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THE BOOK OF UNVEILING

The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants what must soon take place; and he made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, who bore witness to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw.

Rev. 1:1–2

The word translated ‘revelation’ in the opening verse of the last book of the Bible is *apokalupsis* in Greek, meaning the ‘lifting of a veil’, but exactly what is being unveiled is unclear from the construction of the sentence. Is it a revelation *of* Jesus Christ meaning ‘about’ him, or *of* Jesus Christ in the sense of ‘belonging’ to him—a revelation he has been given by his Father, and which he now transmits through an angel to his Apostle? Since the word is ambiguous, we should probably assume it means both. It is a revelation from the Father to the Son; for, after all, did not Jesus say, ‘But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only’ (Matt. 24:36)? And it is a revelation not only of ‘things that must occur’ but in some sense of Jesus himself; that is, of things that Jesus can only learn *about himself* if the Father reveals them.

We tend to scan through the Apocalypse too quickly, catching only the main images—a Woman clothed with the sun, a Dragon, the Four Horsemen, Babylon, the Heavenly City—never stopping to absorb the rest, or ponder their spiritual meaning. ‘He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches’, says John in the second chapter (Rev. 2:17), while in the introduction to the book he also writes: ‘Blessed is he who reads aloud the words of the prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is

written therein; for the time is near' (Rev. 1:3). The Apocalypse was therefore meant to be *read aloud*, to be *heard* (by those who have ears for it), and to be *kept*, or lived. Normally we do none of these three things that John offers us a blessing for doing. Recall that silent reading to oneself (without even moving one's lips!) is a modern invention, virtually unknown to the ancients and medievals. John is implying the presence of a formal lector, reading the text in a liturgical setting, and a congregation who is listening intently to him. We tend to forget this liturgical context when we read the book today in our study bibles.

The Apocalypse was designed to have a certain effect on its hearers when read aloud, and it was to be read *ecclesially*, in the communion of faith. It should not be treated as a mere book-end, nor is it to be dismissed as the eccentric indulgence of an overheated imagination. It has to be received into the soul; it should make a difference to the hearer; it should be taken seriously.

The chapters that follow are written to explore how John's extraordinary cascade of images helps to 'unveil' the whole Christian tradition for us. I want to demonstrate how—with the eyes of faith—the Apocalypse can be seen as a compendium of the Christian mysteries. Of course, that does not mean that it is exclusively of interest to believing Christians. Revelation is a synthesis of all the cosmic and religious ideas of the Middle East, demonstrating a profound harmony between the Christian experience of the first disciples, the visionary mysticism of the Jewish Temple, and the best elements of the Egyptian-Pythagorean wisdom of the surrounding culture. John consciously drew on a wide range of sources to express the 'making new' of all things in Christ. He saw Jesus Christ as the fulfillment of all prophecies and of all myths, the key to unlock secrets hidden from previous ages (1 Cor. 2:6–16). The whole of previous history, the whole of mythology, could now be re-read with Jesus in mind.

The Author of Revelation

But who was John? The traditional view going back perhaps to Saint Irenaeus around AD 180, and now commonly regarded as mistaken, identified him with the 'disciple whom Jesus loved', mentioned in

the fourth Gospel and thought to refer the author of that Gospel. If true, that would make him the son of Zebedee, one of the two so-called ‘sons of thunder’ (Mark 3:17), an Evangelist and member of the Twelve, who had known Jesus personally on earth. *That* John is said to have lived to be a very old man (John 21:20–24), looking after the Virgin Mary, the Lord’s own mother, until her assumption into heaven (John’s long-term care for her is implied in John 19:27). It was thought that he had written his ‘Apocalypse’ on the island of Patmos near Ephesus some time before his death towards the end of the first century, say around AD 95. A reference to it in Justin’s *Dialog with Trypho* in the middle of the second century seems to support this. Some traditions attributed the three Johannine Letters in the New Testament also to the same ‘John’, though in the fourth century the Council of Rome identified the second and third of these letters as written by someone else.

Modern critics, basing themselves on the rather rough and ungrammatical Greek style of the Book of Revelation compared to the fourth Gospel, argue for a completely different authorship of the two documents. Not only do they doubt that Revelation was written by the same person as the Gospel of John, but they have questioned the idea that the fourth Gospel was written by an Apostle at all, since the theological texture of the book is so different from that of Matthew, Mark, and Luke—it seems to show a level of erudition inappropriate if not impossible for an unlettered fisherman.

All this is a side-issue. We simply do not know the history of these documents, and more recent criticism has drawn attention to the fact that even the most distinguished scholars make dubious assumptions (such as the impossibility of miracles, or the inability of fishermen to acquire a theological education in the first century) that help to determine their conclusions. John Sweet argues that John’s style is deliberately violent, partly to have a certain effect on the reader, partly to preserve elements of Hebrew grammar into the Greek (his control of tenses is, after all, excellent).¹ A striking suggestion was made by J.A.T. Robinson and others that far from being

1. J. Sweet, *Revelation*, 16.

a late addition to the New Testament, prompted by the destruction of the Jewish Temple by the Romans in AD 70,² the Book of Revelation was probably among the very *first* of the New Testament documents, perhaps written in the year 68 or even earlier. Its composition might have involved translating into Greek various pieces of mystical writing composed previously in Hebrew and commented upon in Aramaic. The fourth Gospel would then have been written down somewhat later than that, i.e. after the fall of the Temple. (It would, of course, make quite a difference to how we read the Gospels, and the fourth Gospel in particular, if we knew that the author assumed that some of his readers were already familiar with the Book of Revelation.) Austin Farrer's view in *The Rebirth of Images* is that all the Johannine material was written by the same person, the different styles being required by the genres in which the work was being done—also that the Gospel was written last, perhaps around AD 90 (the Apocalypse being, in a sense, a necessary preparation for writing it).

In any case, reading the text in the way which interests us here would be substantially unaffected if any or all these documents were attributed not to John the Evangelist but to a Christian leader or even a Johannine community living in the early second century.³ Whoever he was, and regardless of whether he was a seer in his own right, we know that he was writing in a visionary tradition that went back a long way—probably to the First Temple built by King Solomon, which stood for four centuries until its destruction by the Babylonians in 587 BC. The prophet Ezekiel describes himself as a priest of this Temple in exile. Ezekiel's visions of the divine chariot (*merkavah*) and heavenly temple (see Ez. 1, 10, and 40–47), the visions of Daniel (Dan. 7–12), and the extra-canonical Book of

2. Although the destruction of Jerusalem by fire, famine and pestilence—even the seemingly miraculous survival of the Christian community and of the 'upper room' in Jerusalem—all fit this hypothesis (Scott Hahn, *The Lamb's Supper*, 90–103).

3. Most biblical scholars at least seem to accept the Apocalypse as the work of a single author, given the uniqueness of its style and the careful construction of the whole, though whether it recorded a single vision or a series of visionary experiences over several years is another question.

Enoch, combined with long Jewish meditation on the seven days of creation, the stages of ascent to the heavenly palaces (*hekhalot*), and the Song of Songs, all played a part in inspiring a commentary tradition that by the twelfth century produced in Spain and Provence the flowering of Jewish mysticism known as Kabbalah. But they also lay, much earlier, behind the Book of Revelation, which integrates these ancient themes within a Christian visionary experience.

The Paradox of Revelation

The Apocalypse closes the canon of Christian Scripture, just as the Book of Genesis opens it. Genesis is concerned with the creation of the world; Revelation with its re-creation. John's vision takes place 'on the Lord's day' (Rev. 1:10); that is, on the day that celebrates the Resurrection and also the Sabbath repose of God. The Seer finds himself lifted above his own times, to a vantage-point where he can see more deeply into the spiritual world that lies within and around our own. In the fourth volume of his theological masterpiece *Theo-Drama*, Hans Urs von Balthasar describes John as standing between heaven and earth, exposed to a *mundus imaginalis*, a world of images, that are neither the archetypes of reality nor historical events but something of both, a bridge between the visible and invisible worlds.⁴

Revelation is unique throughout apocalyptic literature for the profusion of its visual imagery and the paucity of self-interpretation, thus immersing the reader or listener in a symbolic world of extraordinary intensity. 'As an integrated sequence of visionary material, architectonically planned, creating one world of images kaleidoscopically presented, the Apocalypse of John is unique.'⁵

4. Here as elsewhere in *Theo-Drama* Balthasar is developing insights of Adrienne von Speyr, who, allegedly without having read the book of Revelation, experienced the same 'world of images' as John in a series of intense visions. She interpreted these in her own two-volume *Commentary on the Apocalypse* which is not yet available in English. See H.U. von Balthasar, *First Glance at Adrienne von Speyr*, 90–94. I have borrowed the phrase *mundus imaginalis*, however, from orientalist Henri Corbin.

5. R. Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy*, 177. See also his *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, 9–10.

John encodes in these images a distillation of history and of prophecy, and herein lies one of the essential paradoxes of Christian existence. Christians in every age must live both history and prophecy, the Cross and the Resurrection, tragedy and comedy, at the same time. They must live simultaneously on two levels, both knowing and not-knowing the end of the story in which they are playing a part. ‘The Lord appears to the seer in majesty, with all the emblems of triumph—and yet a struggle is going on (and actually intensifying) in which everything is at stake,’ says Balthasar.⁶

But Balthasar takes this same paradox to another level. He continues: ‘On the secular stage, the prior announcement of victory would be regarded as destroying all dramatic tension; on the apocalyptic stage, however, it is this very victory that causes the real dramatic action to spark into flame.’⁷ So it is not simply that we know in advance that the battle has been won; it is that the *awareness of the victory* (of Jesus on the Cross) is what provoked the battle in the first place. This is a weird kind of inverse causality: the outcome of the battle is its cause. It is the real drama that lies behind John’s Revelation, encapsulated in this saying from the fourth Gospel: ‘If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not have sin; but now they have no excuse for their sin’ (John 15:22). The presence of Christ in the world and on the Cross is what brings sin to a head.

Looking back from two thousand years in his future, we can read John’s book as a concentrated expression of a tradition and a history that is still unfolding, still intensely relevant to us in our day-to-day lives. It can serve as the starting point for an exploration not just of a certain type of imaginative literature, or of the social milieu of the early Christians, but of Christianity itself, and of the ‘Christian experience’ shared by all believers.

John consciously models himself on the visionary Old Testament prophets, his task being to point to the One who fulfils all prophecies (a bit like his namesake, John the Baptizer—and similar names in the Bible are rarely coincidental). Whether or not he saw Jesus in the flesh, he writes from within that absolute fulfilment, from

6. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, vol. IV, 19.

7. *Theo-Drama*, vol. IV, 21.

within the lived experience of the Incarnation. All the later theological developments in the history of Christianity—from the doctrine of the Trinity and the moral teachings of Saint Thomas in the Middle Ages to Pope John Paul II's 'theology of the body' in the late twentieth century, together with many other developments yet to be unfolded—are germinating within his text. In that sense, the Apocalypse remains for all time a key to the mysteries that Christ revealed to his closest disciples. These mysteries the Church always needs to rediscover, for she will only truly know them if she knows them as if for the first time.

The Structure of Revelation

Revelation opens with John on the island of Patmos being commissioned by God to send a letter to the seven churches in Asia (the introductory verses 4–8 form a kind of executive summary of the whole book). After this prolog, the book unfolds in six or seven main sections, followed by an epilog to balance the prolog. However, the complexity of the text that we find sandwiched between prolog and epilog cannot be overestimated. Whichever way we choose to divide it, there will be repetitions, overlaps, reversals of order, and multiple perspectives on the same events described in different metaphors.

The text appears at first chaotic, a bit like a dream. It is no doubt constructed deliberately to give that impression:

The dream-like character of Revelation is constructed by focusing: first an object is noticed, comes to the foreground; then action begins to swell out from around it. In the first phase, we see a picture: we notice an object and start wondering what it is for. The longer this goes on, the stranger and more compelling the object becomes. The second phase is cinematic: the object's powers are set in motion by one of the characters. It is like a dream; but it is also like witnessing a religious ceremony in a strange temple, and not knowing what any of the cultic *things* is going to *do*.⁸

8. Francesca Murphy, *The Comedy of Revelation*, 215.

It helps to notice that the Apocalypse falls naturally into a simple structure of two parts or halves, with the second beginning at chapter 12 (the famous vision of the woman clothed with the sun and crowned with twelve stars). The first part unfolds as follows.

- (1) In the first three chapters, John has a vision of Jesus Christ, who gives him messages for the churches of Asia.
- (2) In the next two chapters, John has a vision of heaven, of the heavenly Throne, and of a book in God's hand sealed with seven seals that only the Lamb (Jesus) is worthy to open. The Lamb proceeds to open the first six seals.
- (3) The opening of the seventh seal leads to the blowing of seven trumpets. The events associated with the first six trumpets take up the next two chapters.
- (4) In the final two chapters of this part, John is given a 'little scroll' to eat, he is instructed to measure the temple, he is told of the two witnesses, and at last the *seventh trumpet* is blown, signifying the final integration of heaven and earth: 'The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ' (11:15).

Seven messages, seven seals, and seven trumpets, and we are still only half way through Revelation! The progression in the first part is clear. Jesus has led John through a series of frames. First he steps through a door into heaven. Once there he sees a book. Entering into the book is the second stage in the journey. In fact the opening of the seven seals can be seen as his *journey into the book*, the revelation of the inner meaning of the Hebrew Scriptures. The seventh seal marks a transition to the third stage, signified by seven trumpets, culminating in the 'marriage of heaven and earth' that brings Part One to an end.

The second part of Revelation begins with the opening of chapter 12 and looks forward to Christ's second coming. So:

- (1) The woman clothed with the sun is the Church founded by Christ, the Dragon and the two Beasts (the evil echo of the two heavenly witnesses we have seen earlier) are the power of Rome and worldly authority in general.

(2) In chapter 14 we see the Lamb standing on Mount Zion with the 144,000—note, not in heaven but in a place midway between heaven and earth, with the ‘sound of many waters’ suggesting baptism, therefore again the presence of the Church—and we see in this ‘midheaven’ three angels (priests?) proclaiming the Gospel.

(3) In the last part of chapter 14 we meet four angels (making a total of seven in this chapter), two of whom carry sickles with which they harvest and reap the earth at the command of the other two.

(4) Chapters 15 and 16 are occupied with another series of seven angels bringing the seven final plagues.

(5) In chapters 17 and 18 we witness the fall of Babylon in detail.

(6) Chapters 19 and 20 concern the vision of heaven and the riding out from there of the Logos himself for the final battle.

(7) Chapters 21 and 22 contain the vision of what happens *after* history: the descent of the New Jerusalem.

(A more detailed outline will be found in Appendix 1 at the end of the book.)

The Theology of Revelation

And what is revealed about God in the Book of Revelation? Primarily, of course, that God is supreme over the cosmos and over man, and that his kingdom will come ‘on earth as it is in heaven.’ The Apocalypse was written to console and encourage Christians oppressed by the Roman Imperium, seemingly an implacable and all-powerful enemy (the conversion of Constantine lay centuries in the future). More than that, it was intended to reconfigure the imagination of its hearers in order to transform their experience of the world around them—to wean them away from ‘Babylon’ and summon them to the holy City of God that was and is descending from heaven.

Secondly, the author of Revelation clearly believed in the divinity of Christ and the Trinity of God. Though the doctrine of the Trinity would not be worked out in detail for several centuries, John was

already a Trinitarian thinker, recognizing the distinct presence of the Son and the Spirit within the sphere of the divine. This is brought out strongly in Richard Bauckham's books, *The Climax of Prophecy* and *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*. Bauckham points out how, while the Lamb or Jesus is always presented as distinct from the One seated on the throne, he is given the same titles as the God of the Old Testament (for example, compare Isaiah 44:6 with Rev. 1:17). Nevertheless John also carefully avoids using a plural verb or pronoun to refer to God and the Lamb together. Thus the Lamb shares in divinity, yet is never portrayed as a separate object of worship. Father and Son are one God.

As for the third divine Person, Bauckham counts a total of fourteen references to the Holy Spirit in the Book of Revelation. Significantly, these are divided into seven occurrences in the phrase 'what the Spirit is saying to the Churches', and seven elsewhere. Sevenfold patterns are associated by John with divinity, or with the expression of divine power in the world. The Lamb in Rev. 5, for example, has 'seven eyes' and 'seven horns' to represent his perfect knowledge and power. The divine Spirit himself is sevenfold for John (as are the 'stars' or angels of the churches in which the Spirit is present). At the end of Revelation, however, the oneness of this sevenfold Spirit is reaffirmed: 'The Spirit and the Bride say, Come!'

The very opening of the Letters to the seven churches (Rev. 1:4–5) signals this Trinitarian understanding, for 'grace and peace' comes to the reader 'from him who is and who was and who is to come' (the Father), from 'the seven spirits who are before his throne' (the Holy Spirit), and from 'Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the first-born from the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth.'

There are also exactly four references in the book to the 'seven spirits' (or the sevenfold Spirit), associated specifically with the victory of the Lamb. Again, this number is significant. In John's symbolic language fourfoldness represents the full extent of the world in its traditional 'four directions', and is often found in combination with seven. So the first four judgments in each series of seven affect the whole world, and the seven phrases by which John designates all the nations of the world are always fourfold (for example, the phrase 'peoples and tribes and languages and nations'). The 7 x 4

occurrences of the title 'Lamb' are probably intended to indicate the worldwide scope of his victory.

In the final, glorious vision of the New Jerusalem we are told (Rev. 21:22) that the City's light is the glory of God, 'and its lamp is the Lamb.' John continues, distinguishing but at the same time stressing the unity of Father and Son:

There shall no more be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it, and his servants shall worship him; they shall see his face, and his name shall be on their foreheads. And night shall be no more; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they shall reign for ever and ever.⁹

From beginning to end, then, the Apocalypse is implicitly Trinitarian in its theology. Historically it seems to represent a bridge to the more explicitly Trinitarian formulae found in the Gospels (e.g., Matt. 28:19) and the Pauline letters (e.g., 2 Cor. 13:14). But in doing so, it is not unfaithful to the Old Testament tradition either, in which it is so clearly rooted. For the Old Testament, too, can be read as implicitly Trinitarian.¹⁰ The Torah is 'a presentiment of the Logos,' and the living relationship expressed in the personal Covenant between God and Israel promises the indwelling Spirit to replace our 'hearts of stone' (Ez. 36:26–7). The Apocalypse, like the Old Testament but more so, is aware of a distinction at the very heart of the absolute, but one that never divides the absolute into several gods in the style of Mesopotamian or Greek polytheism.

With these fundamentals established, we can begin to examine John's theological cosmology in more detail, beginning with the central thrust of the whole book, which relates it directly to the Book of Genesis.

9. Rev. 22:3–5; cf. Isaiah 60:19–21. Bauckham's discussion of the titles given to Jesus and to God can be found in *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, especially on pages 23–30, 54–68.

10. As Giorgio Buccellati has shown in 'Yahweh, the Trinity: The Old Testament Catechumenate (Part 2)', *Communio* XXXIV: 2 (Summer 2007), 292–327.