lesson will be read each week, and only


answer the questions that correspond to the material you read. Wrap-up lectures can then be viewed at the end of every other meeting rather than at the end of every meeting. Of course, this will mean that your study will last longer, and your group will meet more times.

WHAT MATERIALS WILL YOU USE?

The materials in this book include:

- The text of the book of Revelation, using the New American Bible, Revised Edition as the translation.
- Commentary by Catherine A. Cory (which has also been published separately as part of the New Collegeville Bible Commentary series).
- Occasional inserts  highlighting elements of the chapters of Revelation being studied. Some of these are selected from the *Little Rock Catholic Study Bible* while others are supplied by the author and staff writers.
- Questions for study, reflection, and discussion at the end of each lesson.
- Opening and closing prayers for each lesson, as well as other prayer forms available in the closing pages of the book.

In addition, there are wrap-up lectures available for each lesson. Your group may choose to purchase a DVD containing these lectures or make use of the video lectures available online at no charge. The link to these free lectures is:

 Of course, if your group has access to qualified speakers, you may choose to have live presentations.

Each person will need a current translation of the Bible. We recommend the *Little Rock Catholic Study Bible*, which makes use of the New American Bible, Revised Edition. Other translations, such as the New Jerusalem Bible or the New Revised Standard Version: Catholic Edition, would also work well.

HOW WILL YOU USE THESE MATERIALS?

Prepare in advance

Using Lesson One as an example:

- Begin with a simple prayer like the one found on page 11.

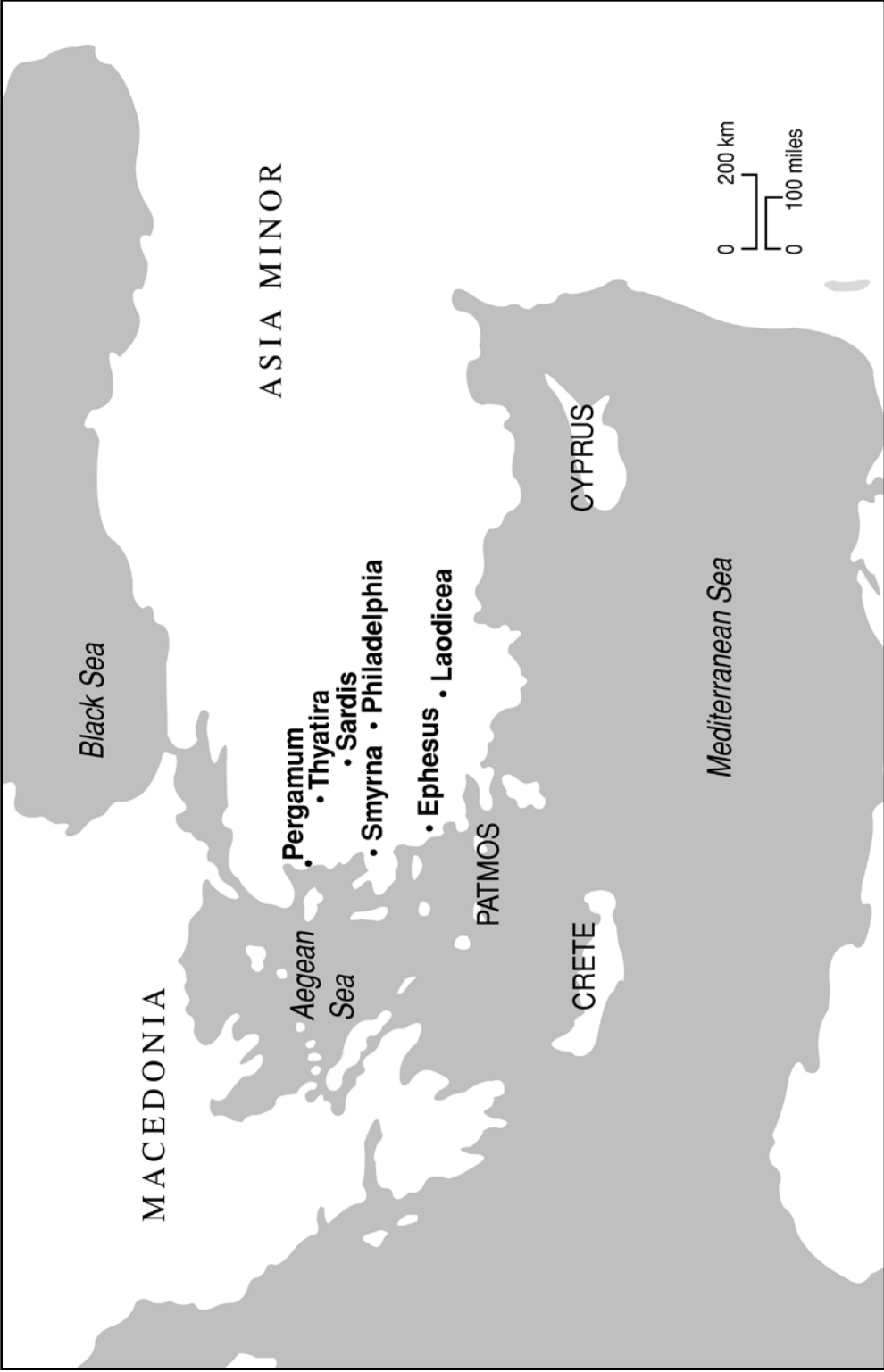
- Read the assigned material for Lesson One (pages 12–20) so that you are prepared for the weekly small group session.
- Answer the questions, Exploring Lesson One, found at the end of the assigned reading, pages 21–23.
- Use the Closing Prayer on page 24 when you complete your study. This prayer may be used again when you meet with the group.

Meet with your small group

- After introductions and greetings, allow time for prayer (about 5 minutes) as you begin the group session. You may use the prayer on page 11 (also used by individuals in their preparation) or use a prayer of your choosing.
- Spend about 45–50 minutes discussing the responses to the questions that were prepared in advance. You may also develop your discussion further by responding to questions and interests that arise during the discussion and faith-sharing itself.
- Close the discussion and faith-sharing with prayer, about 5–10 minutes. You may use the Closing Prayer at the end of each lesson or one of your choosing at the end of the book. It is important to allow people to pray for personal and community needs and to give thanks for how God is moving in your lives.
- Listen to or view the wrap-up lecture associated with each lesson (15–20 minutes). You may watch the lecture online, use a DVD, or provide a live lecture by a qualified local speaker. View the lecture together at the end of the session or, if your group runs out of time, you may invite group members to watch the lecture on their own time after the discussion.

A note to individuals

- If you are using this resource for individual study, simply move at your own pace. Take as much time as you need to read, study, and pray with the material.
- If you would like to share this experience with others, consider inviting a friend or family member to join you for your next study. Even a small group of two or three provides an opportunity for fruitful dialogue and faith-sharing!



Seven Churches of Revelation

Revelation

LESSON ONE

Introduction and Revelation 1

Begin your personal study and group discussion with a simple and sincere prayer such as:

Prayer

Heavenly Father, you are the Alpha and the Omega, our beginning and end. As we study the revelation given to your servant John, inspire us with hope in your promises and the strength to stay faithful to you always.

Read the Introduction on pages 12–15 and the Bible text of Revelation 1 found in the outside columns of pages 16–19, highlighting what stands out to you.

Read the accompanying commentary to add to your understanding.

Respond to the questions on pages 21–23, Exploring Lesson One.

The Closing Prayer on page 24 is for your personal use and may be used at the end of group discussion.

INTRODUCTION

More than any other part of the New Testament, the book of Revelation evokes greatly varying reactions among its readers. Some find it surreal and confusing and want to ignore it completely. Others find it endlessly fascinating because of its many colorful and sometimes grotesque images. Others, fearful about the future, view the book as an illustrated timeline that will help them better prepare for the events of the end of the world.

But is there more to the book of Revelation? Does Revelation have anything to say to believers who want to read the Scriptures to hear God’s voice in the present time, to inspire faith, and challenge themselves and their faith communities to right behavior, now, in the midst of the activities of their everyday lives? To some people’s surprise, the answer is yes, provided we seek to understand the book of Revelation from within the social and historical context in which it originated and as the type of literature it is—apocalyptic.

As a first step to reading and interpreting any piece of literature, it is important to learn something about its author and the place and time in which the author wrote. This information helps us determine the author’s point of view. We must also take into account any historical circumstances or cultural differences that may have affected his or her approach to the topic. Although Sacred Scripture is different from other literature in the sense that Christians believe it to be inspired of God, its human authors are true authors. Since the word of God is mediated through these human authors’ historical and cultural circumstances, we need to ask similar questions about the identity of the biblical author and the place and time in which he lived. Therefore, we will begin this commentary by asking what we know about the author of the book of Revelation and the time and place in which he wrote.

Another thing we need to know when we sit down to read a piece of literature is its genre or literary form. Only then do we know what expectations to have about its meaning. For

example, if we know that a particular story is a fable, we can expect to read about talking animals, and we know that we should look for its moral or central teaching. However, we would not expect a fable to give us a scientific study or a lesson in history. Therefore, before beginning our reading of the book of Revelation we also need to ask about its genre.

AUTHORSHIP

The author of the book of Revelation does not tell us much about himself, except that his name was John and that he saw himself as God’s servant (1:1). Two early church writers, Justin Martyr (c. A.D. 160) and Irenaeus (c. A.D. 180), associated the author of this book with the apostle John and with the writer of the Fourth Gospel, also known by that name. However, most biblical scholars today think that the author of the book of Revelation was neither an apostle of Jesus nor the author of the Gospel of John. The reasons for this view have to do with differences in the style of writing and the probable date of composition of this book. At most, we can say that the author of the book of Revelation was an early Jewish Christian prophet by the name of John, otherwise unknown in early Christian literature.

DATE OF COMPOSITION AND LOCATION OF THE WORK

John tells his readers that he received the visions about which he writes while residing on Patmos, a small island in the Aegean Sea. Further, he tells us that he was there because he “proclaimed God’s word and gave testimony to Jesus” (1:9). Thus we can probably assume that his exile on Patmos came as a result of his preaching activity. He also incorporates letters to seven churches of Asia Minor (modern Turkey) into his work. Therefore, we can locate this work in the eastern Mediterranean (see map on page 10).

Concerning the date of composition of the book of Revelation, the text itself provides few clues. The most important piece of evidence is the author’s use of the term “Babylon” for

Rome (18:2). In other Jewish literature written toward the end of the first century A.D., this term is used to describe Rome, but only after the Roman armies had destroyed Jerusalem and the temple in A.D. 70. Recall that the Babylonians had destroyed the Jerusalem temple in the sixth century B.C. and deported the people of Judea, throwing them into the darkest period of their history. Because the book of Revelation also makes this connection between Rome and Babylon, scholars generally agree that it was written after A.D. 70. The early church writer Irenaeus suggests that Revelation was written toward the end of Domitian's reign (A.D. 81–96), so, without other evidence to the contrary, a date of A.D. 95–96 is reasonable. This means that the book of Revelation is among the last books to be written in the New Testament. This book was commonly accepted as Sacred Scripture by the latter half of the second century.

THE GENRE OF THE BOOK OF REVELATION

What can we say about the genre of the book of Revelation? John describes his work as a prophecy, even though he never actually calls himself a prophet (1:3). A careful reader of this book will notice right away that we do not have a continuous story as we find in the Gospels. Instead, John records the visions (images) and auditions (voices) that came to him through a divine being, usually an angel. The subject matter of these visions and auditions are “heavenly things” and future events. This kind of work is generally described as an “apocalypse,” from a Greek word that means “revelation.” In fact, in some Bible translations the book of Revelation is given the title “Apocalypse.”

Typical of this genre, the seer (that is, the recipient of the visions) receives revelations through mediation of some sort and then records them in writing. The revelations involve secrets of the cosmos and secrets about the future. Sometimes the seer is allowed to journey to the heavenly locations. Most apocalypses also include a command to the seer to seal up

the written account of the visions for some future time.

If we assume that the book of Revelation belongs to the genre “apocalypse,” what then are we to understand about its interpretation? Some people read the book of Revelation to find out what will happen when this physical world is destroyed or to discover when it will come to an end—in other words, as a roadmap of the end time. However, we can be quite certain that the author of the book of Revelation did not write it for that purpose and that the original audience did not understand it in that way. Therefore, we would be seriously misled about its meaning if that is what we seek to learn from it today.

Perhaps the best way to understand apocalypses is to investigate the precursors or forerunners of the genre. In recent decades scholars have been debating whether apocalypses have their roots in the writings of the prophets or in Wisdom literature. This question arose out of the fact that one can see features of both genres in a wide variety of Jewish and Christian apocalypses and, in particular, in the book of Revelation.

As mentioned above, John himself describes his book as a prophecy (1:3; 22:7, 10, 18, 19). Nowhere in Revelation does he distinguish Jewish prophets of old from Christian prophets. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that he understood his prophecy to function in the same way as the prophets before him. Whereas we tend to think of prophets primarily as predictors of the future, the prophets of the Old Testament were better known as spokespersons of God on behalf of the covenant. In that capacity the prophet brought accusations against Israel and Judah when they failed to keep the covenant and warned of God's punishment against wrongdoers. The prophet also brought a message of consolation when, in the midst of their suffering, they thought God had abandoned them or when they repented of their sin. Thus the Old Testament prophets' message was principally a call to conversion and a divine consolation in times of trouble.

Another important aspect of biblical prophecy is its grounding in a particular place

and time. In other words, the prophetic author's original, intended meaning is closely connected to the historical circumstances out of which he wrote. For the book of Revelation this means that we ought to read it as a call to conversion and a message of consolation written first for the churches of Asia Minor, in their historical and cultural situation, and now reinterpreted for *our* historical and cultural situation. This is a process that requires prayerful reflection, but it is also in keeping with our understanding of the prophets' role as the conscience of the people.

Other scholars argue that the genre "apocalypse" has its roots in Wisdom literature. The Old Testament books included in this category are Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes, along with Sirach (also known as Ecclesiasticus), and Wisdom of Solomon. While Wisdom literature covers a wide variety of topics, it is principally concerned with questions about universal truth, the meaning of life (and death), and what constitutes human good. As one might expect, then, it also addresses issues of theodicy (response to the problem of evil): Why do the righteous suffer without warrant? Why do the wicked appear to go unpunished? What is the meaning of human suffering, and where is God's justice? All of us can relate to these questions, especially when the difficulties of life become too much to bear.

How have these theodicy questions traditionally been addressed within Judaism and Christianity? Any response must come to terms with two interrelated and sometimes apparently contradictory assertions: God is sovereign (all-powerful and in control) and God is just. If we acknowledge the existence of evil in the world, we are forced to question whether or to what extent God has power over evil. On the other hand, if we assert the sovereignty of God, then we must wonder about God's justice, since experience shows us that evil does indeed go unpunished at times, and good people do suffer harm.

If we accept that the genre of the book of Revelation has roots in Wisdom literature, we can see how it treats questions of theodicy by repeatedly asserting that God is sovereign, reigning supreme not only over the heavenly realm but also over the earthly realm and even the underworld. In addition, it repeatedly asserts that God is just, promising reward to God's holy ones and punishment of the wicked. This message of hope and consolation is especially powerful if the audience for which it is intended is experiencing persecution for its faith.

Finally, as mentioned above, the apocalyptic genre does not presuppose a sustained story line that extends from the beginning to the end of the book. Likewise, the reader of the book of Revelation will observe that the book is not organized chronologically. Rather, its author describes a collection of visions, some of which are situated in the heavenly realm and others on earth; some pertaining to the believing community as it anticipates persecution, others relating to those who have endured the suffering and proved themselves faithful. Often the author will introduce a particular idea or image in an early vision and then return to it later in a series of expanded visions or auditions. For these reasons the reader must resist the temptation to impose a chronology on the book. Any attempt to see the book as a linear map of the events of the end time will necessarily lead to misunderstanding of its message.

To sum up, apocalypses do three things: (1) they console people in situations of persecution; (2) they present a particular interpretation of historical events that focuses on the justice and sovereignty of God and the triumph of good over evil; (3) they persuade their hearers to keep covenant with God, that is, to live in a way that assures that they will be among God's elect in the end time.

Note: This introduction has been abridged from the original introduction to the commentary found in the New Collegeville Bible Commentary, *The Book of Revelation*.

OUTLINE OF THE BOOK OF REVELATION

There are many ways to outline the book of Revelation. Our commentary is organized according to this outline, with additional subdivisions as needed.

- I. Rev 1:1-8 Introductory materials
- II. Rev 1:9–11:19 First cycle of visions
 - A. Rev 1:9-20 Initial vision of one like the son of man
 - B. Rev 2:1–3:22 The seven letters to the seven churches of Asia Minor
 - C. Rev 4:1–5:14 The vision of God’s throne and the Lamb
 - D. Rev 6:1–7:17 The opening of the seven seals
 - E. Rev 8:1–11:19 The seven trumpets
- III. Rev 12:1–20:15 Second cycle of visions
 - A. Rev 12:1-18 Vision of the woman and the dragon
 - B. Rev 13:1-18 Vision of the beasts of the sea and the land
 - C. Rev 14:1-20 Vision of the Lamb and imminent judgment
 - D. Rev 15:1–16:21 Visions of the seven bowls
 - E. Rev 17:1–18:24 Fall of Babylon (interlude)
 - F. Rev 19:1–20:15 Seven visions of the last things
- IV. Rev 21:1–22:5 Vision of the New Jerusalem
- V. Rev 22:6-21 Concluding materials

I: Prologue

CHAPTER 1

¹The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave to him, to show his servants what must happen soon. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, ²who gives witness to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ by reporting what he saw. ³Blessed is the one who reads aloud and blessed are those who listen to this prophetic message and heed what is written in it, for the appointed time is near.

II: Letters to the Churches of Asia

Greeting

⁴John, to the seven churches in Asia: grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits before his throne, ⁵and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead and ruler of the

continue

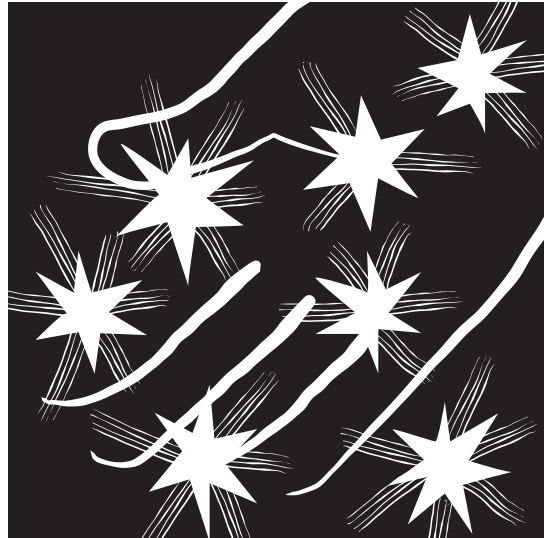
INTRODUCTORY MATERIALS

Rev 1:1-8

The introductory section of this book consists of a prologue (1:1-3), from which the title of the book is derived, followed by what appears to be the “address” portion of a letter (1:4-8).

1:1-3 Prologue

The first word of the document, *apocalypsis*, means “revelation.” Thus the book is known as Revelation or the Apocalypse. The author of the book, who is also the recipient of the revelation, identifies himself as John and describes his purpose in writing: to witness to “the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ” (1:2). He also describes his work as prophecy (1:3). Notice the relationship of parties involved in the transmission of this reve-



lation. The revelation belongs or pertains to Jesus Christ (1:1). It is given by God but is mediated through an angel to John, who in turn reported what he saw to others (the community of believers, 1:1-2). The prologue concludes with a beatitude (a saying that begins, “Blessed is the one . . .”) for those who hear the word and act upon what they hear (1:3). This is a prophet at work, acting as spokesperson for God and calling people to conversion.



A **beatitude** is a common literary form known as a macarism (from the Greek word *makarios*, meaning “blessed,” “fortunate,” or “happy”) found in ancient literature. In the Old Testament, beatitudes are found most often in liturgical settings (e.g., Pss 33:12; 119:1-2) and in Wisdom literature (e.g., Prov 8:32; Sir 14:1-2). Of course, Jesus’ Beatitudes (Matt 5:3-11; Luke 6:20-22) are the best-known examples in the New Testament.

1:4-8 The “address”

This subunit looks like the “address” portion of a letter, but it is somewhat misleading