The Book of Revelation:  
A Written Text Towards the Oral Performance

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1 Introduction: The Book of Revelation, a Written Text

Unlike other New Testament texts, the Book of Revelation is not a text originating in different traditions that were spread by word of mouth before being written later and so acquiring final shape. The Book of Revelation is a written composition, fruit of the creative moment of the artist who uses the quill and papyrus to immortalize his work, and it is transmitted as such. Therefore, throughout the work the author insists that the origin and content does not come from word of mouth, but through the written text on a scroll.

First of all, the author of the Book of Revelation—who is introduced as John (Rev. 1:1,4)—highlights that his writing responds to a divine mandate: ὃ βλέπεις γράψον εἰς βιβλίον, ‘write in a book what you see’ (Rev. 1:11). That is, he stresses that the Book of Revelation is a work not born as the fruit of the author’s personal inspiration, but as the fruit of divine inspiration. It is God Himself who reveals what is hidden so John can reveal it to the servants of God (Rev. 1:1). Therefore, the creative moment just mentioned is reduced, in the case of the Book of Revelation, to a mere transcription of τὸν λόγον τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ τὴν μαρτυρίαν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ ὅσα εἶδεν, ‘the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw’ (Rev. 1:2).

Perhaps, this is the reason the author of the Book of Revelation stresses that the prophecy has already been written down, which is why he emphasizes the two meaningful expressions: τὰ ἐν αὐτῇ γεγραμμένα (Rev. 1:3), at the beginning, and τὸ βιβλίον (Rev. 22:7,9–10,18[2]–19[2]), at the end. That is, John states that he has already recorded in writing the revelation of God; in fact, what has been seen and heard (cf. Rev. 1:2), according to the prologue, has already been converted into a book (τὰ ἐν αὐτῇ γεγραμμένα, Rev. 1:3).

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1 The Greek text belongs to Novum Testamentum Graece, (199327). The translation is the author’s.
But John’s insistence does not end there. It is in the final liturgical dialogue (Rev. 22:17–21) when he emphasizes that the manuscript is already a reality. For that reason, the expression τὸ βιβλίον, which had already been repeated up to three times in the authentication process of the work (Rev. 22:7,9–10), appears again another three times, reinforced by means of the demonstrative τοῦτο (Rev. 22:18[2]-19) and the presence of the passive participle γράφω. The repeated use of the demonstrative τοῦτο lends a special effect to the pericopes; due to its deictic value, each time that John mentions τὸ βιβλίον τοῦτο it is as if in some way he is demonstrating with his hand, achieving a certain effect of realism for the listener/reader: it is as if, in some way, the book was there before their eyes and could also be viewed when the reading concluded. Hence any type of modification to the text, whether addition or omission, will be punished (Rev. 22:18–19). At the same time, the reiterated presence of γράφω (Rev. 22:18–19) proves that the Book of Revelation had already been written and given its final ending.

Perhaps the seer insists upon showing that the revelation was put down in writing because during the reading of the Book of Revelation, the listener/reader is made to participate in the composition process of the work: the stay in Patmos (Rev. 1:9), hearing the voice that orders John to write, or rather, that he begins writing what he sees (Rev. 1:11)—given the presence of the aorist imperative—after he sees and hears. Thus, at the end of the work, John is forced to insist that the work has concluded, in this way avoiding subsequent additions as occurred in other writings of the New Testament, such as the gospels.

In short, John presents the Book of Revelation as a work that emerges from a divine initiative: communicating to the early Christian communities what was hidden (Rev. 1:1), and that, reaching its conclusion, is presented as a book, one which is completely finished and sealed, whose modification would be punished by God Himself (Rev. 22:18–19). Thus, the Book of Revelation is a work that originated in writing.

2 The Book of Revelation and the Oral Performance

The Book of Revelation, from the beginning, indicates to whom it is addressed: the servants of God (Rev. 1:1) and a little later John tells how he received from Jesus the command to write his visions to send to the seven churches (Rev. 1:11). At the end of the story the angel once again reminds us of this, insisting that the revelation has taken place to be manifested to the servants of God (Rev. 22:6). Therefore, it is clear that between the written text and its recipients an