

2.8 - Style of Writing

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It has been observed that the style of the Greek within the book of Revelation differs significantly from that of the gospel of John. This has been frequently used to intimate that the author, although describing himself as John (Rev. 1:1⁺, 4⁺, 9⁺; 21:2⁺; 22:8⁺), is a different John than the Apostle. (See the discussion concerning the [authorship](#) of the book.) Our purpose here is to briefly discuss these differences in style and to suggest possible reasons why this is so. The Greek of the book of Revelation has been categorized as “more primitive” or “rougher” than that of John’s Gospel. This is primarily due to the violation of some of the normal rules of Greek grammar. Charles claimed it contained more grammatical irregularities than any other Greek document of the ancient world.¹

Most of these solecisms are disagreements in case, number, gender, or person. Other instances sometimes included in discussion of the solecisms are not outright transgressions of ordinary grammatical rules but are better categorized as peculiar variants in style.²

Tenney describes a specific example: “For instance, this phrase, ‘from him who is and who was and who is to come’ (Rev. 1:4⁺) should be translated literally: ‘From he who is, and from he was, and from he who is coming.’ The case of the noun after the preposition ‘from’ is wrong; the second expression is a finite verb and not a participle; and the third expression is used in the same way as the first.”³ Some have suggested that the differences in style might reflect the aging of John between the writing of his Gospel and the book of Revelation, but this seems unlikely.⁴ Others have concluded from these differences that the author of the book of Revelation cannot be the author of John’s Gospel. Still others point to possible reasons for the appearance of these irregularities. Tenney sees the [irregularity mentioned above](#) as being evidence of the Hebraic material and thought of the author:

The reason for this strange rendering is that the Greek had no past participle of the verb “to be,” and so the author used a finite form. Furthermore, the case did not change because evidently the entire expression had become stereotyped as a title, and so did not alter the construction to fit the context. **The writer translated a Hebrew title directly and literally into Greek without attempting to conform to the Greek idiom.** He thought in Hebrew or Aramaic; he wrote in Greek. The relative certainty of this fact shows that the book of Revelation does not emanate chiefly from Greek and pagan sources. [emphasis added]⁵

Beale too observes a correlation between the irregularities and Old Testament allusions:

A significant number of these irregularities occur in the midst of OT allusions. A number of expressions appear irregular because John is carrying over the exact grammatical forms of the allusions, often from the various versions of the Greek OT and sometimes from the Hebrew. He does not change the OT grammatical form to fit the immediate syntactical context in Revelation, so the OT expression sticks out like a sore thumb. . . . the solecisms of the Apocalypse function in this way.⁶

Robertson sees the textual anomalies as reflecting a heavy dependence upon the [Septuagint](#).⁷ Others suggest that John’s writing style was affected by the emotionally vivid content given in rapid succession.⁸ Another possibility is that John utilized an amanuensis (secretary) when writing the Gospel, but was unable to do so on Patmos.⁹ An additional factor to consider is that other of John’s writings contain significant grammatical irregularities:¹⁰

Without any question there are unusual grammatical features in the Apocalypse, but what about John’s other writings, his first epistle, for example? Are there not extreme grammatical irregularities here, too? . . . Unusual grammatical phenomena are by no means limited to the Apocalypse in the apostle John’s canonical writings. If John deviated from the normal usage in 1 John, why could he not have done so in the Apocalypse?¹¹

The grammatical departures do not appear to be due to the ignorance of the writer, but appear intentional, perhaps in order to emphasize theological subtleties.¹² Regardless of the reasons for the stylistic oddities of the Greek of the book of Revelation, it has not adversely affected its literary impact:

But from whatever cause or concurrence of causes, it cannot be denied that the Apocalypse of John stands alone among Greek literary writings in its disregard of the ordinary rules of syntax, and the success with which syntax is set aside without loss of perspicuity or even of literary power. The book seems openly and deliberately to defy the grammarian, and yet, even as literature, it is in its own field unsurpassed.¹³

Notes

¹“Charles claimed it contained more grammatical irregularities than any other Greek document of the ancient world. he accounted for

this with his famous dictum that ‘while [John] writes in Greek, he thinks in Hebrew, and the thought has naturally affected the vehicle of expression.’ ”—Gregory K. Beale, [The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1999), 96.

²Ibid., 101-102.

³Merrill C. Tenney, [Interpreting Revelation](#) (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1957), 14.

⁴“The gospel of John was probably written between A.D. 85 and 90, the epistles of John in the early nineties, and the Apocalypse about A.D. 95.”—Robert L. Thomas, [Revelation 1-7](#) (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1992), 18.

⁵Tenney, [Interpreting Revelation](#), 14.

⁶Beale, [The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text](#), 101.

⁷“It is not so much particular Hebraisms that meet us in the Apocalypse as the flavor of the LXX whose words are interwoven in the text at every turn.”—A. T. Robertson, [A Grammar of the Greek NT in the Light of Historical Research](#) (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1934), 135.

⁸“Some have suggested that the message was so emotional and vivid that John struggled to keep up with the flashes of dramatic revelation coming on him.”—Mal Couch, [“The Literary Structure of Revelation.”](#) in Mal Couch, ed., [A Bible Handbook to Revelation](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2001), 69.

⁹“It is also possible that John used an amanuensis (secretary) when he wrote the gospel and the epistles (as Paul did; Rom. 16:22) —something he could not have done while writing Revelation in exile on Patmos.”—John MacArthur, [Revelation 1-11 : The MacArthur New Testament Commentary](#) (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1999), 6. “There is plausibility in the suggestion that the superior smoothness of the Greek of the Gospel and various linguistic differences are due at least in part to the employment of a Greek amanuensis. . . . Paul wrote most of his epistles by the hand of another.”—Isbon T. Beckwith, [The Apocalypse of John](#) (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2001), 356.

¹⁰“While the solecistic anacolutha of the Apocalypse have no parallel on any largescale in the Gospel, there is a considerable number of unusual constructions which are common to the two books.”—Henry Barclay Swete, [The Apocalypse of St. John](#) (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1998, 1906), cxxiii.

¹¹Thomas, [Revelation 1-7](#), 7-8.

¹²“his departures from Greek usage are pretty certainly not due to ignorance; his general correctness and his Greek vocabulary show him to have possessed an adequate command of the language.”—Beckwith, [The Apocalypse of John](#), 345.

¹³Swete, [The Apocalypse of St. John](#), cxx.

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