

Reading the Apocalypse

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Apocalypse: is it really so unfamiliar?

IT PUZZLES ME THAT CHRISTIANS FIGHT SHY of the Apocalypse. It is not just the case that we live in the shadow of the millennium, but our culture is saturated with images which in many ways parallel those from Revelation. I switch on my television and see a sophisticated, and often surreal, world of contemporary advertising which millions of us drink in. Such images affect us in ways which we cannot quite comprehend so that we are moved to buy the advertised products. Also, my children watch films and play computer games riddled with the fantastic and bizarre. This is part of their everyday world. Yes, they can tell the difference between different kinds of reality, but the fantastic is woven into the fabric of contemporary culture which bombards them with images offering a possible link with that which confronts us on every page of Revelation. That is not to say that things are going to be easy. As it has developed, Christianity has fought shy of the weird and exotic for entirely understandable reasons. Its major spokespersons tend to present themselves as reasonable men and women who would have no truck with the zany and bizarre – all of which seem to be epitomized by the Apocalypse.

Having written two commentaries on the book of Revelation¹ I suppose there should be a feeling of satisfaction that I have managed to try and make sense of this bewildering and, to some, off-putting, text. But herein lies the difficulty. I am not sure that we should be in the business of making sense of the text. Of course, one can read Revelation with a sense that there is a beginning and an ending in the vision of the New Jerusalem, even if it is rather difficult to see how the intervening bits hang together. I have found myself under conflicting pressures; on the one hand to explain (that after all is what a commentary is for), and on the other with a strong sense of unease that explanation misses the point of a text like this. What does one do with a dream or vision, whether one's own or another's? Half a century of Freud and Jung has reduced the world of dreams to something which is altogether more manageable – understandable enough, given the way in which the nightmarish can be so disconcerting. The world of cool reason is altogether preferable.

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There are signs in the world of psychotherapy, however, that there is a greater willingness to consider a more ancient wisdom concerning dreams and revelations. One recent development in group work is directly relevant to our question, and both extends and challenges the dominant methodology of dealing with dreams in the psychoanalytic tradition.² There has emerged a form of group work which explores the role of dreams and what they may tell us about the collective experience. This use of dreams harks back to a pre-modern approach in which dreams are not subject to interpretation as the result of some kind of overarching interpretative key. Rather, the components of the dream themselves become the mode of discourse for the group without being reduced to a particular meaning derived from an analytic tradition. There is much that could be said about this embryonic and suggestive development in group psychotherapy, which in certain key respects departs from the psychoanalytic tradition. Though still in its infancy, it promises to add a rather different dimension to discussion about the role of dreams and what they tell us about society as well as the individual.

Submitting ourselves to the Revelation of Jesus Christ

Revelation makes great demands of those who read or hear it in pursuit of the blessing it offers. Always there is the temptation to move too quickly to 'translate' its imagery into a more comprehensible and accessible discourse. In effect that is what most ways of interpreting Revelation have done down the centuries. For example, the book has been treated as a prophecy about the end of the world. Another way relates the visions to their first-century context, involving questions about the meaning for the original author and readers and their contemporary historical realities. A rather different way of reading the text is to regard the images as an account of the struggles facing the journey of the soul to God. There has always been another approach, one which has in different ways been used by mystics and prophets, which seems to me to be more consistent with the nature of the book itself. It is a form of contemporary application in which the book is used as an interpretative lens for viewing contemporary history. Apocalypse thus becomes an unveiling of the inner meaning of events and persons. With this approach a text like Revelation reads as a gateway to a greater understanding of reality, both divine and human, spiritual and political, which includes, but transcends, that offered by the human senses. It thereby becomes a way of illuminating the nature of politics and reli-

gion in every age. The apocalyptic imagery is no longer a code for translation into another discourse in which an alternative account can be offered of the various ciphers contained in the apocalyptic texts. Like the modern political cartoon, Revelation's imagery may strike home in ways that escape the ability of prosaic discourse. Steve Bell's pungent and insightful cartoons in the *Guardian* regularly pierce to the heart of a contemporary matter in ways even the most learned of editorials cannot match.

It seems to me that to treat Revelation as if it were a code and want to 'decode' it, fails to take seriously the apocalyptic medium. The function of language in a code is to conceal, to communicate something which has to be kept secret. John wrote an apocalypse – a prophecy – not a story. To interpret a visionary text requires of us particular interpretative skills – imagination and emotion, for example. Like a metaphor it startles, questions, even disorients, before pointing to a fresh view of reality by its extraordinary imagery and impertinent verbal juxtapositions. However difficult it may be for us, we must learn to exercise those faculties which are needed to engage with such a medium. We are above all else being asked to view things differently, a point well made by William Blake:

What, it will be questioned, when the sun rises, do you not see a round disk of fire somewhat like a guinea? O no, [responds William Blake,] I see an innumerable company of the heavenly host crying, 'Holy Holy Holy is the Lord God Almighty'. I question not my corporeal or vegetative eye any more than I would question a window concerning a sight. I look through it and not with it. (William Blake, *A vision of the last judgement* K617)

That quotation from William Blake prompts me to resort to his hermeneutical wisdom. He was asked by a learned doctor to offer elucidation of his own symbolism. Blake responded tartly in the following words:

You say that I want somebody to elucidate my ideas. But you ought to know that what is grand is necessarily obscure to weak men. That which can be made explicit to the idiot is not worth my care. The wisest of the ancients consider'd what is not too explicit as the fittest for instruction, because it rouses the faculties to act . . . Why is the Bible more Entertaining & Instructive than any other book? Is it not because they [*sic*] are addressed as to the Imagination, which is

Spiritual Sensation and but mediately to the understanding or reason?
(Letter to Trusler K793–4)

It is not the easily explained or the straightforward which is of most use to us but that which, to quote Blake's words, 'rouzes the faculties to act'. That is, what is most profound stretches our imaginations and gets us to open up new perspectives on things rather than merely being told what the answers are. We are asked by Blake to be co-authors in finding meaning in his texts. When theology is a matter of the systematic and the tidy, Revelation fits uneasily into that mould. Despite initial impressions, Revelation offers insight on very practical matters like what one eats and relations with the local culture. It demands non-conformity to the expectations of the world if those demands are not compatible with the way of the Lamb.

What follows in these reflections on three passages from Revelation is not an explanation of what the text is about so much as a report of the way in which this text has 'rouzed my faculties to act'.

*Revelation 5: 'Heaven perplexed'*³

The slain Lamb merits the worship of the heavenly host. It is not the mighty of the world who attract fame and attention, but those who are victims of the system of the beast and Babylon, just as the Lamb was, who are promised the blessings of the age to come (7:16). Revelation 5 compels us to consider a different understanding of the meaning of success and the exercise of power. This is so difficult to hold on to when all the pressures are to conform to a culture of self-aggrandizement epitomized by Babylon. Self-offering and weakness, recognized and accepted, is itself powerful and acceptable to God, but this is not about passivity (as is suggested by the more defiant stance of the Lamb in 14.1ff).

The vision of the slaughtered Lamb's place with God reminds us that the gospel offers an alternative story (though there are hints of it in the Old Testament too, where the side of the victims is taken). This stands in contrast with human society's version of the story of the fate of the victim (they were troublemakers, subversives: 'it is fitting for one man to die for the people' in John 11:50 represents the sentiments of the leaders of state security forces down the centuries). The gospel gives the perspective of the victim, of the Abels of this world who otherwise remain silent. It is the story of the innocent victim. The Christian gospel, therefore, becomes fundamental for interpreting all human

history and the distortions and delusions we tell about ourselves, the violence we use to maintain the status quo, and our ways of behaving, disguising from ourselves the oppression of the victim and the way we maintain a lie in order to keep things as they are.

Revelation is a text about the unmasking of human culture. At its start it reveals the vindication of the Lamb who was slain. The story of Jesus' death is a revelation of the false consciousness of the efficacy of the scapegoat mechanism and the violence which it institutionalizes. The gospel unmasks the fact that violence lies at the base of all human culture and it does so by proclaiming the innocence of the victim. It offers an alternative pattern for human mimesis. The consequence of this – and this is so crucial for our understanding of Revelation – is the cross. Jesus identifies with the victims in his society and as a result sets in train a process of victimization on himself. There is a violent reaction as the political élite plot to rid themselves of a troublemaker. As the unfolding visions of John demonstrate, this leads to violence *as the gospel shows up human culture for what it is*. To bear witness to this alternative way is to risk the violence of the old system. The story of Christ's life and death subverts the 'lie' of culture based on violence, as do the lives of those living according to this pattern. That provokes a violent crisis as the lie is revealed as accelerating the process of cultural disintegration, the immediate consequence of the vindication of the Lamb in the visions which follow in Revelation 6. With the gospel there can be no resolution other than acceptance of its alternative way. A society based on violence is inherently unstable. The revelation of the gospel reveals God's wrath in that the human culture based on violence is shown for what it really is.

We can see why the Passion is found between the preaching of the Kingdom and the Apocalypse . . . It is a phenomenon that has no importance in the eyes of the world – incapable, at least in principle, of setting up or reinstating a cultural order, but very effective, in spite of those who know better, in carrying out subversion. In the long run, it is quite capable of undermining and overturning the whole cultural history and supplying the secret motive force of all subsequent history.⁴

Revelation 13:1–18: a vision of two beasts

I recall a meeting with a small Christian group in the northeast of Brazil in 1990. It was round about the time of state elections, and we were listening to the way in which the members found Scripture helped them

to interpret their situation. An elderly man began to talk about the flattery and blandishments of the candidates, using, without a trace of embarrassment, material from Revelation about the beast and its heads to describe the way in which politicians deluded ordinary people with their promises and veiled threats. I have often thought about that occasion when I have read passages from William Blake and from the Civil War radical Gerrard Winstanley. In one of his illustrations Blake depicts the beast with seven heads as various parts of the state establishment of his day: ecclesiastical, royal, legal and military power, just as his predecessor Gerrard Winstanley had done.

The insight of my Brazilian acquaintance and these earlier users of the book of Revelation represents a long-standing recognition that passages from Daniel and Revelation offer a potent insight into the nature of state power, and the need for vigilance on the part of the people of God in the face of the persuasiveness of such plausible might.

Revelation 12 finishes with the dragon standing on the sea shore, angrily seeking to make war on the woman's offspring. From the sea emerges a beast invested with the authority of the dragon. In turn, this authority is exercised on its behalf by a beast from the land. The immediacy of the threat to the earth and its inhabitants which is the consequence of Satan's ejection from heaven is set out in this vision: there is the demand to worship the first beast. John sees the world's inhabitants falling into line and worshipping the beast. Those who refuse have to live (and die) with the consequences. In the face of this power the whole world follows after in amazement (13:4) and worships the dragon. People engage in activity which should be directed only towards God.

The references to the image of the beast and the more specific description of the wound have led commentators over the centuries to suppose that there are particular historical allusions here. The worship of the image of the beast (13:14) has been linked with the promotion of the Roman imperial cult which was particularly widespread in the area of the churches whose angels are addressed by John. It had become part of the fabric of life, and John's vision, in effect, demands of readers that they unravel that fabric and weave a new fabric of living in which the persistent, even casual, participation in state religion and the social conventions that surround it form no part.

This act of worship is not a private matter, for those who worship will be marked with a mark on their right hand and on their foreheads, in contrast with the sign of those who stand with the Lamb who are marked with the name of the Lamb and of God (14:1). It is something

which is imposed on the worshippers of the beast (13:16). There are public, social and economic consequences for those who resist, therefore: exclusion from regular social intercourse. Without the name of the beast or the number of its name it becomes impossible to buy or sell. Those 'bought' with the blood of the Lamb must not do anything other than resist. The present disruption of their pattern of life is a temporary hardship compared with the wider disruption of buying and selling which will take place when Babylon, the power which enables that to carry on, is destroyed, provoking the merchants to lament, as is evident in Revelation 18, especially v. 11.

Reference to the number of its name prompts another word of exhortation in v. 18 as in v. 10. But now wisdom is required to calculate the number of a beast, just as it will be to understand the mystery of Babylon and the beast in 17:9. The mysterious number 666 in 13:18 attracts much attention. Jews were fond of working out the numerical value of letters (we need to remember that Jews and Greeks used letters for numbers too, so $a = 1$, $b = 2$, etc.). The numerical value of Nero Caesar in Hebrew is 666. Within the context of Revelation itself, however, the number seven (used of angels, churches, seals, trumpets and bowls) implies completeness. The number 666 is three times over falling one short of the number of perfection, seven. This falling short is evident also in the interruption after the sixth seal and the sixth trumpet in 6:12ff and 9:13ff. The beast seems to be near perfection (it is after all a caricature of the Lamb who was slain in 13:3), but what it lacks actually renders it diabolical and utterly opposed to God in supposing that it has ultimate power and wisdom (13:4). The number is a threefold falling short of perfection, that which is almost messianic but not quite so. It has most of the hallmarks of truth and so can easily deceive. For this reason it must, at all costs, be resisted.

In Revelation 13 we have a graphic portrait of the nature and operation of state ideology which creates support and by its activities cloaks its real goals and identity from those it has taken in by them. The beast is the incarnation of the powers of the devil and attracts universal admiration for acts which appear to be beneficial and for its military power. The pressure is to conform. Those who refuse to do so face social ostracism (as is evident from Revelation 13:16). As the beast has some of the characteristics of the Lamb (Revelation 13:3 and 14), we can understand how watchful one has to be to avoid being taken in by what seems superficially plausible, and colluding with that which is opposed to the divine justice. We should not underestimate the effectiveness of a prevailing set of ideas to form our minds in such a way that

when something different and challenging comes along we consider it wrong-headed or misguided. That is exactly the effect of what is called ideology. It makes you think that the ideas which are widely held are 'obvious', 'common-sense' and 'normal', when in fact they often cover up the powerful vested interests of a small group which has and wants to retain power. In John's vision the task of the second beast from the land is to persuade ordinary people that what they see in the first beast is normal and admirable, so that any deviation or counter-culture is regarded as strange, anti-social and, therefore, to be repudiated. John's vision helps to unmask these processes and is a pointed reminder of the falsity of the attitude that what 'everybody does' must be right and is to be copied (13:3 and 8). This unmasking is a necessary task. Despite the widespread assumption that it was evil men like Hitler, Stalin and Pol Pot and their circles of supporters who were responsible for crimes against humanity, they would not have been able to carry out the iniquities of genocide and mass murder without the tacit support of ordinary (many Christian) people keeping their noses clean, maintaining a low profile and, above all, avoiding at all costs being seen to be political.

*Revelation 20: the millennium*⁵

In the light of Revelation 20 it is disturbing that the imminence of the end of a millennium should provoke a debate about appropriate ways of celebrating it with buildings, parties and the like without any mention of the text from which the concept comes. This will cause little surprise, given the abrasive, this-worldly tone of the book. When we consider such proposals in the light of Revelation 20, far from the world enjoying a celebration to mark the millennium, it stands under the judgement of God for the neglect of the divine justice and the things which made for its true peace. The cosmos is a culture of death. Revelation 20 promises that those who rule will be those who lost their lives at the hands of social orders which brought about their death, and dares to envision a period when the messianic reign will take place on earth, a fulfilment, then, of the prayer of Jesus: 'thy kingdom come, thy will be done *on earth* as it is in heaven'. John sees the dragon bound, so as to prevent the nations being deceived into living lives which, in their complacency and the pursuit of 'business as usual', ignore the divine righteousness.

In Revelation 20 we are offered a vision of those who resisted the beast and those who suffered for such resistance sitting with the one

who had himself been the faithful witness (1:5). They are the ones who held out against the compromises required of them in the old scheme of things (14:9, 11 and 16:2). Though this passage envisions a different realm in the future, the reign of Christ is both present (1:6) and in the future (5:10) and can be entered into here and now in communities of resistance to the regime of the beast and Babylon.

We can describe the bare bones of what is in the passage, but the far more difficult question is what sense we might make of it. With its symbols and metaphors, the imagery functions to question us and to offer an alternative horizon. It demands that we allow ourselves to be interrogated by the images and disturbed by a different way of looking at things. It will be like the myopic person who puts on the glasses and sees things come into focus, or the walker who suddenly finds the mist disappear from the mountain tops to reveal a very different vista from any that could have been imagined lying hidden in the fog which had hitherto passed for normality. If we allow ourselves to be challenged by what we read, digesting and pondering what is there rather than rushing to explain everything and to organize the images into a neat eschatological system, we will perhaps begin to discern that the vision of the millennium may be a disturbance to our complacency, enabling us to see that we have been wretched, pitiable, poor and blind, like the Laodicean Christians (Revelation 3:17).

Those who will reign are those whose lives follow in the footsteps of the Messiah by refusing to accept the injustice, values and oppressive behaviour of the principalities and powers. Instead they hold out for something different, representing humanity to God and God to humanity as priests. The millennium is an age that will be marked by that alternative pattern of life which was followed by a minority in the old age of the beast and Babylon, and which provoked the ridicule of those who seem to be successful in the old scheme of things.

It is that oppressive situation in the old scheme of things that the Book of Wisdom illuminates well. It criticizes the mindset of those who say 'let might be right', and 'come, let us enjoy the good things when we can'. These attitudes are shown to be utterly wrong. Those who continue the testimony of Jesus offer a living reproach to current values and ways of thinking (Wis 2:15). But they will be judges and rulers over the people (Wis 3:8), even if according to the values of the present they may be scorned and dishonoured (Wis 4:17f). Their style of life is seen in the millennium to be honourable and true to humanity, as they have manifested the endurance necessary to resist the might and allure of

Babylon by 'keeping the commandments of God and holding fast to the faith of Jesus' (Revelation 14:12).

Whether they recognize it or not at the time of their resistance, those who reign have shown themselves fit to do so because they are the ones who have identified themselves with the way of the Lamb and are peculiarly qualified to rule because of their espousal of another form of governance:

'The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized; but to sit at my right hand or at my left hand is not mine to grant; but it is for those for whom it has been prepared . . . You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.' (Mark 10:39-44)

In the millennium the organization of the world based on deceit and self-aggrandizement, which has led to death, destruction, oppression and other acts described in the previous chapters, will be absent (20:2). Satan will be bound, and so the deceit, which led to the pursuit of the false gods of consumption and greed promoted by the beast of Empire and of Babylon, will no longer lead the nations astray. The messianic reign is dependent on the restraint of Satan, the earthly parallel to the liberation of heaven set out in 12:7ff. The deceiving of people and the distortion of minds and lives no longer takes place (cf 12:9; 13:14), enabling a proper exercise of justice.

The problem of the Apocalypse

There remains a pressing problem with Revelation. Many ordinary readers of Revelation react not with awe or discomfort, but with amazement and disgust that they should have to pay attention to the words of this book. Visions are, after all, not a sign of divine authority for modernity but of severe psychic disturbance. Would we pay attention to this text if it were not part of the canon of Scripture, especially in the light of the part that Revelation has played as a catalyst in events of human suffering?

There is no easy response to such unease. Visionaries are certainly eccentric. They may at times be damaged (but what does damage involve? And what is the criterion of wholeness by which we judge the damage?), and what they see can encourage things which are humanly

damaging. They are not immediately to be rejected out of hand, however. If an elderly person with senile dementia or a person with schizophrenia is the problem, I struggle to find ways of accommodating the person who is before me to my habits of behaving and speaking. The usual ways of dealing with a person no longer work, and I am at a loss. The temptation to react by rejection, consigning to a home or an asylum, is overwhelming. But the challenge is to learn new habits of mind and behaviour in the face of the other.

No reader of Revelation can fail to be uneasy about the possibility of this text being used for interpretations that are dangerous, damaging and oppressive. There is no way of preventing such interpretations on the grounds of our theological or historical sophistication. One cannot prevent a text like Revelation, allusive as it is, being used in particular ways merely by asserting 'this text cannot mean this'.

Three points can be made:

- Revelation never countenances the use of violence by the people of God, however just their cause. They are called instead to witness and patient endurance.
- The violence and upheaval Revelation speaks of is something we need to hear about regularly. We can be lulled into a sense that this is a world without violence and injustice. That merely exhibits the limit of our horizon. The pockets of deprivation are there in this country. They are widespread elsewhere in the world and are increasing.
- At the heart of Revelation is the Lamb. His story is the ultimate criterion of all life, all interpretation of Scripture, whether Revelation or any other text: does it conform to the way of the Lamb?

Revelation has been given respectability either by subordination to the rest of the canon or benign neglect. We fear that if we attend to it the cataclysm it contains will sweep away our neat theological, ecclesiastical – as well as our political – constructions. The vision confronts us with the otherness of God. In a world where the track record of reason and pragmatism has not been entirely commendable, particularly in this last bitter and violent century of the second millennium, we might think again, and at least listen and ponder whether the Spirit may be speaking to the churches through these awesome visions.

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NOTES

1 C. Rowland, *Revelation*, The Epworth Bible Commentaries (London: SCM Press, 1993), and *Revelation: the new interpreter's Bible*, volume xii (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998).

2 W. G. Lawrence, *Social dreaming at work* (London: Karnac, 1998).

3 The title of a suggestive essay on this chapter of Revelation by Gerd Theissen in his collected sermons, *Signs of life* (London: SCM Press, 1998).

4 R. Girard, *Things hidden since the foundation of the world* (London: Athlone, 1987), p 209.

5 On this theme see M. Gilbertson, *The meaning of the millennium* (Cambridge: Grove, 1997), and R. J. McKelvey, *The millennium and the book of Revelation* (Cambridge: Lutterworth, 1999).