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The Preacher's Use of the Book of Revelation

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PREACHING from the Book of Revelation is at once perplexing and profitable. The enigmatic, apocalyptic structure of the Book makes the task of exegesis formidable and exacting; but the fruits of such labour are doubly rewarding. The fact that there have been and still are many bizarre interpretations of the book ought not to deter the preacher. It should only make the preacher more aggressive in his search for meaning and more determined than ever to interpret the book in harmony with the rest of the Biblical message. "More than any other writing in the Bible," complains E. F. Scott, "it has attracted the fanatical and curious minded and the Church has been too willing to abandon it to them as their natural prey."¹ A much earlier commentator observing this tendency towards fantastic interpretation in the Church of his day writes, "Many have tried their hands at it but until this very day they have reached no certainty; and some have brewed into it many stupid things out of their own heads."²

We today, however, are in a much better position. Beginning with Albert Schweitzer's *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, New Testament studies have been more and more concerned with the eschatological nature of the New Testament message. Extrabiblical studies in the field of the Apocalyptic writings produced between the Book of Daniel and the Book of Revelation have provided an illuminating background for interpretation. The theological climate itself with its pronounced concern for Christology in an eschatological frame of reference has created a more sympathetic attitude towards the book than has existed heretofore. The historian's pre-occupation with the problem of meaning in history has also focused attention on *Revelation*, which is concerned with a theology of history. Furthermore, the demands of the totalitarian states which confront the Church in many parts of the world in our day create situations not unlike those which called forth the Book of Revelation. We have now a community of experience in which interpretation becomes considerably less difficult.

THE APPROACH

In approaching the Book of Revelation the preacher must bear in mind as a fundamental rule of interpretation that it is "The Revelation of *Jesus*

1. E. F. Scott, *The Book of Revelation*, p. 188.

2. Martin Luther, *Works of Martin Luther*, VI (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1932), p. 480.

Christ" (1:1). The purpose of the Seer of Patmos is to unveil Jesus Christ for us in the full magnitude of His Easter victory. The Book is therefore to be understood in the light of the whole Biblical message, particularly as it centres in Christology. John's primary purpose is to pull back the curtain, as it were, and to let his readers see Christ enthroned in splendour and girded with might.

In the second place the preacher must remember that the book is directed to a distinct and precise historical situation in which the primitive Church in Asia Minor found itself persecuted and oppressed by the power of the Roman State. The writer is forced to wrestle with an embarrassing dilemma which was painfully relevant to the early Church. How could Christ be the Lord of History and yet permit His Church to be so maligned and persecuted by the power of the Caesars? How could the early Church's creed concerning the Lordship of Christ embedded in the baptismal formula and in hymnody be explained in the light of the undeniable and deadly reality of Evil as it embodied itself in the Roman State? The problem was not academic for the writer. He himself is captive "in the isle that is called Patmos for the word of God and for the testimony of Jesus" (1:9). What can he say in the face of the prevailing situation so unpromising for the Christian Church? How shall he speak to his people? The message of the Book of Revelation and its peculiar form are the result of John's wrestling with this dilemma.

The cryptic form of the book is partly explained by the fact that it was an illegal document transmitted through the channels of the underground movement of the Church. The document with its message enshrined in visions, symbols, numbers, and mighty thunderings would have little meaning except to those for whom it was intended. "The book was intended to be enigmatic to outsiders, to the enemies of Christ and the emperor's censors, and at the same time a revelation to those who partook of the affliction of Christ and His kingdom."³ Those for whom it was written had the key and the key involved knowledge of three things; the Old Testament, previous apocalyptic writings and the current events of their times.

One writer, after correctly observing that John's thought is saturated with Old Testament ideas, goes on to say that out of 404 verses there are 518 Old Testament references and countless echoes.⁴ One need only examine the marginal cross references included with the Book of Revelation in most Bibles to see how largely Old Testament concepts and imagery figure in John's writing. Furthermore, it only takes a cursory knowledge of the Old Testament to see for example that the visions of the plagues (ch. 15) and the trumpets (8:7-21, 11:15-19) have their origins in such Old Testament events as the deliverance of the Children of Israel under Moses' leadership from the hand of the Egyptian Pharaoh (Ex. 7,8,9,10) and the fall of the city of Jericho (Josh. 6:1-20). Both events teach that God is active in

3. E. Stauffer, *Christ and the Caesars*, p. 176.

4. Preston and Hanson, *The Revelation of St. John*, p. 24.

His intervention on behalf of His people. He will judge the nations in the interests of the people who embody His will. John's purpose in using this material becomes clear. Rome (Babylon) may not hope to escape the judgment of God, for she has laid violent hands upon the people of God, the New Israel. Now God will actively intervene on behalf of His people. Judgements will inexorably follow Caesar's decision to "make war with the saints" (13:7). A precise analysis of the parallels should not obscure the main purpose of the writer to fasten attention on the fact of God's judgements in history, which in the Book of Revelation are Christologically interpreted.

The apocalyptic form is used because of the precise situation in which the Seer is writing. "An apocalypse," writes Anderson Scott, "is a '*Tract for Bad Times*' intended to encourage people suffering under the strain of oppression and persecution. The writer's object is to steel them to patience and endurance unto the end by the presentation in the most vivid form, of the fact which overrides all others, 'the Lord reigneth' and will surely come with recompense."⁵ The Church in John's day was experiencing 'bad times' and he naturally follows that pattern of writing which had been a vehicle for enjoining hope and confidence for generations in the face of serious oppression and enslavement. There is however, this notable difference. The "Lord who reigns" becomes none other than "the Lamb who had been slain" (5:6) and is "alive for evermore" (1:18).

It is apparent, then, that one should not expect a revelation of a pattern of future events in this book. It is primarily addressed to a historical situation, a knowledge of which provides the third portion of the key for understanding. Professor Stauffer insists that "we may read the Book of Revelation with some understanding when we see it as the apostolic reply to the declaration of war by the Divine Emperor in Rome."⁶

There is nevertheless a future thrust in the book which undoubtedly shares in what J. A. T. Robinson in another connection describes as the "fundamental witness of the Apostolic Church—that this act of God (in Christ) inaugurated a situation which was on the one hand final, and on the other, required yet to be finalized."⁷ This evident future thrust, however, ought not to detract from the fact that the primary reference of the book is to the tension of Church and State in the first century and the relation of each to the Lord of History.

THE HISTORICAL SITUATION

Towards the close of the first century Rome was at the zenith of her power. Her territories extended from Scotland on the north to the African desert on the south, and from the Euphrates river on the east to the Atlantic ocean on the west. She was indeed as John described her, "sitting upon

5. C. Anderson Scott, *The Book of Revelation*, p. 11.

6. Stauffer, *op. cit.*, p. 176.

7. J. A. T. Robinson, *In the End God*, p. 63.

many waters" (17:1), ruling over many nations and multitudes and tongues (17:15, 13:7-8), and reigning "over the kings of the earth."

Economically Rome was in a most prosperous condition. Her trade and commerce had enriched a large multitude (18:11-14, 17-19). As a result a large portion of the free population lived in the lap of luxury (18:16-17). By way of contrast to, and perhaps as a consequence of, this excessive wealth there was a large proportion of slaves in the total population. John describes "a trafficking in the souls of men" as part of the commerce that makes up the economic picture (18:12-13). And as one would expect, such luxury had brought along with it a distinct decline in moral standards. The early Church stood aghast at the corruption it beheld on every hand. Small wonder John describes Rome as "Babylon the great, the Mother of harlots and the abomination of the earth" (17:5).

Persecution had broken out in Asia Minor around 95-96 A.D. The Church was driven underground by the violent measures of oppression. Domitian, the ruling emperor, was making war with the saints (13:7). The precise point at issue was emperor worship. Domitian (the Beast out of the sea) took his "divinity" very seriously, insisting on being called "Lord and God" (Rev. 13:6).⁸ A highly organized and impressive cult (Beast out of the Land), making use of ventriloquism and other forms of trickery, was developed to perpetuate and actualize this fiction (13:11-15). More serious was the Emperor's decision to make acquiescence in the cult of his alleged divinity a mark of imperial loyalty. But no true Christian could offer sacrifice to the image of Caesar and say "Kyrios Kaisar" ("Caesar is Lord"). Such an act and affirmation was tantamount to blasphemy (13:12). "If the Roman state had had a loyalty test in any other form than that Emperor worship which was blasphemous for the Christians," Prof. Cullman points out, "the Christians would have been able to meet it in good conscience, and much bloodshed would have been avoided. So long as the State demanded a loyalty test in the form of submission to emperor-worship, there could be no peace between Christianity and the State, however loyal the Christians might be as citizens and however humane individual emperors. . . ."⁹

From the point of view of the authorities, Emperor worship was an excellent thing. It provided a cohesive bond which contributed greatly to the security of the Empire. Emperor worship was not only a matter of the Emperor's pride, it was also a matter of State policy. For Christians, however, such policy was anathema. How could *Kyrios Kaisar* even begin to compare with *Kyrios Christos*? How could one bow down before Domitian's image and at the same time confess Jesus Christ as the King of kings and the Lord of lords to whom were to be attributed the highest honours

8. Domitian was believed in some quarters to be Nero Redivivus and hence the reference to the "deadly wound being healed." The number of the man 666 is sometimes understood to spell out NERON KAISAR. The numerical equivalents of the Hebraic transliteration add up to 666.

9. O. Cullmann, *The State in the New Testament*, p. 79.

(5:12,13)? The crisis was grave and acute. To refuse to pay homage to Caesar's image was in the eyes of the world a form of treason. To be secure in one's property, job, or life, one had to be an avowed pagan. One could not even engage in the commerce of the day without handling coinage on which Domitian's image was imprinted together with blasphemous inscriptions (13:16-17). Nor was it easy to escape situations in which Christians would be forced to acknowledge their true loyalty. "The pagan multitude, who regarded the Christian position with hatred and suspicion, and the priests in whose interests it was to further the worship of the state, saw to it that everyone who was suspected of Christian sympathies either paid homage to Domitian or paid the penalty."¹⁰ In those days if you wished to "smear" a person you did not call him a communist: you called him a Christian.

Conflict with the State was inevitable and the leaders of this Christian sect which refused to conform to State requirements were singled out for punishment. John, the leader of the Church at Ephesus, was captured and sentenced to a work camp on the Isle of Patmos just off the coast of Asia Minor. Engulfed by the overwhelming power of the State and yet with the ringing affirmations of the Christian faith clearly in mind, he takes up his pen to write. His purpose is clear; he desires to encourage his flock to remain steadfast and faithful by reaffirming his own basic theology of history. Christ would vindicate their faith because He is the Lord of History. Caesar could not hope to prevail. In fact Rome was already being destroyed. "Babylon is fallen, is fallen" (18:2). "Alleluia, the Lord God omnipotent reigneth" (19:6).

THE THEOLOGY OF HISTORY OF THE BOOK OF REVELATION

The conflict between Church and State around 95-96 A.D. is only a battle in the age long warfare between God and the powers of evil. The extensive power of evil is described in the Apocalypse under the symbol of the "great red dragon, having seven heads and ten horns, and upon his head seven diadems" (Rev. 12:3). The one challenge to this domination of Evil was Israel's faith. Her history is described under the figure of "the woman clothed with the sun and with the moon under her feet and upon her head a crown of twelve stars—and travailling in birth" (12:1,2). With the birth of the man-child (12:5), a new stage of the struggle was begun. Here was One who could effectively challenge the Evil one, variously designated as "Dragon," "Satan," "Devil" (12:9), and shatter his claim upon the souls of men and nations. The cosmic struggle is brought right into the stuff of human history. The warfare takes concrete form in the struggle of the Incarnate, Crucified, and Risen Christ with the powers of evil embodied particularly in evil men, institutions, governments and even religions. John is painfully aware that "the totalitarian state is precisely the classic form of the Devil's manifestation on earth."¹¹

10. A. Burnet, *The Lord Reigneth*, p. 43. 11. O. Cullmann, *op. cit.*, p. 74.

As in the case of other writers in the New Testament, the Cross figures prominently in John's thinking. His thinking approximates what Gustav Aulén describes as the *Christus Victor* aspect of the Atonement. Christ conquers the enemies of God and humanity by involving Himself in humanity's history and coming to grips with the Evil One who has embodied himself in the societies and souls of men. Throughout the Apocalypse, Christ is presented as the Strong One, the source of comfort to the suffering members of the Church, and the pledge of certain judgment to those who like Domitian blaspheme His name. "Lo, the lion that is of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, hath conquered" (5:5).

Even the writer's frequent description of Christ as the Lamb does not detract from this picture of triumph. The Lamb is enthroned, majestic, victorious and omnipotent (5:6; 7:9, 10; 7:15-17; 12:11; 14:1-5; 17:14; 19:1-8; 22:3,4). John does not thereby exclude the thought, so long associated with the concept of Lamb, of Christ's offering Himself for the sins of the world, but obviously he sees something more in the Atonement than sacrifice. He sees also conflict and victory, struggle and triumph. As the Devil's greatest weapon is Death, so the Resurrection demonstrates the magnitude of the Lamb's greatest victory in wresting it from his grasp (1:18; 5:9-13).

At the Cross therefore John sees the powers of the Evil One who has been usurping the prerogatives of God definitely overcome and subjected to the will of Christ. Satan, in the language of the Book of Revelation, is bound (20:2). With the advent of Christ, the old age, dominated by Evil, is judged and overcome. God, in Christ, has asserted His true Sovereignty. Christ, by virtue of His death and Resurrection, has assumed Lordship over human History. The defeat of the Evil one is an accomplished fact. The purposes of God can no longer be finally frustrated by the powers of Evil. Christ is the Lord (5:12). "Alleluia: for the Lord God Omnipotent reigneth" (19:6).

But what of the problem of Evil? How can John explain his own situation? He is captive on Patmos precisely because he has defied the Roman authorities in the name of Christ. Rome, whose Emperor is blaspheming Christ and ordering the wholesale destruction of thousands of Christians, is at the zenith of her power. As far as secular security and wellbeing are concerned Rome has never been in such a favourable position. Is not John then unrealistic in his assertion that Christ has overcome all his enemies by virtue of His victory at the Cross and through the Resurrection? Is he not indulging in fanciful speculation when he suggests that Christ is reigning now with the saints (14:1)?

John is well aware of the problem of Evil and its cruel and bestial existence. He does not underestimate the nature of the historical situation in which he is involved. The Beast, who gathers up all the evil and tyrannous characteristics of the previous kingdoms of the Mediterranean basin, is a power to be reckoned with (13:1, 2; Daniel 7). But John sees that the days

of the Beast are numbered because the power which lies behind his evil machinations is already defeated. Christ has already conquered that Power. The Beast is living on "borrowed time" and building on rotten foundations. Since the first Easter day, "other foundation can no man lay than that is laid which is Jesus Christ" (I Cor. 3:11). John shouts out at his captors, "Babylon is fallen, is fallen—Alleluia the Lord God Omnipotent Reigneth." Just because Caesar has failed to recognize the Rider of the White Horse, and has made war with the saints, he has sealed his own doom and that of his Empire.

John makes no predictions as to when this will happen but he is confident that it will take place. The nation, observes John, which commits itself to Evil carries within itself the seeds of its own destruction. Judgment may be slow but it is always sure. The nation which becomes counterfeit and sets itself up as a kingdom over against the Kingdom of God is already judged (18:2). The Kingdom which fails to be a Kingdom under God has already begun to decay. This confidence is derived from John's fundamental conviction that "the Lord God Omnipotent Reigneth," and on the basis of it he counsels patience and faithfulness.

Many theologians today are using the notion of overlapping ages to describe the strange situation in which Evil, although defeated, still continues to exist.¹² This idea suggests the kind of thinking in which the writer of the Apocalypse is involved. The powers of Evil dominant in the old age have been judged, defeated, overcome by Christ and His Death and Resurrection. A new age has been inaugurated in which Christ is the Sovereign Ruler. The old age, meanwhile, for reasons finally known to God, is allowed to continue, overlapping the new age and obscuring it from all those who have not eyes to see and ears to hear. It is possible for such to believe that the old age has never been effectively challenged, for "Satan is loosed a little while" (20:3). But the time in which he is permitted to exercise his "defeated power" will come to an end and his destruction will be complete and final (Rev. 20:10). Any power which Satan now exercises must be exercised with a view to fulfilling the perfect will of Christ. This is the nature of his binding and of his loosing.

The saints have, in actual fact, been ruling with Christ even though this rule is only visible to faith (Rev. 5:10). The Christian Church lives in both ages. Thus while she is caught in the despair, misery and destructiveness of the old age, her life is already hid with Christ in God. Through the Spirit she participates in the victorious life of her Lord and awaits in hope the day of consummation and final victory. The Church is embarrassed by the continued existence of Evil but she rejoices in hope, knowing that the decisive battle has been fought and won and the day of final victory draws near. The Church knows that evil powers cannot hope to win the day. They may win a skirmish, but they are losing the war. The issue has already been determined. Christ has already defeated them. The outcome

12. T. F. Torrance, *Kingdom and Church*, p. 119.

of the processes of history is certain. No power henceforth can effectively challenge the Will and Purpose of God Incarnate in Jesus Christ.

This theology of hope—a far deeper thing than mere optimism—is the basic theme of the book. Christ *now* is the reigning monarch, but His reign awaits a full and future disclosure. His Kingship, while actual *now*, is nevertheless veiled and obscured, but *then*, in the Great Day of His appearing, there will be no mistaking His Royal prerogatives. Those who have served the Evil one will perish with him, and every institution based on Satanic powers will be destroyed (20:10–15). Evil itself will be utterly routed and cast into the abyss. Those who have served the Lamb will enter into an experience of blessedness so inconceivably glorious that there are no standards of comparison in this life. John's use of negatives suggests the difficulty of describing the transfigured life which God has prepared for those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of Life (21:1–5, 22:3–5).

But one must not be satisfied with interpreting the last two chapters in an individualistic manner. Parousia describes that Final Act of God in which history is brought to its consummation, its vagaries judged and purged and its true meaning exhibited. There is, in short, a Last Judgment and General Resurrection, both of which “signify the belief that though the pattern of this world may pass away, yet those elements of historical life which are contributed by the material and physical aspects of the created order are not cast like rubbish on the void.”¹³ There is an interesting “earthiness” about the concept of consummation in the Apocalypse which should not be explained away by any allegation of crude materialism. There is a *new* heaven and a *new* earth, a *new* creation and a *new* Jerusalem, but the concepts heaven, earth, creation, Jerusalem, all suggest that what has belonged essentially to the present order is not dispensed with in the Consummation. Dr. H. H. Farmer shares the Apocalypticist's concern for history in consummation when he writes, “Christian Theology, on the whole, has tended to insist that the world is not merely instrumental to the fashioning of personalities, after which it will pass into nothingness, but will itself be somehow taken up in a transfigured form into the realized program of God.”¹⁴ Professor Filson writes in a similar vein, “The spatial, pictorial portrayal of this open manifestation is the vehicle of essential truth. Christ will act openly and appear clearly to all; he will prove beyond dispute that he has been and is the Lord; he will bring to climax and completion what God has promised His people.”¹⁵

CONCLUSION

A friend of mine in 1954 attended the famous German “Kirchentag” meeting at Leipzig behind the Iron Curtain. State authorities, while they

13. E. C. Rust, *The Christian Understanding of History*, p. 297.

14. H. H. Farmer, *The World and God*, p. 304.

15. F. Filson, *Jesus Christ the Risen Lord*, p. 304.

did not forbid the meeting, had put every possible obstacle in the pathway of the planners. The theme of the conference was "Be Joyful in Hope" and the studies were based upon the Book of Revelation. My friend remarked in describing the gathering, "For the first time in my life the Book of Revelation came alive!"

The Book of Revelation sounds a note of triumph and confidence which the people sorely need to hear today. Evil powers have apparently made great advances in our generation. Nations have risen to power which neither know nor obey God. Officially some are opposed to the Church of Christ. Acts of restriction and violence are even now taking place. But as John sees it, such nations are building on sand. The superstructure will inexorably disintegrate because Christ is the Lord of history and the one sure foundation.

The seer of Patmos would give sincere and confident assent to the Evanston message. "We are not sufficient for these things. But Christ is sufficient. We do not know what is coming to us. But we know Who is coming. It is He who meets us every day—and who will meet us at the end—Jesus Christ our Lord. Therefore we say to you: Rejoice in hope."¹⁶

16. *The Evanston Report* (S.C.M. 1954), p. 3.