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Pauline Eschatology and the Apocalypse

by Robert H. Mounce

Dr. Mounce, Dean of the Potter College of Arts and Humanities in Western Kentucky University is preparing the forthcoming volume on the Revelation of John for the New International Commentary on the New Testament, and it would not be too fanciful to see in the following paper (which was read at a conference in the Reformed Seminary, Jackson, Mississippi) a by-product of this preparation.

THE purpose of this paper is to consider briefly certain linguistic and conceptual parallels between two major eschatological passages in the Thessalonian letters (I Thess. 4: 13-18 and II Thess. 2: 1-12) and the Apocalypse of John. The approach is primarily descriptive. It is based upon a comparative study of the two pieces of literature with special attention given to key phrases and ideas which could indicate a common source in Christian apocalyptic.

Interestingly enough, the word *παρουσία* which is central to Paul's eschatological vocabulary—seven times in the two Thessalonian passages (even the lawless one has a *παρουσία* in II Thess. 2: 9)—is nowhere to be found in the Apocalypse. Elsewhere in the Johannine corpus it occurs but once (I John 2: 28)—believers are to abide in Christ so as not to be ashamed *ἐν τῇ παρουσίᾳ*. The root meaning of *παρουσία* is presence or arrival. Hellenistic Greek commonly used the word in reference to the royal visit of a ruling dignitary. Perhaps the note of judgment which so often accompanies mention of the return of Christ in Revelation made the word seem inappropriate.

Among the many linguistic parallels a few are worthy of special note. In I Thessalonians 2: 16 we learn that the descent of the Lord from heaven is heralded by the shout of an archangel. In Revelation the word *ἄγγελος* is used 67 times. The book is replete with angels but there is no specific mention of an archangel. In fact, *ἀρχάγγελος* occurs elsewhere in the New Testament only in Jude 9 where a "trial lawyer" by the name of Michael is designated archangel. Now it is Michael who in Revelation 12: 7 ff. wages a war in heaven against the dragon and causes Satan to be cast down to earth. Could it also be Michael the archangel who will shout the victorious commands at the triumphal return of Christ? In any case, the trumpet blast of I Thessalonians 4: 16 has many analogues in the Apocalypse. The seven trumpets of Chapters 8-11 form one

of the three basic sequences of seven-fold plagues. The voice which John hears on that memorable Lord's day is ὡς σάλπιγγος (1: 10; cf. I Thess. 4: 17) as is the voice which calls him up to heaven (4: 1).

The return of Christ is like a great magnet which draws all believers (even those who are for the moment resting in the grave) to a great reunion in the air. The raptured are caught up together ἐν νεφέλαις (I Thess. 4: 17). In Revelation 11: 12 the two witnesses (the witnessing church?) are raised from the dead and before the very eyes of a startled world rise to heaven ἐν τῇ νεφέλῃ. The son of man who reaps the harvest of the earth in Revelation 14: 14-16 is three times designated as the one who sits upon the white νεφέλη. In Revelation 1: 7 he comes μετὰ τῶν νεφελῶν.

Before turning to the second passage it should be noticed that Paul's teaching that believers living at the time of the parousia will not precede those who have died (I Thess. 4: 15) is balanced by John's vision which pictures the martyrs as remaining under the altar until human history has run its course (Revelation 6: 9-11). In the ultimate sense of resurrection reality, all men enter eternity simultaneously.

II Thessalonians 2: 1-12 portrays the lawless one with his deceitful practices and pretentious claims who is to be utterly destroyed at the revelation of Jesus Christ. In the Apocalypse these same themes are treated at length in Chapters 13, 17, 19, and 20. In II Thessalonians 2: 3 the lawless one is named ὁ υἱὸς τῆς ἀπωλείας. In Revelation 9: 11 the angel of the bottomless pit who rules over the demonic centaurs is called Ἀπολλύων. The mission of each is destruction. The lawless one sets himself in opposition to all rival claimants to deity (II Thess. 2: 4) much the same as the beast from the sea blasphemes God (Revelation 13: 6) and demands the worship of all men (Revelation 13: 16-17). In his insolent pride and self-exaltation he would actually take the throne in the heavenly temple and declare himself to be God (II Thess. 2: 4). How different from the great throne-room scenes in Revelation 4 and 5 where angelic beings prostrate themselves in ceaseless adoration before God! Not so, the antichrist. He would seize by force that worship which alone belongs to God and to the Lamb.

Special attention should be given to the role of deception in the activity of the antichrist. Paul warns the Thessalonian believers not to be deceived by false rumors that the day of the Lord has already arrived (II Thess. 2: 1-3). Certain events must first take place—the ἀποστασία (“a definite rejection of God”, Phillips) and the ἀποκάλυψις of the lawless one. When he comes “there will be no lack of power, of counterfeit signs and wonders; and his wickedness will deceive the souls that are doomed” (II Thess.

2: 9-10, Knox). In Revelation 12: 9 Satan is named "the deceiver of the whole world." The false prophet of Chapter 13 works great signs, making fire come down from heaven in the sight of men (vs. 13) and giving breath to the statue of the beast so that it actually speaks (vs. 15). The three demonic spirits which gather the nations of the world to Armageddon employ deception to fulfill their task (Rev. 16: 14). Since error is inevitably a perversion of truth we are not surprised to learn that in the last days deceit and treachery will be essential weapons in the armory of the arch villain.

Paul writes that the Lord Jesus will slay the lawless one "with the breath of his mouth" (II Thess. 2: 8). It is interesting that the risen Christ who appears to John in his island exile is symbolically portrayed as having a sharp two-edged sword issuing from his mouth (Rev. 19: 15, 21). Are we to understand that both Paul and John are saying that the deceptive claims of the one who first lured the human race into sin will in the consummation be forever destroyed by the truth which issues from the mouth of God?

How may we assess the relationship between the Pauline passages and Revelation? It is certainly not too much to say that behind the two separate eschatological presentations lies a common source of apocalyptic concept and imagery. With due regard for what Sandmel once called the disease of "parallelomania" I would hold that this apocalyptic tradition furnished both the themes of New Testament eschatology and, on many occasions, its distinctive vocabulary.

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