

SPIRITUALLY CALLED SODOM AND EGYPT

GETTING TO THE HEART OF EARLY CHRISTIAN PROPHECY THROUGH THE APOCALYPSE OF JOHN¹

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This work engages with and refreshes the debate regarding the nature of early Christian prophecy—a debate that has become somewhat deadlocked and stale—by placing Revelation at the centre of the debate and finding there a *tertium quid* challenging both sides of the debate. It is argued that Revelation is much more likely to be representative of regular early Christian prophecy than is often assumed and that what constitutes John’s prophecy (and potentially early Christian prophecy generally) as prophecy is essentially the way in which the text moves the affections—by a particularly powerful use of allusive metaphor to ‘name’ features of the contemporary world in such a way that the referent is completely swallowed up by the allusion.

The argument moves in four steps. The first (Ch. 1) identifies a certain polarisation of the scholarship between ‘prophecy as oracle’ and ‘prophecy as exposition’. The former draws prophecy as stereotypically direct, specific revelation, spontaneously received outside of cognitive reflective processes and typically delivered as a short utterance. The latter sees prophecy as ‘doing theology’—a hermeneutical exercise involving exegesis of prior texts resulting in extended discourses. These positions have deep roots in Anabaptist and Reformed traditions respectively—ecclesiological roots that explain a number of features of the debate including relatively little attention given to Revelation as a source.

Secondly, it is argued, against the scholarly consensus, that Revelation is, in its entirety, an example of mainstream early Christian prophecy. Chapter two examines the emic evidence—the way in which the book of Revelation, by a multitude of implicit and explicit markers, declares itself to be a prophecy. While many of these arguments are not

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novel the chapter adds weight to the argument that Revelation would have been heard initially in a single sitting and raises the possibility of an allusion to (or at least echo of) Exodus 3 at Revelation 1:1 (God/Jesus signalling a new revelation for his people by sending his angel to his servant) that introduces the text as a new book of Moses. The third chapter turns to etic criteria, seeking to discern how Revelation might have been received by its first hearers. To what extent would it have met their expectations of prophecy? Pauline, OT and Palestinian prophetic traditions would probably have been most important here but it is found that whatever the influences on the Asian churches there was likely a very strong degree of fit. A number of objections to the typicality of the Apocalypse are dealt with and in particular the dichotomies often made between regular Corinthian/Pauline church prophecy and the prophecy of John are shown to be unsafe. Even if the argument that Revelation is typical of early Christian prophecy does not completely convince (and there will be some degree of doubt here) these chapters should at the very least persuade that the evidence of Revelation must not be dismissed too quickly, that it has been underestimated as a source in scholarly discussions and that Revelation should be placed rather closer to the mainstream of early Christian prophecy.

The third step of the argument seeks to answer the question of what precisely constitutes Revelation as prophecy. The standard definitions of prophecy as inspired speech or a message from the divine realm delivered through a human intermediary are helpful in broad terms but do little to distinguish prophecy from other types of early Christian discourse (e.g. gospel preaching or interpreted tongues speech). Attempts to define prophecy more closely in terms of form, content or ecclesial function have entered a series of cul-de-sacs. Chapters four and five develop an affective-function approach. A grammar of the affections is developed from the work of Jonathan Edwards and united with an attention to poetics and particularly metaphor, employing insights from a range of metaphor theorists. The focus here is on the question of how prophecy might be distinguished from other texts and utterances. What tools and approaches might allow us to detect that which is distinctive about prophecy? This emphasis on the distinctive might run the risk of drawing a lop-sided portrait of prophecy were it not for the fact that the approach advanced here focuses on (a) the affections—which Jonathan Edwards finds to be the greater part of

religion, its essential core and mainspring, and (b) poetics and the way in which the language of the utterance works on the hearer—encompassing the form, content, function and basic dynamic of prophecy.

Finally, in the fourth step (Ch. 6) parallel analyses of affective function are made of Revelation 11:1-13 (the chosen sample text) and 1 Corinthians 15 (the chosen comparison text). It is argued that while both texts are metaphorical and powerfully affective, the metaphors of Revelation 11 are of a different nature and work on the reader in rather different ways in comparison with those of 1 Corinthians 15. The particular affective power of Revelation 11:1-13 is accomplished substantially through metaphor that is: (1) original rather than conventional; (2) open-ended rather than determinate; (3) substantive-based rather than focused on a verb or other part of speech; (4) referent-suppressing rather than referent-explicit (it is not 'A is B'—there is only 'B'); and (5) allusive rather than employing everyday imagery. This is metaphor as an unveiling of the true (spiritually-speaking) *Sitz im Leben* of the hearers—a naming of reality. Revelation 11:8 is the most explicit example of this activity but the same process can be found throughout the book. Chapter 7 suggests some particular examples but there is much more work to be done in this area. Work is also needed to determine the extent to which this typology of prophecy fits the other extant examples of early Christian prophecy (Luke 2:29-32 and Acts 21:11 are given as cases where similar features may be discernable) and contrasts with the use of metaphor in non-prophetic texts (hymn, teaching, etc.). If the typology, or something close to it, is sustainable then it has the potential to be used heuristically to uncover embedded prophecies within, for example, sermonic material (Jude 11?).