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Scripture

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THE APOCALYPSE

No book of the Bible can claim to have received such a poor press in the past as that accorded the Apocalypse. Some of the early Greek Fathers—Cyril of Jerusalem, Gregory Nazianzen, John Chrysostom, Theodoret—shared hesitations about its inspired character. Heretics and near-heretics gave it their dubious support. It provoked the *irrisus infidelium*. The underworld sects of the Middle Ages borrowed their slogans from its pages. Luther shied away from it: 'my spirit cannot acquiesce in this book,' while Zwingli forthrightly denounced it: 'It is not a book of the Bible.' A leading divine, some three hundred years ago, described it as a book 'which either finds a man cracked or leaves him so.' More recent oracles have been content to pronounce it pure fantasy, the ravings of a crank from the lunatic fringe.

Even sympathetic readers, not given to lampooning the Word of God, have admitted themselves utterly baffled by the studied obscurities in the text. They have found themselves on the shore of a Sargasso Sea of symbols, or mesmerised by a cabalism of numbers, or gazing with uncomprehending wonder at the ceremonial of the liturgy of heaven. Little cause for amazement, then, if the Apocalypse has not won the respect we might have expected for the final flourish of revelation.

Modern studies, however, have been trying to make compensation and have done much to make intelligible this most difficult book. Our chief obstacle to understanding a great part of the Bible lies not so much in the actual text as in the mentality of its authors. The Semites did not think as we do, our thought-patterns are as distant as east from west. Hence, some appreciation of Hebrew modes of thinking is going to offer an important key to unlocking the message of the Apocalypse. But that is not all. The growing awareness that the prophets of the Old Testament wrote from the standpoint of their own times has led scholars to see that the starting-point of this New Testament work (which tradition has always recognised as manifesting

prophetic traits) was the author's contemporary situation. In this attempt to unravel the complicated snarl of problems tied up in the Apocalypse, we must let ourselves be guided by those two threads.

In the years following the return of the Jews from their Exile, despite the preaching of such late prophets as Aggeus, Zachary, Joel and Malachy, it became apparent that the previous vehicle for divine revelation, prophecy, was receding before a new expression: apocalyptic. This was a fusion of the ancient eschatological oracle (concerned with the coming era and the awful 'Day of Yahweh') with the prophetic vision (of the 'new times'), and consisted in the revelation ('apocalypse') of divine secrets manifested in dreams and symbolic visions. This new art-form arose from the seeking of fervent souls, in those bitterly disappointing post-Exilic years, for an understanding of their present disillusionment in a future realisation of God's plan for them. A new world was brought in to redress the balance of the old.

If we try to define the characteristics of the literary form of apocalyptic, we shall find that three main trends may be listed. There is first of all an overweening delight in symbols and visions. We are introduced to a weird symbolism of numbers, beasts, names in a *décor* that Impressionism itself could never have conjured up. It should have been (but not always was) obvious even to the most literal-minded expositor that these marvels were not to be taken at their face value. They stood for something else. A second facet of apocalyptic is that its absorbing interest in the ultimate issues of God's plan for the world includes an almost vindictive and savage gloating over the downfall of the enemies of God and of the nation. Even the whole order of nature is involved in what has been (recently) termed a 'cosmic break-up': the stars fall from their places, the sun no longer gives its light, the moon is turned into blood, the sea gives up its dead. Finally, amid such luxuriant splendour can be discerned the relics of prophecy whose ghost had not yet been completely laid. The apocalypses in Ezechiel, Zachary and Daniel were followed by numerous non-canonical successors (like the Qumrân *War of the Sons of Light with the Sons of Darkness*), but while there are undoubtedly family resemblances among all this *genre*, the vagaries traceable in the non-canonical apocalypses are mercifully absent from those included in the Bible. Similar passports may be produced by all, but an attentive scrutiny will linger over the special particularities.

If we turn to the one apocalypse which the New Testament has retained in its Canon, that of St John, we may expect to find in it some of these notes of apocalyptic. In the first place, we encounter symbols

and visions. For purposes of convenience, we may distinguish a triple catalogue of symbols and offer what many believe to be their correct deciphering. After the seven letters to the Churches of Asia Minor, we are shown a heavenly *liturgy*. The long robe and golden cincture worn by the Son of Man (an image borrowed from the book of Daniel) signify the priesthood and royalty of Christ; his white hair, burning eyes, feet of bronze tell us of his eternity, divine knowledge and lasting stability; the two-edged sword which issued from his mouth symbolises the pronouncement of death-dealing decrees which will effect the destruction of the persecutors of God's Church. Among the numerous assistants at the Throne are the twenty-four elders who thus link up the present scene with the orders of priests classified in 1 Chronicles (and recalled to us in Lk. 1:5, where we read that Zachary was performing the duties of the sanctuary in his *turn*—that of Abia). The 'seven spirits' are reminiscent of the book of Tobias where Raphael declares himself to be one of the seven who stand in the presence of God. The four living creatures—the *Hayim* of Ezechiel—lion, bull, man and eagle, represent that which is noble, strong, intelligent and agile in creation. (We are accustomed to designate the Evangelists by these symbols.) The crowns worn by the angels tell of their governing role over the world, and the horns and eyes of the Lamb attribute power and knowledge to It. The incense burnt here as elsewhere in the Apocalypse denotes the prayers offered before the throne of God.

A second chapter of symbols describes the *destruction* to be meted out to the godless in three series of disasters: seven seals broken—the divine decrees are to become effective; seven trumpets—the processional heralding God's destroying entry; seven bowls smashed—God's anger is to be poured out over the world. The four horsemen who emerge after the breaking of the first seal in a scenario which is nothing if not prismatic conjure up the Parthian cavalry which contributed so greatly to the fall of Rome. It will be noted by close readers of the Apocalypse that the opening of the seventh seal introduces us to the series of trumpets—we are working, as it were, in ever-widening circles. The cosmic upheaval and the seven plagues visited on the nations all belong to the same destructive symbolism promising final vindication.

A third group of symbols is found in the *dramatis personae* and the *numbers* which are sprinkled over the pages of the Apocalypse. The divinity connoted by 'Alpha and Omega' is more obvious than the unusual 'Amen' given to God. 'Abaddon' and its Greek equivalent 'Apollyon' signify 'destruction' and the Plain of Megiddo, the time-honoured battlefield for supremacy in the Palestinian Corridor,

becomes the scene of eschatological disaster—'Armageddon.' 'Gog and Magog' are terms co-opted from Ezechiel to designate the pagan nations assembled against the Church. But it is perhaps against Rome and her rulers that invective is most generously hurled though with a nice economy of terms. She is 'Babylon,' the 'great harlot,' her empire the 'Beast' (also said of Nero), her emperor-worship 'Satan's throne.' As to those cryptic numbers, we are told that 'four' is the symbolic number for the cosmos, that 'seven' denotes perfection, that 'one hundred and forty-four thousand' is the sacred number (twelve) squared and multiplied by a thousand to show mass. 'Seven thousand' covers people of all social classes ('seven') within the great number ('thousand'). The term 'foursquare,' occurring in chapter 21:16, we may easily decipher as meaning 'fully perfect.' The quaint 'a time, and times, and half a time' is taken to mean three and a half years—the forty-two months of 11:2—the duration-type of all persecutions which derives from Daniel. Lastly, 'six hundred and sixty-six' discreetly indicate Nero by representing the sum of the numerical values the letters of his name possessed in Hebrew.

To those who have inquired 'Why did not John give us a plain tale instead of this cryptogram to be decoded almost term by term' it has been answered that a 'disguise' was expedient in view of his troubled times—his intended readers would possess the key to the puzzle where unauthorised aliens would be completely at a loss. That this was in fact what could happen nobody can deny, and its utility in this respect should not be overlooked. But the literary form of apocalyptic was not devised simply to hoodwink the authorities; it derives from a greater need. Besides being an escape-valve of fantasy for the repressions of a bitterly suffering people, apocalyptic (in its better examples) demanded an adventure of faith and trust into an unknown world. It affirmed that history, too, came under the providence of God and its final issues lie in the unseen but directing hand of God. And its very inadequacy to nullify present suffering turned eyes towards the future, to the future life. The very mystery of God's providence suggested a use of symbols in any striving to express that mystery, caught only in tantalising glimpses and beyond the normal means of expression. Let *us* attempt to sketch God's glory in heaven, His plan of history, the role of the cosmic Christ, the final beauty of the Church—and we shall resort to symbols of contemporary design which a later generation will need to demythologise.

The second characteristic we have noted in this highly specialised art-form of apocalyptic is its inclination to delight in the coming destruction of the national persecutors. We shall find, however, in the Apocalypse of St John that while the approaching doom of the

nations is emphasised, it is seen as no more than a just punishment for the wrongs they have committed. They are to be punished *qua* evil-doers—not *qua* opponents to Jewish sovereignty, a trait which marks non-canonical apocalyptic. In other words, John's Apocalypse has in mind the just vindication of the rights of God and the Church—a thesis we will rashly impugn. Further, opportunities for a repentance which will avert total disaster are offered but rejected. As in the case of Pharaoh, the seven plagues serve only to harden oppression. And John does not scruple to point out the real cause of the troubles afflicting the Church. The imperial despotism was no mere police-action ; behind it lay supreme malice—the malice of Satan.

We have noted earlier that apocalyptic was an outgrowth of prophetism, and in the New Testament Apocalypse the element of prophecy is strong. While employing the style, imagery and procedure of Jewish apocalyptic, it remains faithful to the great tradition of the ancient prophets. Like the prophets, the author has a passion for the salvation of souls (as the seven opening letters will show) and wishes to reply to the most vexatious problems of his time. This prophetic core in the Apocalypse has always been recognised in tradition, but an oblique view of the nature of prophecy had the unfortunate effect of seeing the contents of the Apocalypse as a detailed blue-print of events to be pursued during the history of the Church. For many, the Book was little more than a sop to their curiosity—it was made to reveal secrets it never concealed. But not only is the Apocalypse firmly embedded in the prophetic tradition ; it has no hesitations in borrowing from Ezechiel, Zachary and Daniel to an extent which is nothing short of plagiarising. We can even go further. John has exploited the Old Testament in such a way that no less than five hundred Old Testament allusions decorate his work. Have we, then, nothing more than a thinly disguised compilation, a ' resultant text ' offering the best readings from past Jewish literature ? On the contrary. While John has pressed into service the Old Testament he has done so within a Christian perspective. The late date of the Apocalypse ensures that period of reflection necessary to the appreciation of how the Old Testament was being fulfilled in the New, of how the ancient themes were now being interwoven to form the full picture. We have here a Christian mind which has re-thought the *data* of the past in terms of the present Christian dispensation. The language we are listening to, however, still retains its Jewish accent.

Even when we have investigated the literary form of apocalyptic, with its symbolism, vindication and prophetism, and seen what light this can shed on the meaning of our Apocalypse, we are still a far throw

from grasping the message bequeathed to us. We have already observed that the author's own standpoint must be our starting-point for the interpretation of his message (as is the case for the Old Testament prophetic writings), but (like, once more, those same ancient writings) his message does not stop there. Its sights are set on more distant targets also. How, then, are we to approach this question of the interpretation of the Apocalypse, how define its objectives? Scholars are not agreed on a solution, differing like star from star. Yet, each proposal has its own helpful contribution to make to illumine the problem. We may, with Père Feuillet, distinguish no less than seven different approaches to the interpretation of the Apocalypse.

In the first instance there is *Millenarianism* which is based on Apoc. 20:1-6 and which, in varying ways, proposes a thousand-year reign of Christ before his Parousia. We may summarily dismiss the crass literalism of certain medieval interpreters and their modern followers who see in this text a pre-Parousia coming of Christ down to earth, followed by such a reign. Einar Molland, in his *Christendom* (a recent ecumenical survey of the sects found within Christianity), tells us that a fabulous building has been erected in America containing even more fabulous apartments designed to accommodate the *entourage* of Christ during the millennium. (One has the uneasy suspicion that the present—but only temporary—occupants will enjoy an undisturbed tenure.) There are other considerable authorities, however, who suggest a spiritual and symbolic interpretation of the same text. Augustine, after the precedent of Irenaeus, Justin, Hippolytus and Tertullian, thinks that the thousand years is contemporary with the whole earthly phase of the Kingdom of God, from the Resurrection and Ascension onwards. But it is difficult to reconcile this view of the millennium—which supposes precisely that Satan is enchained—with the evidence provided by John that he is still provoking the terrible crises which bring such intense suffering to the Church. It is John's care to show that *after* the persecutions of Rome, there will be relief. Hence, Fr Boismard advances the view (already gaining wide acceptance) that the 'thousand years' corresponds to the earthly phase of the Church from the end of the persecutions fomented by Rome until the end of time. And so the return of Christ described in Apoc. 19:11ff. must be understood in a symbolic sense (or may even form a doublet, a repetition, of 20:7-11). Although the Church has never condemned Millenarianism, a decree of the Holy Office (21 July 1944) states *tuto doceri non posse*. What is attacked in this decree is the idea that Christ will return visibly upon the earth before the Parousia. Those who hold (like Feret) that a flowering of Christian civilisation will grace the world before its consummation are at liberty to do so.

A second method of interpretation of the Apocalypse, which claims names like Allo, Bonsirven and Cerfaux in support, is that which attempts to see in this Book a series of *recapitulations*—the successive cycles of visions (seven seals, seven trumpets, seven bowls) are merely presentations of the same disasters, complementary signs, parallel to one another, which herald the last things. This opinion, which so admirably simplifies matters, has also in its favour the fact that we cannot discover in the relevant parts of the Apocalypse any constant chronological progression. But in this debate of recapitulation *v.* continuous narrative, authors like R. H. Charles (whose great knowledge of apocalyptic has proved immensely valuable to the last generation) and Ernst Lohmeyer have voted for continuous narrative : successive events do follow a strict sequence ; their case seems to be strengthened by such a verse as 15:1, ' seven angels with seven plagues, which are the *last*, for with them the wrath of God is ended.'

A third approach tends to see in the Apocalypse a detailed forecast of the whole run of history—the method of *universal history*. This interpretation of the episodes in the Apocalypse, which had a resounding success in the Middle Ages, gives rise to the notion of the seven ages of the world. Each period of history, however, in this view was coloured by the hopes of its commentator : his times were ' hard ' and consequently accommodated to those critical times of the Apocalypse which were to usher in the end. Now while it is evidently too much to expect the Apocalypticist to plot minutely the future unrolling of the Church's history, so satisfying to our curiosity, still it remains true that certain capital stages of the religious history of humanity are envisaged by him. What is revealed is less the successive events of history taken in themselves, but more their true bearing in relation to God's Kingdom. While the future is not announced in detail, it is prophesied that the oppression suffered by the Church must end in a total check ; God will have the last word.

This Christian philosophy of history, affirming that *de jure* sovereignty belongs to God, which sovereignty will be asserted *de facto* in God's own time when He will pass judgment on all evil and recognise true merit, must, however, derive from an examination of the *data* presented by John. The method of *contemporary history*, situating the Apocalypse within the framework of John's contemporary situation offers, therefore, a welcome corrective to the previous approach. The realisation that his eye was primarily on his own time delivers us from the need to scour history books to detect his characters and their roles. But while this interpretation is such a corrective, its weakness lies in confining the message of the Apocalypse to John's period. He had more to offer than that.

A fifth thesis is concerned to limit that message to the end of time. Dealing neither with the past nor the present, the Apocalypse is orientated towards describing the end of the world and the signs which will precede it—and all these things were at hand. Now while it is doubtlessly true that the Apocalypse does envisage the Parousia and the completion of history, it is forcing the texts to attempt to prove that the author was inculcating the naïve conviction that the Parousia was chronologically at hand. The *eschatological* interpretation fails to take sufficient notice of John's emphasis on the victorious Christ, Lord of History, exercising a real but hidden mastery over the forces of evil which are so utterly opposed to him. Their end is near in that the plan of God for the world is on the point of being realised completely. The end is in sight, the final age has arrived.

The question: Whence did John draw the materials for his work? has given rise to a further method of interpretation—the method of *literary analysis*. That much came to him in visions, as he claims, cannot be overlooked, and we have already noted the part played by the Old Testament in John's thought-pattern. However, this is a far cry from the efforts of scholars at the close of the last century who saw in the Apocalypse a compilation of older apocalyptic material. Vischer of Germany asserted that the bulk of the book was a previous Jewish apocalypse made Christian by the addition of a prologue and an epilogue with a few interpolations within the body of the work. The Christian element was no more than an ingredient, a spice. Modern scholars, however, on the whole are becoming less favourable to such hardy hypotheses which turn the Apocalypse into a casual compilation of diverse sources; the unity of inspiration and of style are opposed to it. Still, the book is not a simple account of visions, Old Testament allusions and Christian ideas shaped by a master-mind. It results from a work of reflection and composition which must have used pre-existing elements, and it is legitimate to attempt to define the pre-history of the text. We may, with Boismard, distinguish two primitive texts written by the same author at different times, then fused into one text—our Apocalypse—by another hand. Using this hypothesis much can be done to explain the doublets, ruptures in the series of visions, passages apparently out of context. To take one example, the 'New Jerusalem' of chapters 21:2–22—is it one 'city' or two? We can discern two descriptions: one which presents it as the messianic city, the Church on earth, in chapters 21:9–22:15, and another which has rather in mind the eternal city, the Church glorious and triumphant when time has passed away, in chapter 21:1–8. Fr Boismard suggests that a 'Text I' offered the 'messianic Jerusalem' and a 'Text II' the 'heavenly Jerusalem.' One would expect the 'messianic Jerusalem'

to precede the heavenly one since it prefigures it. Nevertheless, we might refrain from exposing ourselves to the Seer's curse (22:19) by rearranging those chapters.

Finally, there is the *comparative* method of interpretation with its two departments for home affairs (examining the contents of the Apocalypse in the light of traditional Christian material and biblical sources, an aspect we have already discussed) and foreign affairs. This latter attempts to disentangle *motifs* from pagan mythology—for example, the evil Angro-mainyu in conflict with the good Ahuramazda, the Zoroastrian *fravashis* or 'folk angels'—which have been laid under contribution for a Christian syncretist religion. While the last generation of scholars has tended to recoil from such hazardous parallels in Comparative Religion, we can still remark the occasional unfashionable reminiscence of such hypotheses. The background to John's Christian thought is biblical, not pagan, and the Old Testament it is that must clarify his references since his Apocalypse is to a certain point the re-reading of the Old in the light of the New. The hands held out to us may be the hands of Esau, but the voice is the voice of Jacob.

We have observed that these methods of interpretation offer some help towards understanding the Apocalypse, and we have tried to single out that contribution in each case. We may now move on to consider the Apocalypse in those perspectives.

A specific time of crisis gave rise to the writing of the Apocalypse. Whether the John who wrote it (1:1) is St John the Evangelist or another John (variously referred to as 'John the Elder' or 'John the Seer') attached to his circle of influence need not detain us. 'It seems,' Kiddle remarks, 'that the authorship of *Revelation* may prove the one mystery of the book which will never be revealed in this world.' What is important is that it was written to fortify the Christian morale during a time of such persecution that the question must have risen unbidden to many lips: How can this be our fate when *He* has said 'Fear not, I have conquered the world'? Nero, or *Nero redivivus*, Domitian, is indicated as the perpetrator of this early 'final solution' which discredited the closing years of the first century.

John accepts the challenge and, to realise his aim, takes up the two great themes of traditional prophetism favoured by apocalyptic writers: the 'great Day of Yahweh,' full of impending doom, and the 'new times' of peace and happiness in the established Kingdom of God. The Church, the new People of God, decimated by a ferocious persecution, would be vindicated and merit an eternal recompense.

After the Letters to the seven Churches of Asia Minor (whose

historical geography has been so well made known to us by Ramsay and others), an opening vision in chapter four portrays the majesty of God in heaven, absolute master of human destiny. Into this liturgical scene enters the Lamb of God to whom is made over the book containing the decrees of extermination of the oppressors which begin to take shape, in chapter six, with the invasion of the barbarian Parthians who set in motion the usual *cortège* of war, pest and famine. We catch a glimpse of the faithful, preserved from these evils while awaiting their definitive happiness in heaven. Strangely enough, a similar mercy is shown the persecutors: a series of plagues can be the occasion of their conversion, but, as in the case of the Egyptians, this overture evokes no such response. God will destroy these impious corrupters who would divert the world to the Roman emperor-worship, and a lament on Rome is sung only to be echoed by songs of triumph in heaven. A further vision takes up this theme of the destruction of Rome—but the destruction this time is effected by Christ.

The perspective of the 'new times' begins to govern the Apocalypse from chapter twenty—there is a period of prosperity for the Church which is terminated, however, by a renewed attack of Satan who is overthrown. We are then faced with the resurrection of the dead and the judgment. With death itself no more, chapter twenty-one opens up the vista of the Church in glory; a retrospective vision, recalling the perfection of that same Church, the new Jerusalem, during its reign on earth, closes the book.

But John's message of consolation and encouragement was not confined to those of his own time. We have already observed that he offers us a philosophy of history: the whole sweep of the historical process is under God's control and the life, death and resurrection of Christ, the Lamb of God of both the Fourth Gospel and the Apocalypse, have a direct bearing on everything, the Church in particular. The basic structure of the Apocalypse of the struggle of the sons of darkness against the sons of light (a theme common also to the Fourth Gospel) transcends any particular phase of history, but behind that struggle lies the permanent vision of faith recorded in chapters four and five of the Apocalypse: God maintains a controlling interest over earthly catastrophes, subordinating them to His divine plan. In fact, they are part of that same plan. There may be a 'pause,' as it were, in the divine economy to enable Christians to stabilise their relationship to Him, a challenge that demands the response of faith, but the reward is certain.

And why? Because (often enough despite appearances) God is with His people. The *Shekinah*, His Presence, transitory in the Old

Testament, is here to stay. God has taken up a permanent dwelling with His people, the Church. One great hope of the Old Dispensation has been fulfilled. But the figure of the Son of Man in the midst of the vision of heaven tells us that still another ancient expectation is being realised—the ascent of humanity to God. The closing chapters of the Apocalypse show that state finally attained: the Church is clothed at last in the glory that was hers from the beginning. The Bride is sharing in the privileges of the Bridegroom, Paradise has been regained.

If we were to try and seek what role John would have us play during this interval before the last act of the drama of redemption, we shall find it is that of witness: witness to the work of Christ as a past event, a present experience and a future hope. This may entail some suffering—it is not without interest that we find the Greek word *martyria* ('bearing witness') hardening, in the Apocalypse, into our 'martyrdom.' Yet that great Victory Hymn of the persecuted Church still echoes its epic of Christian hope, and its rewarding and consolatory promise is held out to us.

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THE PROPHETS AND POLITICS

A surprising feature of the prophets of Israel is their involvement with the political life of their day. That they should be concerned with religion and with fundamental principles of right and wrong is what we expect; we are even prepared to find that this duty entails their condemnation of public sin and social abuses: but we may not be quite so prepared for their role as self-appointed government advisers, almost equivalent to present-day political columnists in newspapers. The whole work of Ezekiel can only be seen against the background of the Exile and the hope for independence; the teaching of Isaiah is interwoven with the political manoeuvrings occasioned by the Assyrian threats, as that of Jeremiah by the threat from Babylon.

The result is that we cannot sit down peacefully to study the theology of the prophets as we study the theology of St Thomas, in pure principle, undisturbed by external realities. Our study is always interrupted by the need for a quite detailed knowledge of the political