



Revelation:

A Divine Message of Hope

Father Bruce Vawter, C.M.

The Knights of Columbus presents
The Veritas Series
“Proclaiming the Faith in the Third Millennium”

Revelation

A Divine Message of Hope

BY

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Imprimatur
John F. Whealon
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Cover: Christ (a Byzantine mosaic in the south gallery, 11th c.). Hagia Sophia, Istanbul, Turkey. © Erich Lessing/Art Resource, New York.

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Printed in the United States of America

CONTENTS

WHAT IS APOCALYPSE?	5
Christ's Perennial Triumph	6
Prophecy	7
Common Misunderstandings	8
Why the Apocalypse?	9
Roman Persecution	9
Nero's Terror	10
Jewish Apocalyptic Literature	10
Writing During the Persecution	11
For Jews Only	13
Other Books	13
WHAT JOHN SAW	15
Symbolism	16
Meaning Understood	16
Symbolic Numbers	17
What They Mean	18
"...On Eagles Wings"	18
The Prophet John	19
Babylon	19
"...Like a Trumpet"	20
Each Had Four Faces	21
24 Elders	21
Book of Henoch	22
Interpret in Context	23
THE SEVEN CHURCHES	25
Literary Influences	26
Symbols Old and New	27
The Form of the Letters	28
The Church at Ephesus	29

The Church at Smyrna	31
The Church at Pergamum.	31
The Church at Thyatira	32
The Church at Sardis	32
The Church at Philadelphia	32
The Church at Laodicea	33
The Message of the Apocalypse.	33
THE WOES TO COME	35
The Father and the Spirit	35
The Son	36
Semitic Structure	37
The Seals	37
Intermediate Visions.	38
The Trumpets.	39
Visions Before the Seventh Trumpet	40
The Final Trumpet	42
Timing	42
THE WOMAN CLOTHED WITH THE SUN	44
The Cast of Characters	44
The Number of the Beast	47
The Diabolical Trinity	47
The Seven Bowls.	48
The Harlot and the Beast	50
Fall of Babylon	51
THE NEW JERUSALEM	53
The Millennium	53
Heaven: The Church Glorified	55
A Message of Joy and Hope	56
ABOUT THE AUTHOR.	57

I

WHAT IS APOCALYPSE?

Non-Catholics who read the Bible in English find the last book of the New Testament entitled “Revelation.” This is, as a matter of fact, a very accurate translation of the Greek word *apokalypsis* which is kept as “Apocalypse,” for the title of this book in many Catholic translations of the Bible. But it is also misleading, through no fault of its own.

An example of how misleading it is we can see from the fact that we so often hear people refer to the book as “Revelations.” That is to say, they are thinking of it in terms of “the shape of things to come.” “Revelations” means the unveiling of secrets, and what is more secret than a future which only God can know? Also, there is nothing about which men have traditionally shown more curiosity than the unknown future. By lawful and unlawful means, by prayer and by fortune telling, by consulting spirits and signs and omens, the quest of such “revelations” has always been eagerly pursued. And in the minds of many people, it is just such things that we have in the Apocalypse of Saint John. It is, to them, a collection of “revelations” of the future, made by the Almighty Himself, needing only to be read and interpreted by us.

Now this is an unfortunate misunderstanding of the meaning of the word Apocalypse or Revelation. In itself, perhaps it would not be so tragic, but what is extremely bad is the multitude of utterly unfounded and absolutely erroneous interpretations to which this misunderstanding has given rise. Now it is true that Revelation is the unveiling of something, and even of a future something, but it is also of a very definite and precise something, not a general panorama of future history. It is, as the introduction to the book

makes clear (1:1-3), “the revelation of Jesus Christ,” “what must soon take place” “the word of God,” “the testimony of Jesus Christ,” “all that he [John] saw,” and “the prophecy” of which “the time is near.” It is, in a word, a divine revelation made known to John in a vision, not of the indefinite future, but of something that was to happen soon.

A revelation of what thing? The contents of the book should leave us with little doubt. It is “the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Corinthians 1:7), “when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire” (2 Thessalonians 1:7), “the grace that is coming to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 1:13), “so will it be on the day when the Son of man is revealed” (Luke 17:30). It is, in other words, the manifestation of the triumph of Christ, which is coming very soon. It is this fact that was made known to John in vision, and it is this fact with which the Apocalypse is concerned.

Christ’s Perennial Triumph

This triumph of Christ, it is true, exists on several planes. Even as God “was and is and is to come” (4:8), the triumph of His Son is at the one time a fact that has taken place, an enduring reality, and a promise that is related to the future. Most frequently the “revelation” of Christ, as we see from the texts above, refers to His final glorious coming at the end of time. But it also means the here and now, as well as the past. The Apocalypse is concerned with Christ’s triumph as a single reality, in which past, present, and future are fused into one. It is actually a perennial triumph. Therefore can John say that it comes “soon”?

This idea is present in the rest of the New Testament. In Colossians 2:13-15, Paul says that “you, who were dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, having canceled the bond which stood against us with its legal demands; this he set aside, nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the principalities and powers and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in him.” Here the triumph is a fact that has taken place. Yet in Ephesians 6:12 he says, “We are not contending against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places” – here there is not yet triumph, but struggle. And in 1 Corinthians 15:24-26 he

puts the triumph in the indefinite future, at the time of the resurrection of the just: “Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death.” Yet in the same breath he adds (v. 27): “For God has put all things in subjection under his feet.”

The triumph of Christ can be spoken of as past, because once for all through His life, death, and resurrection He has conquered death and sin. But He has done so only to the extent that men accept His salvation and live by it. He has conquered the enemy, which no longer has any power over one who is truly Christ's. But men can fall under this power again and again if they will to reject Christ's grace. Hence the life of Christians in this world is a battle, characterized by both victories and defeats, and the ultimate triumph of Christ is reserved to the future when this battle has been fought to its conclusion.

It is about this that John has written. For him Christ is the conqueror Who “has freed us from our sins by his blood and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father” (1:5-6); He is “the ruler of kings on earth” (1:5); “I died, and behold I am alive for evermore, and I have the keys of death and Hades” (1:18). But Christ lives on in His Church, as Paul also taught, and the victory of Christ must consequently be constantly repeated in his members. “To him who conquers...” is the condition of His promises to the churches (2:8; 2:11; 2:17; 2:26; 3:5; 3:12; 3:21). “Be faithful unto death and I will give you the crown of life” (2:10). Until the work of the Church has been done, Christ's victory is not complete. It was to assure his readers that this victory would be complete, that the Revelation of John was written.

Prophecy

This, when all is said and done, is the entire message of the Apocalypse. True, some details of the Church's victory are included, but relatively few, and then nothing precise but rather in generalities. The book is not concerned with various stages or ages of the Church, for example, or with sharply defined eras of the future. Past, present, and future are rather mingled in the one prophetic vision, precisely as our Lord mingled the prediction of the destruction of Jerusalem with His description of the last times (Matthew 24; Mark 13; Luke 21). They are, in fact, one; or rather, they are various aspects of the same thing. The destruction of Jerusalem and the temple was a

prefiguration of Christ's last triumph, for by it the old order in fact as well as in principle was removed from the scene, leaving the Church free and independent in the world. Christ's triumph of the Cross is the beginning of His final conquest of death.

Common Misunderstandings

To teach these things, we repeat, was the purpose of the Apocalypse. It was not written to satisfy idle curiosity about the future. It was not written to contradict our Lord's own words about the last times, "of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angel of heaven, but the Father only" (Matthew 24:36). And "you do not know at what hour your Lord is to come" (v. 42). It was not written to provide a blueprint by which a person of ingenuity could plot the future course and destiny of peoples and nations down into our present time. (People have, it is true, dreadfully misused the Apocalypse in this way for countless generations, and invariably they have found its "revelations" playing out just as it reaches their lifetime – it is easier, it seems, to fit the prophecy into the convenient mould of the past which is known than to be equally sure of the future.) Above all, it was not written to frighten us, to cause us to despair, but to console and reassure faith.

We are not so optimistic as to think that any amount of common sense words on the Apocalypse will keep it from being misused by those who have made it (or rather, their misunderstanding of it) the essence of their religion and life. It has too long afforded curious souls that thrill of "sacred fortunetelling" by juggling the numbers and symbols which they do not in the least understand, making them mean what they want them to mean, and then confidently serving the result up as "God's word." It has been too long a gold mine for the lunatic fringe, the idle, the curious, those who are more interested in their neighbors' sins than their own, and those who have a singular pleasure in thinking themselves irremediably "saved" while a countless number of their fellow men are irremediably "lost," for all this to be given up without a struggle. The Apocalypse will continue, probably until the end of time, to be a writing "which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other scriptures" (2 Peter 3:16).

Why The Apocalypse?

But if this is so – if the Apocalypse has been so subject to misinterpretation, if it really is not a detailed glimpse of world history – why was it written in such a fashion? Why all the involved images and symbols? Why was it necessary to put into such a form what, after all, is basically contained in the Gospels and the rest of the New Testament?

To answer this, we need know two things. First, the state of the Church when the Apocalypse was written. Second, what kind of person was its author.

The first answer is given from the Pauline Epistles and the Gospels as well as from the Apocalypse. Persecutions, of the sort Paul had to console his readers about, had begun to afflict the Church. Even worse persecutions, in fact, had descended than any of those Paul had to face. There was no longer question of Jewish discrimination against Christians, of petty restrictions on a local level, of the individual riot at Ephesus or the beating at Philippi and the single mob in Jerusalem. Now the whole might of a vast and well organized Empire was beginning to turn upon Christianity. Throughout the Acts of the Apostles, Luke tells us by implication that the Romans were more likely to be favorably disposed to Christians than not, as contrasted with their attitude to the Jews. Certainly there had been no open hostility of Romans as Romans directed against the Christians as Christians. If Felix had kept Paul in prison unjustly, it was because he was a corrupt man, not because he was a Roman, and because Paul was a potential source of income, not because he was a Christian. Felix could not have cared less about Christianity as a religion. And so it had been generally. But now all this had changed.

Roman Persecution

Paul had been in prison in Rome between the years A.D 61-63. He had been released for lack of any evidence against him, and he had been imprisoned in the first place because of charges made by his own people. But shortly after Paul's release the madman who ruled Rome under the name of Nero first fired the city of Rome, as the Roman historians acknowledge, and then used the Christian community as the scapegoat on which to lay the blame. Persecution began. Paul himself was to be hunted down and executed in the year 67. The terrible spectacles were enacted that have been faithfully chronicled by contemporary authors – the degenerate emperor feasting in a garden illumined

by the light of Christians being burnt alive, the appetites of the mobs distracted from rebellion at their own wrongs by seeing the even more wretched Christians flung to the beasts in the arena.

Nero's Terror

Nero – in his lifetime declared a god by imperial decree – was murdered in 68, but the troubles of the Church were only beginning. There ensued the reigns of Vespasian (69-79) and Titus (79-81), and finally Domitian (81-96), in whom all of Nero's wickedness was reincarnate. The pressure against Christians formed by the precedent created under Nero, the lies and slanders spread against them, so that they were commonly named "the hatred of the human race," and their refusal to accept the deification of the emperors, became a constant terror which was to continue under even the few good Caesars of the decaying Empire. All this was a new experience to the Christians which even the Gospels had not prepared them to expect. That the whole world, embodied in the crushing power of the Empire, should have turned against them to destroy them, was a terrifying experience.

It was in this environment that the vision came to John, in exile under Domitian "on the island called Patmos on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus" (1:9). The Apocalypse was a necessary revelation to confirm and strengthen the infant Church in a world gone mad.

This is half the explanation of the Apocalypse. But, as we said above, the other half lies in a knowledge of the person of John himself.

Jewish Apocalyptic Literature

John the Apostle was a Jew. His culture, his background, his reading and his thought processes were Jewish. This is of extreme importance in explaining the Apocalypse. When the word of God came to John, it came to a man whose mind and whose soul had been conditioned by Jewish literature, history, and tradition. The word of God did not change this man, it came through him.

If John had not been a Jew, the Apocalypse would have surely taken another form than it did. But as a Jew, John had a fund of tradition to draw on that was ready-made for the book that he had to write. He had the literary tradition that was already established and which is known as Jewish Apocalyptic.

This is the fact to recognize, that John's Apocalypse is simply the last in a long line of Apocalypses which had been produced in earlier years under virtually the same conditions and for virtually the same ends. It is the last, and it is the greatest, but it is still one of a series.

Anyone who is familiar with both the Apocalypse and the Old Testament, knows that many of the events described in the Apocalypse have been taken, almost verbatim, from Old Testament books, chiefly Ezekiel and Daniel. Words, sentences, pictures, symbols, have been freely adapted or lifted bodily. When one reads the Apocalypse in the original language and compares it with the Greek translation of the Old Testament which John used, he is impressed even more by the degree of dependence of the Apocalypse on the Old Testament. Now all this is not by accident.

Writing During Persecution

Jewish apocalyptic grew out of a combination of circumstances altogether like those which occasioned John's writing. In the year 587 B.C., the last in a long line of crushing defeats had destroyed Jewish independence forever. The vast Babylonian Empire, under the man who was to remain forever for the Jews a symbol of all that was evil in tyranny, Nebuchadnezzar, destroyed the holy city Jerusalem and the temple, and transported the inhabitants of the land to Babylon. Never again in a full sense were they to regain their liberty, except briefly during the period of the Maccabean kingdom in the second century B.C. Though under the Persian Empire which destroyed Babylon the Jews were allowed to return to their homeland, they returned no longer as masters but as subjects of a foreign prince. The Persian Empire was succeeded by the Greek of Alexander the Great. During this time the Jews were not actively persecuted, but a more subtle influence was brought to bear to destroy their faith. Alexander had united the world with a single language, a single culture, and, as he hoped, a single religion, which was an amalgam of all the pagan cults. There was a strong tendency for the Jews to conform, to be submerged into the new world state which had so much to offer in a material way. We know from the books of Maccabees and the wisdom literature, particularly such books as Sirach and the Wisdom of Solomon, how many of the Jews did succumb to this temptation. They were the ancestors of the Sadducees of the New Testament, though many of them went far beyond the Sadducees in embracing foreign ways and showing shame

for their Jewishness. The Jews who remained faithful to their law and religion tended to become isolated from the mainstream of the life of other men and to lead their own life in a spiritual ghetto.

In 168 B.C. the Greco-Syrian Emperor Antiochus Epiphanes 4th, then ruling over Syria and Palestine, brought the issue to its final head by converting the temple of Israel's God into a place of pagan sacrifice and erecting there the image of the Olympian Zeus. Already since the beginning of his reign in 175, he had inexorably turned the moral pressure against Jewish fidelity into physical force. Under pain of death, circumcision and the observance of the Sabbath had been forbidden. Aided by faithless Jews, Antiochus brought to bear against Jewish religion all the power inherent in a mighty secular state.

As it happened, Antiochus had overreached himself. Inflamed by the desecration of the temple and the murder of the holy high priest Onias III, realizing with the desperation of men hard pressed that they could no longer have anything to lose by taking the ultimate step of revolt, the Maccabean rebellion spread throughout Palestine. Under the leadership of the Maccabees, the venerable Mathathias and his vigorous sons Judas, Jonathan, and Simon, Judaism showed once more its power to survive and conquer. Within a few years the temple was rededicated to God, Judea was freed, and for a while the Jews were to be independent, having successfully braved a power before which greater peoples had trembled.

But the seeds of corruption had been too well sown. The very descendants of the Maccabees were soon conducting themselves more shamefully and with greater depravity than the pagan Antiochus. The last native Israelite dynasty became in fact pagan. Greater injustices than had been endured from foreigners were now the daily infliction of Jewish kings. The opposed parties of Pharisees and Sadducees, respectively despising and admiring all that was not Jewish, divided the people with incessant strife, massacre, civil and religious corruption. In 63 B.C. the Romans annexed Judea without opposition, and the Jews were to remain the uneasy subjects of Rome throughout the time the New Testament was lived and written. The final result was to be the Jewish revolt of A.D. 67-70 ending in the destruction once and for all of the temple, and the second revolt of 135 which put an end to the Jewish state and left Jerusalem for the first time an all-pagan city.

Throughout this turmoil, persecution, lack of faith, and temptation to despair, faithful Jews turned back to their sacred books to seek consolation and hope. They leaned especially on God's clear promises to protect and save His people, and on the promise of the Messiah Who would be a glorious conqueror. It is true, they tended to interpret the Lord's promises in a too material sense, and to think of a Messiah largely in terms of removing the Gentile yoke, but their tendency itself was a sound one.

For Jews Only

From this came the Jewish apocalyptic writings. Using as their models the prophetic writings most used by John, Jewish authors began to write. Their writings were cloaked in an imagery and a symbolism which both appealed to their oriental imaginations and were designed to make the books intelligible only to Jews and unintelligible to hostile non-Jewish eyes. They found models for this largely in the predictions of Ezekiel who had already begun to use these symbolic devices in foretelling the overthrow of the Babylonian Empire. Sections of Isaiah which modern scholars believe were also put in their present form in the time of the Babylonian oppression, also served as the beginning of apocalyptic. Thus this style of writing was firmly rooted in the Old Testament. Furthermore, the first of the really great apocalypses through and through is the Book of Daniel, part of the Old Testament, which we now know was written down from older material in the very times of the persecution of Antiochus Epiphanes.

Other Books

As these books were later to inspire much of John's imagery, so they did of a long line of Jewish apocalypses in the two centuries before our Lord's birth. Among these books, which in many ways resemble the Apocalypse of John, are the *Book of Henoch*, the *Apocalypse of Moses* or *Book of Jubilees*, the *Sibylline Oracles*, the *Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs*, the *Assumption of Moses*, the *Apocalypse of Baruch*, the so-called *Fourth Book of Esdras*, the *Apocalypse of Abraham*, the *Apocalypse of Moses*, and others. Some of these were being written, in fact, while John was on Patmos composing his Apocalypse.

There is very little direct influence of these Jewish apocalypses on John, though there is some. Where they are most similar is in their common purpose and origin. All of them are, as literary productions, outgrowths of the prophetic literature of the Old Testament. All of them, in reliance on the

promises of God, confidently predict a glorious future and the crushing of the enemies of God's people. All of them were written to console and to strengthen faith. For Christian faith, too, had begun to fail in the face of Roman persecution, as John makes clear in the first chapters of his Apocalypse. All of them are characterized by involved and extended symbolism, for John too was a Jew with a Jewish background, and symbolism was both part of his thought processes and a device to keep his book unintelligible to hostile readers. Only one familiar with the Jewish tradition of apocalyptic would know how to take the references to "beasts," "horns," "the sea," and the like, which had Old Testament meanings already established.

What makes John so different from the Jewish apocalypses is the reality of the hope he could offer his readers, a hope that was, in fact, already realized in the work of Christ. While Judaism could only look forward to an uncertain future, John could speak of a glorious triumph that was not only imminent, but was in fact already accomplished.

In the following article we shall see chiefly in what John and the Jewish apocalypses are similar, namely in their use of imagery and symbolism. The remaining articles will deal with what is unique in John, the glorious reign of the triumphant Christ in His Church on earth and in heaven.

II

WHAT JOHN SAW

In taking up the question of the symbolism of the Apocalypse, we should make one thing plain from the beginning, and that is that we do not intend to question for one minute the reality of John's vision. John is a prophet; he has an authentic message from God. The teaching of the Apocalypse is true and is a true record of revelation given to John.

But the Apocalypse is a *record* of revelations received formerly and written down only later (1:9ff.). Probably John received these revelations over a considerable period of time. Their organization into book form, following an outline and set manners of expression, is the work of John himself acting under divine inspiration. The form of writing, which he employed, as was pointed out in the last article, was Jewish apocalyptic.

He himself tells us as much. He says, for example, that he saw "one *like* a son of man" (1:13), that before the heavenly throne "there is *as it were* a sea of glass, *like* crystal" (4:6), "I saw a Lamb standing, *as though* it had been slain" (5:6), "I saw what *appeared to be* a sea of glass mingled with fire" (15:2), and so forth. If we add together all the "like's," the "as though's," and the "as it were's" of the Apocalypse, we should find that they are one of its chief characteristics. John has not said, in other words, that he saw with his bodily eyes a man, a sea of glass, or a slain Lamb, but things that can be symbolized by these representations. One commentator on the Apocalypse has said well that this book was not so much seen by its author as *thought* by him. The images which he has used, and which almost without exception he has borrowed from earlier literature, he has employed to give expression to his revealed thoughts.

This is an important fact to keep in mind when reading the Apocalypse. Take, for instance, the passage in 5:6ff. John saw a Lamb *standing*, but as though *slain*. Just how does a slain lamb stand? In fact, this lamb does not act very slain at all, since "he went and took the scroll from the right hand of him who was seated on the throne" (v. 7). This lamb, too, has seven horns and seven eyes. What are we to make of all this? That John actually was given a picture

of such a strange animal, which simultaneously performed the contradictory functions of life and death? No, these are all symbols, conveying thoughts, not hallucinations. The lamb symbolizes Jesus, Who in a true sense is dead, yet lives. The seven horns symbolize one thing, a thing obvious to John's readers because of the meaning of "seven" and "horn" to anyone familiar with the Old Testament. The seven eyes symbolize another thing, and in this case, because the meaning was less obvious, John explained the symbolism for his readers (v. 6). And so on. We take each symbolism as it comes, and we are not expected to take them as anything more than symbols.

Symbolism

Again, when John says that the "one like a son of man" whom he saw spoke the words to the seven churches recorded in chapters 2-3 while "from his mouth issued a sharp two-edged sword" (1:16), are we to ask ourselves whether he removed the sword before speaking, or simply talked (if that were possible) with it quite filling his mouth? This "one like a son of man" also had seven stars in his right hand (1:16), the same right hand which he laid upon John (1:17). Did he first lay aside the stars? And what happened to him, of a sudden, when his speech was ended?

This would be to read the Apocalypse foolishly. The two-edged sword symbolizes the word of God – another familiar Old Testament idea. The symbolism of the seven stars is explained in the context. Once the symbol has served its purpose, it is usually discarded.

Meaning Understood

Yet we sometimes see attempted explanations of the Apocalypse on the part of those who have blandly ignored John's repeated insistence that all these pictures are mere symbol, who try to give us a drawing of the lamb with the seven horns and eyes, or of the "beast rising out of the sea, with ten horns and seven heads, with ten diadems upon its horns and a blasphemous name upon its heads" (13:1), or explain how a scroll sealed with seven seals can be opened a little at a time without breaking all the seals at once (ch. 5), and so forth. This is to read the Apocalypse very, very foolishly.

Most of John's symbols, we have said, are taken from the Old Testament. It is instructive, however, to compare his Apocalypse with the various Jewish

apocalypses to see how similar they are in the methods they followed. Stars are used in 1:9 for angels, and in 9:2 for a fallen angel. Similarly in the *Book of Henoah* stars symbolize fallen angels. The Jewish apocalypses describe the enemies of Judaism in terms of all manner of fierce beasts, precisely as John speaks of the enemies of the Church, and both have borrowed the figures chiefly from the seventh chapter of Daniel. The *Fourth Book of Esdras* pictures the Roman Empire as an eagle with twelve wings and three heads. John has used other, but similar, symbolism.

Symbolism is the very essence of apocalyptic. Like John, the Jewish apocalypses are perpetually reiterating this fact. "I drew near a great house," says the *Book of Henoah*, "and the walls of this house were *like* a mosaic in crystal...its roof was *like* the milky way...it was burning *as with* fire and it was cold *like* snow." And in another passage, quite similar to John: "I saw one who had a head of days, and his head was *like* white wool; and with him was another whose figure was *as* a man, and his figure was as one of the holy angels." And so on.

Symbolic Numbers

The symbolism of numbers is particularly apparent in the Jewish apocalypses, as in John. The favorite number is seven (seven angels, seven spirits, seven mountains, etc., figure in *Henoah*, the *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*, and *Fourth Esdras*); seventy, the multiple of seven, is almost as frequent (the ninth chapter of Daniel gave this number a special apocalyptic meaning). Anyone who has read the Apocalypse knows how the number seven figures in it. There are seven letters, seven seals, seven cups, seven trumpets, obvious to everybody. More attentive reading shows that there are seven signs (in ch. 12-21), seven blessings occur throughout the book, and the name of Christ appears seven times. It will be noticed that the number seven, which is the Jewish number of plenitude, is in John broken into groups of four plus three (four seals are first opened, for example, then the other three; the first four trumpets sound, then the final three; etc.). Multiplying these two numbers we have twelve, which is another symbol for plenitude. Twelve, in turn, is a favorite symbol because of the twelve tribes of Israel.

The Jewish apocalypses use twelve for the ages of the world (*Fourth Esdras*), the periods of tribulation (*Henoah*), and the like. John uses it especially

in reference to the heavenly state of the Church. The twenty-four elders who appear throughout the Apocalypse symbolize the elect of both the old and the new covenants. The heavenly Jerusalem has twelve gates, divided into four series of three (21:12ff.), and the wall of the city has twelve foundations. Its measurements (v. 15ff.) are all multiples of twelve. As John does, the Jewish apocalypses alternate threes and fours.

What They Mean

While seven and twelve represent fullness and completion, indefinite periods of time or space are symbolized in various ways. A “thousand years” is one such symbolic number, as in 20:2 of John, and frequently in the Jewish apocalypses. Another device is simply to use half of seven, as in 11:9, 12:14 (so too Daniel 7:25, 9:27), or “half of a week of (i.e. seven) years,” “forty-two months” (11:2), that is, “one thousand, two hundred and sixty days” (v. 3).

If seven is the number of perfection six is the number of imperfection, and hence the number of the beast of 13:18 is symbolic of the greatest imperfection, since it is a threefold six.

While the non-scriptural Jewish apocalypses are not the work of inspired men, and they have none of the exalted character of John, we must nevertheless recognize that they belong to a common literary tradition. They consequently have many similarities, so that knowledge of the one is a help to the interpretation of the other. It is in this way that the apocalypses of Judaism are of the most help in regard to John. Once we recognize that John was using accepted symbols which had, in many cases at least, already fixed meanings for his readers, we have gone half the road toward understanding the Apocalypse.

“...On Eagles’ Wings”

It remains, however, to get a better view of some of the key ideas, symbolically expressed, which John has borrowed from the Old Testament.

In Exodus 19:4 the Lord is quoted saying to Israel: “You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself.” The same idea is in Deuteronomy 32:11. John in 12:14 takes up this figure to show God’s protection of the new Israel, the Church, which he pictures carried out into the desert, as Israel was, to be protected from its

enemies. Likewise in 21:3 John says, “Behold the dwelling of God is with men,” that is, the new dwelling in the glorified Church, which repeats and fulfills His former dwelling in Israel, as related in Leviticus 26:11ff. The nearest source, however, which John had for this idea is from the book which he has used so extensively, Ezekiel (37:27ff.): “My dwelling place shall be with them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Then the nations will know that I the Lord sanctify Israel, when my sanctuary is in the midst of them for evermore.” The whole preoccupation of John is with the destiny of the Church. It is the new Israel, and as God swore to protect His people of old, His promises now hold for the redeemed of Christ. As Ezekiel foretold the new covenant between God and man in which God would be with His people for evermore, John sees the perfect fulfillment of this in the presence of God in the Church. With such promises, says John, no merely human power, no persecution however fierce, can cause us to despair. The Church will survive and not only will it survive, it will conquer. Christ’s victory is assured.

The Prophet John

John has clearly put himself among the prophets by the many allusions and citations which he has used. The “one like a son of man” who appears in the inaugural vision of 1:13 is described in the language of the visions of Daniel 10:5ff. and Ezekiel 1:26ff. In 10:11 John hears the words spoken to Jeremiah (1:10) at the beginning of his prophetic ministry, just after he has eaten the prophetic scroll as Ezekiel did (2:8ff.). The two books of Daniel and Ezekiel, as we have mentioned, are echoed throughout the Apocalypse. The resurrection of the two witnesses in 11:11 is described in terms of Ezekiel 37, and also (cf. 11:4ff.) as a reiteration of Zechariah 4:11-14. There are so many allusions to these prophetic books, it would be a false kind of emphasis to single out any in particular.

Babylon

However, one aspect of the Apocalypse that deserves special mention because it figures so prominently is the image of Babylon. Babylon in the Apocalypse stands for the pagan Roman Empire, just as Babylon in 1 Peter 5:13 doubtless means Rome. This was a purely Jewish association, for ever since the Babylonian captivity in which Israel had been crushed and politically annihilated, Babylon had become a sign and symbol of the enemies of God’s

people. The great hymn in which John in ch. 18 confidently predicts the ultimate triumph of the Church over the crushing power of the pagan state is consequently a mosaic of quotations from the prophetic oracles of Isaiah and Ezekiel.

There is practically no book of the Old Testament which John has not used, but he has not used these books simply because these were the books most familiar to him. In the Old Testament John recognized the inspired word of God, containing enduring truths that are valid for all time. Consequently by using it, and by applying it to the situation of the Church, he has testified to his conviction of the unity of God's action throughout history. What God had done before for His people, He would do again, for such is His nature.

At the same time, John knows the great difference that has taken place in the world through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The Old Testament has been fulfilled in Christ. Consequently, we see the changes and modifications which John introduces into the Old Testament imagery, changes and modifications which are dictated by the new and fuller revelation of Christ. There is, John says, a direct line which connects the Old Testament times with the New, but that connection is at the same time a progression, a development, an ever more wonderful thing.

“...Like a Trumpet”

Let us take an example to show what is meant by this. In chapter 4 John recounts the vision of heaven which is evidently described in the language of the first chapter of Ezekiel. There is (v. 2) a throne “with one seated on the throne,” just as in Ezekiel 1:26 appears “the likeness of a throne...and a likeness as it were of a human form” (note how Ezekiel, too, uses the apocalyptic “like”). The voice “like a trumpet” (v. 1) reminds us of Exodus 19:16, the appearance of God on Sinai, and indeed this is also a divine appearance. The throne is “like jasper and carnelian...like an emerald” (v. 3), while in Ezekiel 1:26 it was “like a sapphire.” The “lightning, and voices and peals of thunder, torches of fire” (v. 5) are again an echo of Exodus 19:16 and Ezekiel 1:27. The “rainbow” (v. 3) appears in Ezekiel 1:28. “Such was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord,” said Ezekiel (1:28). And there is no doubt that John is speaking of the same thing.

Each Had Four Faces

There are other close parallels to drive the point home more deeply. John speaks of “on each side of the throne, four living creatures, full of eyes in front and behind, the first living creature like a lion, the second living creature like an ox, the third living creature with the face of a man, and the fourth living creature like a flying eagle. And the four living creatures, each of them with six wings, are full of eyes all around and within” (4:6-8). This is evidently parallel with Ezekiel 1:4-10: “the likeness of four living creatures. And this was their appearance: they had the form of men, but each had four faces, and each of them had four wings.... As for the likeness of their faces, each had the face of a man in front, the four had the face of a lion on the right side, the four had the face of an ox on the left side, and the four had the face of an eagle at the back.” In Ezekiel the “eyes” of which John speaks were on the “wheels” that accompanied the four living creatures (1:18). Both Ezekiel and John speak of the “sea of glass, like crystal” (Revelation 4:6) supporting the heavenly throne (Ezekiel 1:22, 26). And so on it goes.

It is evident, then, that John had deliberately described his vision in terms of the heavenly vision of Ezekiel which he has summarized and simplified at times but has kept fairly identical. Yet some significant changes also come into the picture.

Ezekiel’s vision had as its point of departure the splendor of God enthroned in the temple of Jerusalem, in the shadow of the wings of the cherubim, over the throne of the Ark of the Covenant. While John deliberately connects his vision with the Old Testament, he tells us as well that a great change has taken place.

24 Elders

In John’s vision, not in Ezekiel’s, there are twenty-four elders with crowns who surround the heavenly throne (4:10). These, as is plain from the reading of the Apocalypse, represent the Saints of both the old and the New Testaments – the symbolic number twelve (the twelve tribes, twelve Apostles, etc.) doubled. These are they who have “conquered,” in the words of the first chapters of Revelation. Hence it is significant that it is they who form the first

main difference between John and Ezekiel. Ezekiel wrote in expectancy; John writes in fulfillment.

Another great difference – to name but one – occurs in the continuation of the vision in John’s fifth chapter. “Between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders, I saw a Lamb standing, as though it had been slain with seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth” (5:6). Here is what makes all the difference in the world between the message of Ezekiel and the message of John, for John reveals in the name of the glorified Christ in heaven.

Book of Henoah

The Lamb has already been identified as the Messiah, “the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David” (5:5). The figure of the Lamb itself has been drawn from several Old Testament sources. The lamb as *slain* is a borrowing from the messianic prophecy of Isaiah 53:7, “like a lamb led to slaughter.” But this lamb is not merely one slain, it is a triumphant lamb, one *standing*, with *horns*, that is, power. This picture has been taken from the *Book of Henoah*, which describes the Messiah as a great horned lamb leading the people of God into triumph. The Greek word used for “lamb” in both Henoah and John is the same, and differs from that used in Isaiah. Thus John has combined two Old Testament ideas, the suffering of the Messiah and His triumph. The seven eyes of the Lamb have been borrowed from Zechariah, from which John has likewise taken much of his imagery. These seven are the eyes of the Lord, which range through the whole earth” (4:10). John further specifies that the eyes are “the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth.” For not only does God now, as in the Old Testament, govern and oversee the whole earth, He does it in a much more spiritual way, through the sending of the Spirit of the Father and the Son.

That John puts this Lamb “between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders” is to make Him an intimate part of heaven, and to show His association with both God and man. It is the death and triumph of Jesus Christ that has made the vast difference between the Old Testament and the New.

This is the way that John must be read consistently, all the way through. There is a tremendous teaching tied up in Revelation, a beautiful doctrine of faith and consolation. There is true prophecy.

Interpret in Context

But John can be understood only by keeping these basic facts in mind. First, as we have seen, that his work is literally saturated with Old Testament allusions, and that the Old Testament must always be our point of departure in beginning to interpret the Apocalypse. Secondly, that he is writing in an apocalyptic tradition, which used conventional themes with an established and accepted symbolism. To ignore this fact, and the history behind John's writing, would be like trying to interpret the American Constitution divorced from all American history. And finally, we must always look for the differences that John has introduced into these Old Testament and traditional ideas, for they are the essence of his message. The Apocalypse, like all of the New Testament, cannot be understood apart from the Christian revelation of the Church.

If we keep these facts in mind, we shall avoid the pitfalls of weird and wild beliefs that have been wrested from the Apocalypse by so many people. We shall avoid the chief danger, which has been pointed out before, of taking John's imagery in a material sense. Jesus Christ is described now as a lamb, now as a Bridegroom, now as a Son of Man, all of which figures rest on the Old Testament. But these are symbols. Just as Jesus Christ is not really a Lamb, neither are the "hundred and forty-four thousand" of 7:4 a precise number, but a symbolism. They refer to a reality, as the Lamb refers to a reality, but we must not make a reality out of the symbol but of what the symbol signifies.

Another chief danger we shall avoid if we keep these principles in mind is the temptation which we have mentioned before, to satisfy vulgar curiosity by trying to make the Apocalypse a sort of dream-book of the future, giving precise information about precise historical events. The Apocalypse is prophecy, but its prediction is of spiritual, not material things.

In the following articles we shall try to apply these principles and give a brief summary of the teaching of the Apocalypse. For the sake of convenience we shall divide it into the three parts which Biblical interpreters commonly

assign to it. As long as we remember that this is a division only of convenience, this will be helpful. John, however, is bound by no hard and fast divisions, nor was the apocalyptic style which he used. We shall see that the whole of the Apocalypse is in each of its parts. The division indicates only certain points of emphasis.

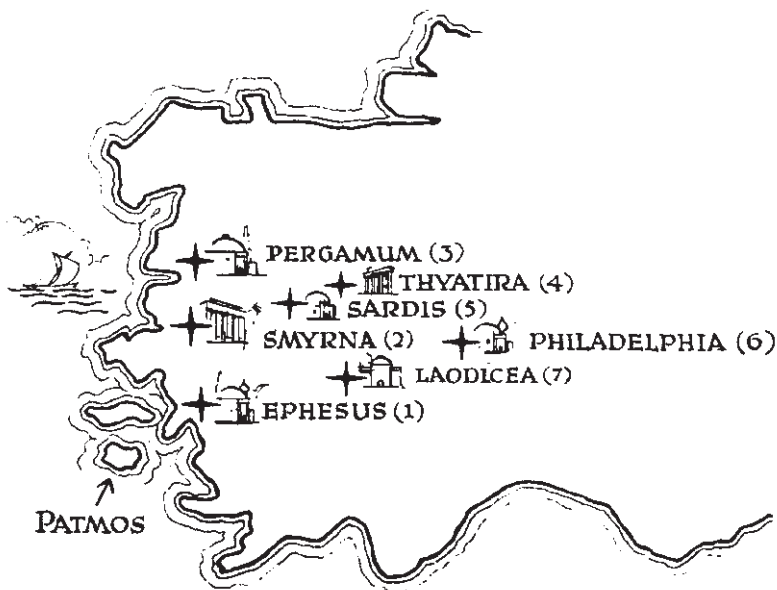
III

THE SEVEN CHURCHES

In the first three chapters of the Apocalypse we find John's prologue, a description of an inaugural vision and the letters addressed to the "seven churches." In a way, these letters anticipate the entire message of the Apocalypse, as indeed they were meant to do.

Why the seven churches? Seven, as we have seen, is the Jewish number of completeness. There seems to be no doubt that by "the seven churches" John means the universal Church, and that by beginning the book with letters addressed to the seven churches he is saying, as the Apocalypse bears him witness, that what is said in this work is said to the whole Church.

At the same time, John has identified each of the seven churches, which were not simply chosen at random. If we look at the map of Asia Minor (the



modern Turkey), shown on page 24, and see where John was, on the island of Patmos (1:9), and notice the location in order of the churches to which are addressed the letters of chapters 2-3, we can get a better idea of what John had in mind. As we see, beginning with Ephesus, which was the chief city of the Roman province of Asia, he has made a rough circle of the leading cities of this same province in which, tradition tells us, he spent his last years. It was natural for him to address himself to the churches which he knew best in intending a book for the entire Church at large. Also, as we shall see, each of the churches which he chose has its own particular characteristics which make it an apt subject for conveying part of John's message.

John begins (1:1-3) by setting forth his revelation as delivered by Jesus Christ concerning things which must *shortly* come to pass. As we have already explained, the rest of the Apocalypse will make plain what these things are, namely the triumph of the Church of Jesus Christ in the face of persecution. In v. 3 occurs the first of seven "beatitudes" (the others are in 14:13, 16:15, 19:9, 23:7, and 23:14) which are scattered throughout the book. Once more John emphasizes, as he is to do frequently, that the time is at hand for this revelation to be fulfilled.

Literary Influences

In 1:4-8 John extends a greeting to the "seven churches" much in the manner of the beginnings of Paul's Epistles. It might be noted that of all the New Testament writers John is most dependent on Paul – *grace be to you and peace* is the usual Pauline salutation, and the title *firstborn of the dead* given to Christ in v. 5 is from Colossians 1:18. Note that in vv. 4-6 John brings in the Holy Trinity, which also gives another example of how he uses "seven" to mean a single complete unity. The greeting is from *him who is and who was and who is coming*, that is, from God the Father, John's free adaptation to the purposes of the Apocalypse of the divine title given in Exodus 3:14, from *the seven spirits who are before his throne*, which from 4:5 and 5:6 evidently means the Holy Spirit (the "sevenfold" idea is borrowed from Isaiah 11:2); and from *Jesus Christ who made us a kingdom, and priests*, that is, who established a new covenant ("kingdom" and "priests" are the words used for Israel in Ezekiel 19:6 and Psalm 114:2).

Symbols Old and New

The language further describing Christ expresses the central New Testament doctrine of the salvation which He wrought. In v. 7 there is a combination of allusions to Mark 13:26 and its parallels, to Daniel 7:13, and to Zechariah 12:10ff. "I am the Alpha and the Omega," John quotes of the Lord God. We would say, "I am the A and the Z," that is, the beginning and the end. God *is, was, and is coming* – wholly pervades history and everything is under His control, for He is *the Almighty*. Thus we have a fitting beginning to John's message.

Before the churches are actually addressed, however, John describes a vision of the Son of Man whose revelation this is. The material for this description has been taken chiefly from the seventh chapter of Daniel and the first chapter of Ezekiel. It is instructive to read through these chapters both to get an idea of what John's imagery means and to note how he has altered it to fit his own special message. We might add that John intended us to do this – or rather, he was writing for those who would already be quite familiar with these Old Testament passages and would thus know how to interpret his words. This fact is to be seen demonstrated in that John does not bother to explain this familiar imagery, but, on the contrary, when he introduces *a new symbol that is not in these sources*, then he does explain the meaning. The seven stars and the seven lamp-stands, for instance, are explained in verse 20, for they are John's own symbols. But for the rest, the best commentary is the Old Testament.

John is writing to a persecuted Church - *tribulation and patience in Jesus* (v. 9) are two of Paul's favorite expressions for suffering for the sake of the Gospel. John, a partner in this persecution (tradition tells us that he was exiled to the island of Patmos under the Emperor Domitian, A.D. 81-96), was *in the spirit*, that is, he received a divine revelation, on Sunday, possibly during the ceremonies of worship. He saw *one like to a son of man* (Daniel 7:13) standing *in the midst* of what we are later told represent the churches, *seven golden lamp-stands*. The Son of Man is, of course, Christ, Who is clad in the long garment of royalty and girded with the girdle of priesthood (v. 13). That He stands in the midst of the lamp-stands represents Him as the Lord of His Church. He is further represented with white hair. This detail, too, is borrowed from Daniel 7:9. The

white hair represents eternity; in Daniel it was the quality of the “ancient of days” (God), but John, who is compressing the picture given by Daniel, simply ascribes it to the Son of Man, Who is also God. The rest of the description in vv. 14-15 is likewise borrowed from Daniel, but from another vision, that of 10:5ff. The voice *like the voice of many waters* is from Ezekiel 1:24, 43:2, etc. The seven stars in the Son of Man’s right hand are explained later, and the *sharp two-edged sword* in His mouth is a common enough symbol for the word of God.

Thus John has communicated through this imagery, that his revelation is from the One Who is both God and Man, the Messiah, the Redeemer, Who is Lord of history and of His Church. And this is confirmed by the words of the Son of Man in the last verses of this first chapter. Whether *the angels of the seven churches* is a further symbol of the Bishops of the churches to which the letters are addressed, as seems quite likely, or means simply the angel which God has appointed to watch over His church, cannot be determined.

The Form of the Letters

When we look at the letters to the churches in the next two chapters, we see that they all follow a set form. There is a set introduction, “To the angel of the church at – write...” Then follows the message, divided into two parts, the first of praise, the latter of censure. At the end, another set form divided into two parts: (a) “He who has an ear...”; and (b) “He who overcomes...” As a further mark of John’s style, it could be remarked that in the first three of these letters the concluding formula (a) precedes (b), but in the last four (b) precedes (a). This is as we pointed out in a preceding article, the custom of the apocalyptic style, to divide sevens into groups of four and three. Usually John follows the four-three arrangement rather, than as here, the three-four. Thus in ch. 6, the first four of the seven seals are broken, and later the last three. Also in ch. 8 the first four of the seven trumpets sound as a group, and afterwards the last three.

In taking the letters to the churches as a group, first of all, we get a better idea of what John is trying to say. There are, as is obvious, details in the letters which pertain only to the churches to which they are addressed, and which are, therefore, the reason these churches were chosen. John has things to reveal of praise and blame for the Christians of his day. At the same time, the

conclusion in each case is addressed to the whole Church – “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says *to the churches*.” Similarly, the promise for “him who overcomes” is meant for all Christians, since for everyone who successfully triumphs over the trials of persecution and kindred temptations, the reward is eternal life. Thus the seven churches fulfill their symbolism as representatives of the universal Church while at the same time specific churches are addressed.

Another common feature that is shared by the set form of the letters is that in almost every case the title chosen for Christ is one of the details taken from the inaugural vision. Thus *he who holds the seven stars in his right hand*, etc. (2:1), *the first and last*, etc. (v. 8), *he who has the sharp two-edged sword* (v. 12), who has *eyes like to a flame of fire*, etc. (v. 18), and so on through the list. The only exception, really, is in 3:7 the letter to the church at Philadelphia, where it is referred to *the true one* (a frequent enough expression in John’s Gospel for “God”), *he who has the key of David*, etc., a figure taken from Isaiah 22:22 and selected because of the particular content of the letter to Philadelphia, about *the open door* (a Pauline expression). In 3:14, the letter to the church at Laodicea, the reference is partly to a title in the inaugural vision, *the faithful and true witness*, and partly a new reference to Proverbs 8:22 and 1:15-17, *the beginning of the creation of God*.

The Church at Ephesus

The Church at Ephesus (2:1-7) is almost entirely praised. Ephesus has borne up well under persecution and has produced much fruit of good works, as we might expect from the esteem which Paul had for this church. They had followed out the Apostle’s injunction to reject false teachers, and they had not grown weary in serving God. Only their charity had grown somewhat cold. There is, therefore, the danger that Ephesus might lose its pre-eminent place among the churches of God. The danger seems to be remote, however. Ephesus has rejected the heresy of the Nicolaites, which is also mentioned in v. 15, relating to the church at Pergamum, and possible in v. 24 (“the depths of Satan”), relating to the church at Thyatira. What this false teaching of the Nicolaites was we are not told with certainty, but it was probably one of those sects that flourished in Asia Minor, which Paul had had to fight chiefly in his letter to the nearby Colossians, and which are also combated by John in his

Gospel – that is, the so-called Gnostic sects which taught a superior kind of “wisdom” which was set up in opposition to the Gospel.

At the end of the letter to the Church of Ephesus is the promise which, as we noted before, is addressed to all Christians. The victorious Christian will eat of *the tree of life* which is *in paradise*. The allusion is to Genesis 2-3, the story of the creation and fall of men. The reward for a good Christian life is the eternal destiny forfeited by men at the beginning of things. This promise is repeated, in different words at the end of each of the letters. In v. 11 it is put that *he shall not be hurt by the second death*. From contemporary Jewish literature, we know that this means “damnation.” Death of the body, that is, physical death, was “the first death,” which everyone had to undergo; death of the soul, damnation by which it would be dead to all that it had been created for, was the “second death” that could be avoided. Christ used this same figure in Matthew 10:28. In 2:17 the victorious Christian is promised *the hidden manna* and *a white pebble* on which a new name is written which is unknown to all save those who receive it. The Jews commonly spoke of the manna of the Old Testament as the food which would be eaten by the elect of the Messiah when He would come; thus until that time it was “hidden,” reserved. In John’s Gospel, chapter six, the manna is seen as a symbol of the Eucharist and of eternal life. The “new name” known only by those who receive it is a theme repeated in 3:12, 19:12, as well as in John 10:3ff., and is an allusion to Isaiah 62:2, speaking of the glory of restored Israel: “you shall be called by a new name which the mouth of the Lord will give.” Thus it, too, refers to eternal life. Why it is called a “white pebble” is variously interpreted. Some of the pagan cults opposed to Christianity used pebbles as badges of identity; *white* in the Apocalypse is always a sign of victory and is particularly associated with the heavenly life; and this was a common enough symbol of the time, since the Romans marked victory with a white toga and actually spoke of a successful day as “one to be marked by a white pebble.”

Again in 2:26-28 the victorious Christian is promised a reward in the language of Psalm 2, a psalm of the triumph of the Messiah. This is the same triumph which Christ also received from His Father (v. 28), in keeping with the promise repeated throughout John’s Gospel. It is associated also with *the morning star*, an allusion to Isaiah 14:12 and other passages which use this expression to mean that which is exalted and magnificent, and possibly also to

Christ as the light of the world, so common to John's Gospel. In 3:5 the promise is of *white garments*, heavenly life, *the book of life*, an ancient Jewish idea to express eternal life, found in Exodus 32:32 and used by Saint Paul; and Christ will *confess his name* before the Father and His angels, as promised by the Lord in Matthew 10:32. In 3:12 the victorious Christian will be a *pillar* (a Pauline expression, as in Galatians 2:9) in *the temple of God*, the heavenly Jerusalem which is the theme of the last part of the Apocalypse, and again there is mention of the *new name* revealed by Christ to His followers and not to be taken from them, as in John 17:26. "Name" in Semitic thought means virtually the personality itself. "Abiding in Jesus' name" in John's Gospel means "living in Jesus," that is, sharing His life. Finally, in 3:21 it is said that the victorious Christian will share Christ's throne in heaven.

The Church at Smyrna

Throughout, therefore, there is a message for all Christians derived from the particular statements made of the individual churches. The Church at Smyrna (2:8-11) fares even better than that of Ephesus, for all that is said of it is good. It too suffers *tribulation*, persecution, and material poverty, though in true spiritual wealth it is rich (the same idea is expressed in Luke 12:21). The church of Smyrna seems to have been largely Jewish and to have suffered persecution from fellow Jews who had refused Christianity. John says that these latter are not real Jews at all, since the true Israel is the Church. This is faithful to Paul's thought in Romans 2:28 and 1 Corinthians 10:18. They are, says John, to suffer even greater persecution, but if they remain faithful they will receive *the crown of life* (virtually a quotation of James 1:12). The persecution will be of *ten days* duration. The number "ten" is used in Jewish apocalyptic generally for an indefinite number, and "days" in opposition to "years" means a short rather than a long time.

The Church at Pergamum

The church at Pergamum (2:12-17) is praised but also condemned. Pergamum is *where the throne of Satan is*; this is probably a reference to the fact that Pergamum was one of the chief centers of the cult of the Emperor, where Caesar was worshipped as a god. The Christians there had held fast to the faith under persecution, even under martyrdom. One martyr especially, Antipas, is

singled out, concerning whom we have no other information. But some of the Pergamum Christians had compromised, even as the Israelites had succumbed to false worship on the plains of Moab (Numbers 24:3, 25:2). They had become contaminated by the Nicolaites and would suffer condemnation, *the sword of my mouth*, unless they repented.

The Church at Thyatira

The church at Thyatira (2:18-29), too, had given cause for both praise and blame. In general they had been faithful in good works, but some had been misled by a false prophetess, whom John calls Jezebel after the infamous wife of Ahab of Israel. They had been induced to commit fornication, which may mean just that, or may have the sense it so often has in the Old Testament, that of false worship, idolatry; this latter is suggested by what follows, that they had been led *to eat things sacrificed to idols*, which Paul had had to warn against in 1 Corinthians 8:10:14ff. This “Jezebel,” says John, will be struck with a fatal illness (“I will cast her upon a bed”), and the same destruction will be experienced by all who follow her, since Christ will repay *according to your works* (v. 23). This false teaching is also termed *the depths of Satan, as they call them* (v. 24), which probably means that its followers called this teaching “deep things,” and it is characterized by the true Christian as “Satan’s teaching.” Hence this was in all likelihood a species of the superior knowledge promised by the Gnostic sects. Most of the Christians of Thyatira had not fallen prey to this evil.

The Church at Sardis

The church of Sardis (3:1-6) receives the heaviest condemnation. It is a church which as a whole is spiritually dead; even those who remain faithful are on the point of death; they have few good works to show. They are consequently in grave danger of Christ’s judgment, who will come as a thief in the night (1 Thessalonians 5:2), unexpectedly. Only a few at Sardis shall walk with Christ *in white*, that is, shall share in His triumph.

The Church at Philadelphia

Of the church at Philadelphia (3:7-13), on the other hand, only good is said again. Under great hardship, again apparently subject to the persecution

of Jews, they have kept the faith. Hence the Lord has *caused a door to be opened*, an expression which appears in Colossians 4:6, meaning a great future thing that is to occur inevitably. Here two things are promised the Philadelphians, firstly that their persecutors will be humbled; secondly that in the general tribulation that is coming upon the earth they will be spared.

The Church at Laodicea

The letter to the church at Laodicea (3:14-22) is perhaps the most famous, because of the lines in vv. 15-16. Laodicea is generally condemned, though their case is not hopeless. John has apparently taken the figure of his address from the hot springs for which Laodicea was noted. The Laodiceans are neither hot nor cold, says the Apocalypse, neither faithful nor faithless. They must make a decision to be followers of Christ with all that is implied in this, or quit pretending to the Christian name. In verses 17-18 also local color has been used to determine the language of the message to Laodicea. The city was famous commercially, which is probably connected with its citizens' lukewarmness. Buy *gold refined by fire*, commands the Lord, that is to say, pure gold, the gold of spiritual wealth, not the wealth of this earth; only thus can they be clad in white garments. Buy of Him also *salve to anoint your eyes*, He continues. There was a famous medical school at Laodicea. The eye salve that the Laodiceans need, however, is spiritual, *that you may see* with spiritual sight. They must recognize in their tribulations the efforts of the Lord to bring them to repentance. He does not say that these efforts have necessarily been in vain.

The Message of the Apocalypse

Having thus run through the first three chapters of the Apocalypse, we have really a picture of the whole story that is to be unfolded in the subsequent chapters. Under different images what is basically the same message will be revealed, not once but several times. We have seen how in these chapters the various parts are tied together by allusions to what has already gone before and by what is to follow. So it is throughout the whole book and such, indeed, is the method of Semitic writing generally. There is perfectly exemplified in this writing what John means in speaking of God as the One Who is, Who was, and Who is coming. His close adherence to the Old Testament tradition, his reference to contemporary events, his prediction of the future which is coming

shortly, all conspire to make up the style of Apocalypse. There is a message for the Christians of John's time, specifically for those of the seven churches which are addressed, and above all, there is a timeless message for the whole Church throughout the ages symbolized in the seven churches.

In the following two articles we shall follow through, somewhat more quickly, the development of these themes in the remaining chapters of John's book.

IV

THE WOES TO COME

Practically all commentators on the Apocalypse are agreed that after the introductory letters to the seven churches (ch. 1-3), the body of the Apocalypse falls into two main divisions, the first of which is ch. 4-11. This first main division describes the future triumph of Christ and His Church from what may be called a negative standpoint, that is, with its emphasis on the punishment of God's enemies. The section to follow, which we shall see in our next article, is more positive.

The letters to the seven churches really contained in brief everything that is found in these two main divisions. But while the facts were merely stated in the letters, in the body of the Apocalypse they are described as in a prophetic vision.

As he did in the letters, John begins with a vision of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This vision, however, takes place not on earth but in heaven, and it is described in much greater detail.

The Father and the Spirit

First the vision of the Father and the Spirit (ch. 4). The materials of John's description have been taken chiefly from the sixth chapter of Isaiah, the first chapter of Ezekiel, and the seventh chapter of Daniel. If we read through these Old Testament passages we see that the description of the heavenly throne is from Ezekiel, the "living creatures" who stand around it have been described in terms both of Ezekiel and Isaiah, and certain details here and there have been taken from Daniel. Some revision has been made – for example, John has simplified Ezekiel's vision by omitting the "wheels" and instead ascribed to the living creatures the omnipresence of God symbolized in the eyes "in front and behind" (v. 6) which Ezekiel attached to the wheels. Also, this is a Christian, not a Jewish, vision and therefore the Holy Spirit, once more termed "the seven spirits of God" (v. 5) is introduced and explained.

Thus we are presented with a vision in which John is rapt into heaven and sees God the Father on His heavenly throne, in the presence of the Holy

Spirit, surrounded by symbolic creatures with whom we are familiar from the Old Testament. God receives the praise of all His creatures, including the “twenty-four elders” who are seated about Him on twenty-four thrones. The thrones appear in Daniel. The fact that there are twenty-four of them in John is another modification necessary in a Christian Apocalypse. The elders represent the glorified elect of both the Old and New Testaments. Even this symbolism was foreshadowed in the Old Testament, since in Isaiah 24:23 we read that “the Lord of hosts will reign on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem, and before his elders he will manifest his glory.”

The Son

The other divine Person, the Son, appears in ch. 5 now symbolized as a Lamb. First, in the right hand of the Father appears *a scroll written within and on the back*, sealed with seven seals (see Ezekiel 2:9-10). The scroll is the book of the future, as we speedily see, which cannot be revealed by anyone except God Himself. Only the Lion of the Tribe of Judah, the Root of David, who has conquered sin and death, can open this book and reveal its contents.

This, therefore, introduces the Lamb, “standing, as though it had been slain, with seven horns and with seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth” (v. 6). The Lamb is a messianic figure recognized from Isaiah 53, with the horns symbolizing power (*The Book of Henoch* presented the Messiah as a horned lamb), and He too, just like the Father, is the Author of the Spirit of God (see John 15:26, etc.). He alone can open the scroll, and to this end are addressed to Him the prayers of the faithful (v. 8).

It is interesting to see how John views the Church glorified in heaven and the Church on earth as essentially one and the same. This, of course, is common New Testament teaching. The “golden bowls full of incense” which are the prayers of the saints, are offered to God by the twenty-four elders. The “saints” are the members of the Church on earth, just as Paul habitually refers to them, having borrowed the term from the Old Testament practice of referring to faithful Israelites as God’s saints. This union of prayers between the Church on earth and in heaven is what is known in Catholic teaching as “the communion of saints,” and this picture in the Apocalypse is an early evidence of the traditional Christian belief that the saints in heaven can receive the prayers of the faithful on earth and transmit them to God.

The Son, too, receives the honor of all God's creatures, the "living creatures," the elders, the angels, and finally "every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all therein" (v. 13). This is the picture of the glorified Son of God set above every creature with which we are familiar from the Epistles to the Hebrews, Colossians, Ephesians, etc.

Semitic Structure

All this has been preparatory to the beginning of the revelation symbolized under the breaking of the seven seals. We should note the outline that John follows through the next six chapters. The first four seals will be broken at once, and will together make up one picture. Then the fifth and sixth seals will be broken, together making up one picture. Then there will be some intermediate material leading finally into the breaking of the seventh seal. The seventh seal, in turn, is really the introduction to the seven trumpets that follow. The seven trumpets more or less repeat the revelation of the seven seals, though they present it more from God's standpoint. Again the same outline is followed. First four trumpets will be sounded, making one unified impression. Then the fifth and sixth trumpets, together giving one impression. After this, another series of intermediate visions, leading finally into the last of the trumpets.

Following this complicated and repetitious scheme John preserves unity in his work, interlocks the various parts together, and at the same time develops his themes. The development, however, is not in a strictly logical fashion as we are familiar with in Western writing. It is, rather, a product of the Semitic mind, which runs through the whole picture again and again (as the seven letters, the seven seals and the seven trumpets essentially tell the same thing), each time emphasizing one or another aspect of the whole. This is the style in which the prophetic books of the Old Testament are written. Forgetting it, and trying to interpret the Apocalypse as though it had been written by one of us, is another source of the frequent mis-interpretations given this book.

The Seals

The first four seals (6:1-8) are unified by their common image, "the four horsemen of the Apocalypse." This vision has been borrowed from Zechariah 6:1-5. The four horsemen together add up to war, strife, pestilence, and death,

and therefore are a graphic portrayal of our Lord's own description of the last times in Matthew 24:6-8, where He says "You will hear of wars and rumors of wars...nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places: all this is but the beginning of the sufferings." Accordingly the first horseman is astride a white (for victory) horse, wearing a crown (victory), going forth to conquer. The second horse is red, the color of blood. The third horse is black, for he symbolizes plague. In keeping with this, John hears speaking of famine prices: "A quart of wheat for a denarius" (the denarius was a day's wages); "do not harm oil and wine" (v. 6), that is, oil and wine would be impossible for the common person to buy, and he could have only barley and wheat at outrageous cost. The fourth horseman is death, on a horse the color of death.

The next two seals go together. The opening of the fifth seal reveals the martyrs, standing under God's heavenly altar, calling for vengeance. They are told, however, that they must wait until God's appointed time (6:9-11). This helps explain the purpose of the dire things that are predicted of the earth. One aspect of God's judgment is the punishment of the unjust. The reward of the good is only the other aspect. Hence the sixth seal, the revelation of God's day of wrath (6:12-17). This description is taken almost word for word from several different Biblical sources. The earthquake (Matthew 24), the sun black and the moon turned to blood (Joel 2:31), the stars fallen from heaven like figs from a fig tree (Isaiah 34:4), the sky rolled up like a scroll (Isaiah 34:4), the rulers of the earth hiding (Isaiah 2:10), calling upon the rocks and mountains to fall upon them (Hosea 10:8), are all familiar language to signify the end of the present order.

What would naturally follow would be a description of the heavenly triumph of the Church – John has a short version of this at the end of the seven trumpets which follow. But the author is not nearly ready for this. He is about to go through the whole process once more in the series of the seven trumpets, in order to bring out another aspect of his message.

Intermediate Visions

And before he does even this, there is in chapter 7 a series of intermediate visions that lead up to the opening of the seventh seal and prolong it dramatically. First, in 7:1-8 is the picture of *the 144,000 sealed with the seal of the living God*. This is introduced by "the four angels standing at the four

corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth, that no wind might blow on earth or sea or against any tree,” who, in other words, are symbols of God’s power over all the earth, and who are bidden by another angel, God’s messenger, not to harm the earth until His elect have been chosen. These angels, again, are from the imagery of Zechariah 6:1-8, another application of the same text John has used before. The threatened destruction is not to fall until God has determined the number of those who are to be saved. These are given under the symbolic number 144,000, which is the “heavenly” number of perfection: 12, raised to the thousandth power, and multiplied by another 12 taken from the number of the Israelite tribes. The tribes are not given quite in their Old Testament form, however, since there was no tribe called Joseph. They, too, are symbolic for the chosen of God, and should not, therefore, be restricted to Jewish Christians. They are the Church on earth who are to live through the last days.

Immediately after this is a corresponding picture (7:9-12) of the Church triumphant in heaven, those who have triumphed over persecution. Such is the explanation given this vision by one of the elders (vv. 13-17), in language borrowed from several Old Testament sources, including Ezekiel 34:23, Isaiah 49:10, and Isaiah 25:8. With this comes the opening of the seventh seal (8:1) which is in turn the vision of the seven trumpets.

The Trumpets

The seven trumpets retrace the ground of the seven seals, but they are not a simple repetition. There is in this series of visions a greater sense of urgency, a better perspective of the completeness of the divine plan, and a keener insistence of how God is in complete control of the destinies of the future. As with the seven seals (5:8-10), before the trumpets begin there is a preliminary vision of the role of the prayers of the saints in their power to bring about God’s intervention in history (8:2-5), described in almost the same terms.

The first four trumpets are (vv. 6-12) joined together, as the first four seals. Once more the imagery is similar – thunder, earthquake, blood, and the rest. The figure of the trumpet occurs with Saint Paul, in the apocalyptic 1 Thessalonians 4:16. The Old Testament source on which John has leaned most heavily for his description of the things to come is the tenth chapter of Exodus, the story of the plagues of Egypt. As there, we have here hail (first

trumpet), turning of water to blood (second trumpet), along with one image that has been used before, the dropping of the stars from heaven, and the changing of the sun and moon (fourth trumpet), and one that is borrowed from Jeremiah 9:15, the turning of water to wormwood (third trumpet). Each of the trumpets deals with the destruction of a ‘third’ of something, that is, a sizeable part.

After this a final verse (8:13) introduces the three “woes” which are synonymous with the last three trumpets.

Again there is a parallel with the seals, and the fifth and sixth trumpets are related, to be separated from the seventh by a series of intermediate visions. The relation between the fifth and sixth trumpets is the common Old Testament source after which they have been modeled, the first two chapters of Joel. Also, there is a progression, in that the fifth trumpet predicts a scourge that harms but will not kill, while the sixth brings actual destruction. The locusts (9:1-12) and the horsemen (9:13-21) thus signify a progressively worsening situation that is part of the coming of the last times.

In these two visions John also introduces some of the themes that will be brought out at greater length in the second part of the Apocalypse. The one responsible for the plague of the locusts is Satan, the star fallen from heaven (9:1). He has no power over God’s elect (v. 4), and in fact over only that part of mankind which has rejected God. The horsemen are described as having been held in check by God’s angels and now being permitted to pour across the River Euphrates, in tremendous number (9:16). John is describing such an invasion in terms that his contemporaries would understand. The chief menace to the law and order represented by the Roman Empire in John’s day was the Parthian Empire, across the Euphrates. These Invasions, again, destroy “a third” of mankind, and now we are told why such things were permitted by God, that by means of them He might bring an evil world to repentance (vv. 20-21); but all in vain.

Visions Before the Seventh Trumpet

The first of the intermediate visions before the sending of the seventh trumpet is dominated by an angel who is described in terms of the visions of the Son of Man and of the One upon the heavenly throne (1:12ff. and 4:1ff.). He, therefore, represents Christ and God. He too has a scroll, a little one, and

he stands with one foot on the sea and the other on the land (10:1-2). This picture leans heavily on that of Daniel 12:7, though John has modified it. The angel, because of whom he represents, stands dominating both sea and land, that is, the whole earth. He calls out with a voice of seven thunders, words which John is forbidden to write down (10:3-4); thus part of John's revelation he has not been permitted to give us. Having sworn a solemn oath, however, to reveal and to bring about quickly the ultimate end (vv. 5-7), the angel gives John the little scroll that he had, which John eats (vv. 8-11). This last scene is taken from Ezekiel 2:8-3:3. The scroll is described as little in relation to the great scroll of the seven seals, for this is John's portion, that is, the revelation given to him to be made known. In his mouth it is sweet, but in his stomach bitter. So also was it said in Ezekiel. The word of God is pleasant to receive, but often unpleasant to keep and to fulfill.

Abruptly the scene changes. John is told to measure the heavenly temple (11:1). We say "heavenly" temple since none other existed at the time John was writing, and the perspective of the Apocalypse keeps moving back and forth between heaven and earth. However, possibly the temple of Jerusalem is meant, since in any case this picture is taken from Ezekiel 40:3. The temple, however, represents the Church. Measuring it John is shown the necessity of the Church for salvation. Outside the temple is the province of the godless Gentiles who will trample over the holy city "forty-two months" (11:2). These forty-two months, also called elsewhere in the Apocalypse three and a half years, a time, times and a half time, and twelve hundred and sixty days, are borrowed from Daniel 7:25 and 12:7. This number, half of seven years, represents the period of the Church's troubles on the earth, the period of time, in other words, that separates it from the glorious vindication of Christ. This number is also based on history, as it is the approximation of the time of the persecution of Israel under Antiochus Epiphanes (168-175 B.C.) in the time of the Maccabees.

During this time, therefore God tells John that His *two witnesses* will be prophesying (11:3). These two witnesses, when they are called *olive trees and lamp stands* (v. 4) are described in the terms of Zechariah 4:1-3, 11-14, and further in 11:5-6 they appear with the characteristics of the prophets Moses and Elijah (see Numbers 16:35, 2 Kings 1:10, 1 Kings 17:1, etc.). They represent, therefore, God's faithful witnesses in the Church, who will testify to God throughout the life of the Church on earth. When this period has been

accomplished they will fall under the wrath of the beast from the bottomless pit (11:7). This beast we shall see featured in the second part of the Apocalypse.

John has told us, therefore, that the Church, whose lot it is to suffer the persecution of this world, will nevertheless continue at all times to give faithful witness to the truth. Even when the witnesses are slain by the beast (v. 7, after Daniel 7:3ff.), with the approval of godless people in the world which crucified the Savior (v. 8, after Isaiah 1:10, etc.), who refuse them burial, thus extending the greatest conceivable indignity to them (v. 9ff.), God will vindicate them. In 11:11-13, the resurrection and ascension of the witnesses are described in language reminiscent of the vision of Ezekiel 37, and the ascension of Elijah in 2 Kings 2:11, after “three days and a half,” that is, only the slightest fraction of time in relation to their period of witnessing, a day for a year. The vindication and triumph of the Church coincides with the confusion of her enemies and the conversion of many (vv. 13-14).

The Final Trumpet

And so we are brought to the seventh and final trumpet, the picture of the triumph of the Church, when “the kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Church (vv. 15-19). The song of heavenly triumph is modeled after Psalm 2, and there is a repetition of the thunder, hail, and other signs which have appeared before.

John could as easily have ended here, but he has more to tell. In his second part, which we shall see in the following article, he deals more with the positive aspect, with the Church itself rather than, as in the preceding section, with the punishment of the Church’s enemies. The judgment of God has both elements, which are inseparable. It is impossible to reward the good without punishing the evil.

Timing

When are these things to come to pass? John already told us, at the beginning of his book: “soon.” And, in one way, all these things have already come to pass, though in another way, they are yet to come. The triumph of the Church is a perennial thing. When there seems to be the least likelihood that it will prevail over the power of evil its deliverance is already assured. It was

to triumph over the Roman Empire, which was its most powerful enemy in John's day. It has triumphed repeatedly since. It will triumph over its enemies of our day, and so it will go on, until the final vindication and the glorification which will be set in heaven.

As we have seen, it is fundamentally wrong to try to wrest from the Apocalypse a projection into the future of detailed prophecies of dates and years. John was giving voice to his faith based on the words of our Lord and of the Bible. His numbers and his images are symbolical. He did not know, any more than do we, precisely when would come the ultimate triumph, with the glorious return of the Lord. He knew, as we know, that it will certainly come.

The Apocalypse repeats the same themes over and over. It is the product of many separate visions which John has drawn up into a complicated and intricate outline. Thus we see now one, now another aspect of the same general teaching. But just as the Lord is eternal, as the Son of Man is forever in heaven and on earth reigning in His Church, as the lamb is at one time slain yet standing triumphant, it is in the same perspective that we must view the visions of the Apocalypse. They relate truths that are applicable to all times. The "two witnesses" are the faithful servants of Christ in every generation; they are not confined to any one period. They are with us today as they were with John. They are being put to death in our age as in John's. And as they were "soon" to be raised triumphant in John's own day, so will they rise in ours.

V

THE WOMAN CLOTHED WITH THE SUN

In the second major part of the Apocalypse, chapters 12-19, John most evidently parts company with the Jewish apocalypses. It is not that he ceased to depend on the Old Testament or the Jewish literary tradition of apocalyptic – if anything, this second part contains more allusions to the Old Testament than the first – but in this section he speaks of things that the Old Testament could not know. While the first section spoke in more or less general terms of catastrophes and other aspects of God’s judgment, in this section we have a portrayal of the role of the Church in great detail. It is the Church, the fulfillment of the Old Testament aspiration, that makes all the difference between a Jewish and a Christian apocalypse.

Again John begins this section with a series of preparatory visions. This time, however, there is no presentation of the heavenly Trinity. Rather, the “members of the cast,” so to speak, who are to be the subject of the following revelations, are introduced to us in a series of “signs.”

The Cast of Characters

The first sign is “a woman clothed with the sun; with the moon beneath her feet and twelve stars in a crown about her head. As we see from the complete description of this woman (12:1-2, 5-6), she is both the Church and the Mother of the Messiah. The Church is presented both glorified and in her period of trial, all at once. The *sun*, *moon*, and *stars* is a figure possibly suggested by Genesis 37:9, in the story of Joseph who is a foreshadowing of the Messiah; the picture is intended, at all events, to show the glory of the Church. The reference in v. 2 is a paraphrase of Micah 4:10, where the daughter of Zion, that is, the earthly Jerusalem that is the foreshadowing of the heavenly Jerusalem, is in suffering before the Lord is to save her from Babylon. The child to whom the woman gives birth in v. 5 is certainly Jesus, as He is described in the messianic language of Psalm 2:9. The woman has other offspring (v. 17), who, as we shall see, are the Christians. This is Paul’s teaching about Christ “the firstborn of many brethren,” our Savior Who has

allowed us to share His life. The woman, finally, is sheltered in the desert (possibly John is thinking of God's protection of Israel in the desert) for *one thousand two hundred and sixty days*, which as we have already seen, is the period of the Church's life on earth.

The second sign (vv. 3-4) is the dragon, who in a moment is clearly identified as Satan. Here he is described in terms of the beast whom we shall see in a moment (description from Daniel 7:7), and *his tail swept down a third of the stars of heaven* (Daniel 8:10), that is, he is at the head of the great number of fallen angels. Here, then, we have the two principal antagonists for the souls of men.

In verses 7-12 this perennial battle is described in terms of a struggle between Michael and his angels (see Daniel 10:13) and the devil and his angels, with the victory promised to those who are brethren of Christ and believe in Him. In verses 13-17 there is a repetition of the figure of the enmity between Satan and the offspring of the woman. Here she is said to have been given *the two wings of the great eagle*, an Old Testament figure for divine protection (Exodus 19:4, etc.).

There are other persons yet to be presented. Before we see them, we should note that in v. 15 it is said that the dragon, who is identified also with the serpent of Genesis 3, tries to destroy the woman with water. Likewise in v. 17, *he stood on the sand of the sea*. And immediately after, we shall see *a beast rising out of the sea*.

Ordinarily in the Apocalypse both *earth and sea* are spoken of as accursed (thus in v. 12) – they are “this world” which has no part in Christ. Therefore, appropriately in chapter 13 there are two enemy beasts, one from the land and one from the sea. But in v. 16 the land is opposed to the water as helping the woman. When land and sea are thus opposed, John is alluding to an old idea that occurs time and time again in the Old Testament and is included in the action story in the first chapter of Genesis. Water signifies chaos, out of which God brought forth the land, which is, therefore, the symbol of the right order which He established.

The beast of the sea which acts with the power of Satan is followed by the men of this earth (13:1-4). The description of this and the beast of the land is a summary of the account in Daniel 7:1-8. Daniel told of four beasts, who

symbolized the four great empires which persecuted the Jews. John is thinking of only the one great empire which persecutes Christians, namely Rome. But he makes two beasts to bring out the twofold aspect of this persecution, which is both political and religious.

The beast of the sea, therefore, properly is a symbol of the Roman Empire, which in John's day was the embodiment of antichrist, the world power in opposition to the reign of Christ. This does not mean, of course, that the significance of what John revealed extended only to Rome. This beast is to exercise its power forty-two months, (v. 5), that is, the whole lifetime of the Church on earth. Always, in every age, there will be this worldly power – “this world” – that tries to substitute itself for Christ. John has simply described it under the form that it took in his day.

In keeping with this, the horns and heads have a meaning which we shall see in a moment, and likewise the reference (v. 3) to the one head that was wounded and then healed. The blasphemies of the beast (vv. 5-6) and its warfare against God and his Church (vv. 7-8) are in keeping with its doing the work of Satan, who has raised it up. In vv. 9-10 John addresses a word to Christians regarding their attitude in the face of these outrages. The *endurance* and *faith* which Paul also urged as the response to persecution is the word of Revelation.

The other beast of the land (vv. 11-18), whom John later (16:13) calls *the false prophet*, is the other aspect to the power inimical to Christ. This is personified paganism itself. Characteristically, it has *two horns like a lamb* - that is, it can take the guise of the Son of Man himself – yet *it spoke like a dragon*, for it is the voice of Satan (v. 11). It is paganism that brings men to worship the power that is other than Christ (v. 12), and it performs lying wonders to deceive men (vv. 13-14), even as the witnesses of the Church (11:5-6) performed true wonders. In v. 15 John probably has reference to the images of the emperors which were proposed for worship, in defiance of which many Christians were slain. Paganism is totally at the service of the great empire (vv. 16-17), to the extent that everyone who did not subscribe to it, to receive *the mark of the beast*, was subject to persecution and to economic penalties and boycott.

The Number of the Beast

The famous *number of the beast* appears in v. 18. The number *six hundred and sixty-six* is in the first place, a symbol of the greatest imperfection, since it is the sacred number seven less one repeated thrice. But John says that it is a *human number*, meaning, without doubt, that it is a number to be had by adding together the numerical values of the letters of someone's name. Whose name? We must confess that there is not possible any absolutely certain answer. We are not sure what language John is thinking of whose numbers are to be used. John wrote in Greek, but he probably thought in Aramaic, and he uses mostly Hebrew sources. Even Latin is not an impossibility, since he personifies the antichrist in terms of the Roman Empire. It is probable that a person of ingenuity could get the number 666 from almost any name or title he chose, if we allowed him to formulate the name or title as he wishes and decide what language it is to be placed in. Actually, the most probable candidate for the number of the beast is the Emperor Nero, the first persecutor in the name of Rome. If we add the numerical values in Hebrew of the name Nero Caesar (*Neron Qesar*) we obtain 666. Is this the correct solution? We cannot be sure; it is only a guess. But it seems likely in view of what follows.

The Diabolical Trinity

We should remark that now with the dragon, the beast (of the sea) and the false prophet (the beast of the land) together, we have a kind of "diabolical trinity" set in opposition to the true Trinity of God. As John mentions the three of this "trinity" in 16:3, just as he has previously stressed the appearance of the divine Trinity, we can conclude that it is not simply coincidence that opposes three to three. The final sign in this introductory series presented as a "cast of characters" is that of the 144,000 (14:1-5), which we previously saw (7:4ff.) represents the Church on earth, the elect of God. Here they are presented with the Lamb, with his sign on their foreheads, standing on Mount Zion in total contradiction to the beast and his followers. Here they are also called virgins and *firstfruits for God*, even as Paul entitled the Christians to whom he wrote.

The Seven Bowls (Revelation 15-16)

After this series of signs, another short series of seven angels is introduced in the third great prophetic image of the seven bowls. The first of these angels (14:6-7) proclaims *an eternal gospel*, that is, the fixed and determined will of God to bring about His judgment (the word “gospel” means “good news”). The second angel announces the fall of Babylon (v. 8), a theme that is to be pursued later on in great detail. A third angel (vv. 9-11) predicts the eternal damnation of those who persist in following the beast. Once more John calls for the patient endurance of Christians, and speaks of the heavenly reward of true believers (vv. 12-13). A fourth angel is portrayed as a son of man, for he is to do the work of the Son of Man (v. 14). This work is commanded by a fifth angel (v. 15), namely, to judge the world, here portrayed under the figure of reaping (v. 16). A sixth angel appears for the same purpose (v. 17), and a seventh angel calls from the heavenly altar where are the prayers of the saints (v. 17), and again judgment is portrayed this time as a bloody vintage (vv. 19-20).

These two images of judgment have been taken from Joel 3:13 and Isaiah 63:1-6. Commentators note that the *one thousand six hundred stadia* (about two hundred miles), the area flooded by the blood of judgment, is just about the exact length of Palestine. Just as the earthly Jerusalem in 11:8 is taken for the whole earth where the Church will give its testimony among men, and therefore signifies the world itself peopled by those hostile to the Lord (cf. 11:2, all outside the court of the temple), possibly John here takes the traditional limits of Palestine to stand for the entire world that is to be judged.

Chapter 15 begins the last of the sevenfold pictures of judgment, or the last times, under the image of the seven bowls. Here the emphasis is on triumph, the vindication of the righteous that is necessarily bound up with the punishment of the unjust. Consequently, after a brief mention of the seven plagues (15:1), there is a song of triumph in heaven of those who are presented as having been triumphant over the beast, that is, the Christians who have weathered his persecution and now receive their reward (vv. 2-4). They sing *the song of Moses* as well as *the song of the Lamb*. The song is, in fact, an echo of the song of Moses in Exodus 15:1, after the crossing of the Red Sea. Thus we see the reason that the *sea of glass* (v. 2), which previously was associated with the heavenly throne, is here *mingled with fire*. Just as Moses led Israel victorious

through the Red Sea, the glorified Church has crossed the red sea of glass into heavenly beatitude.

In line with this same train of thought the heavenly temple is described here as *the tent of witness* (v. 5) as in the Exodus story of the tabernacle in the desert (Exodus 40:34, etc.). The seven bowls of God's wrath are now delivered by the creatures about God's throne to seven angels clothed as the Son of Man, since they are to execute His will in judgment (vv. 6-8).

The command to pour out the bowls of the wrath of God (16:1) begins the last summary view of the last times in the form of judgment. The seven bowls are more connected than the seven signs or the seven trumpets. They follow one another in rapid succession, except that again, as before, there is a pause in anticipation of the last of them. The first bowl (v. 2) repeats the picture of the plague of Egypt described in Exodus 9:10-11. All the bowls, in fact, follow closely upon the story of the Egyptian plagues as their model.

The second and third bowls (vv. 3-4) divide between them the plague described in Exodus 7:20-21. The second bowl is also like to the third trumpet (8:10-11). After these first three bowls in vv. 5-7 there is the voice of approval of the angel and of the altar (where are the prayers of the saints). To this extent, then, there is a division made among the bowls like that of the letters to the churches at the beginning of the Apocalypse. As we saw then, while the letters are divided stylistically into 3 + 4, the seals and the trumpets are divided into 4 + 3, or more accurately 4 + (2+1). With the bowls we return again to 3 + 4, or 3 + (3+1).

The fourth bowl has no parallel in Exodus but it depends on Isaiah 49:8-10. This description (vv. 8-9) sets the lot of the wicked in direct opposition to that of the just (7:16). The fifth bowl returns to the picture of Exodus 10:21-22, and is like (vv. 10-11) to the fourth and fifth trumpets.

The sixth bowl (v. 12) as in the case of the sixth trumpet (9:13ff.) is in the form of a prediction of the invasion of the barbarians to put an end to the Roman Empire. The river Euphrates, which so to speak holds them back, is now removed. This also introduces a picture (v. 13) similar to that of the plague of Egypt in Exodus 8:2. Here the "diabolical trinity" lets loose *foul spirits* who signify the evil influences at work on the men of the world to form them against God (v. 14). But Christ, as Paul said (1 Thessalonians 5:2), comes

in judgment unexpectedly, *like a thief* in the night (v. 15) and he will destroy them utterly (v. 16). The symbolic place of this judgment of God, *Armageddon*, is the valley of Megiddo, the battleground of Palestine. Here Ahaziah the king of Judah had been slain by Jehu (2 Kings 9:27). Here King Josiah was slain by Pharaoh Neco (2 Kings 23-29). This battleground was, in effect, already a symbol of death and punishment.

The seventh bowl, at last, describes the end of all (vv. 17-21) in language that we have already seen (cf. 8:7), and in terms of Exodus 9:23-24. Still in this perspective of the bowls, in chapter 17 and following, these events are described in greater detail with much more imagery and imagination.

The Harlot and the Beast (Revelation 17)

First is the picture of the great harlot Babylon seated upon the beast (17:1-6). The harlot is the goddess of Rome. She is seated on *waters*, the symbol of evil (as is said in almost the same words in Jeremiah 51:13); her description in v. 2 is the description of Tyre in Isaiah 23:15-17. The beast is described here as *scarlet* (the color of royalty and with the seven heads and ten horns as before, which are about to be explained); similarly the woman is given all these characteristics of the beast (cf. Jeremiah 51:7), as the persecutor of God's elect. That she is said to be in a wilderness (v. 3) is probably better to show her contradiction to the woman of chapter 12, who personified the Church which was protected in the wilderness by God. The Church and the antichrist occupy the same terrain, this world, and the Church will be safeguarded against the attacks of evil.

The rest of the chapter is devoted to an explanation of this vision, as is announced in v. 7. The beast *was and is not* (v. 8), in opposition to God *who is and who was* (1:4, etc.). Yet both the power of God and the power of the beast are to come – the opposition of these two powers is, in fact, the sum of the Apocalypse. The seven heads of the beast are *seven hills on which the woman is seated* (v. 9), a certain reference to Rome, the city of the seven hills. Here we see why John has characterized the power of evil as Babylon. Just as Babylon had represented to the Old Testament Jew all that was wicked and symbolized persecution (sometimes other cities were named, but Babylon was the favorite), so does Rome in John's time.

In vv. 10-11 we read that the seven heads *are also seven kings, five of whom have fallen, one is, the other has not yet come, and when he comes, he must remain only a little while. As for the beast that was and is not, it is an eighth but it belongs to the seven, and it goes to perdition.* Probably what John means is this. He had the beast with seven heads from Daniel, and he has not changed the figure. He is thinking, however, of eight emperors of Rome. These are the eight that have ruled down to his time, who were Augustus, Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius, Nero, Vespasian, Titus, and Domitian (there were three others, Vitellius, Galba, and Otho, who had reigned only momentarily, however). Five of these had fallen – the Church had seen the end of the persecution of Nero. One is – John puts himself in the time of Vespasian (when the vision may originally have been granted), during whose reign there was a temporary surcease from persecution. One is yet to be – Titus, who destroyed Jerusalem, and who reigned a relatively short time. The eighth, who is one of the seven, is Domitian, whom the early Christians, as we know from the writings of Tacitus, Dio Cassius, and Dio Chrysostom, along with others, pictured as a reincarnation of Nero. It is in this sense also that we should understand 13:3, of the wounding of one of the heads of the beast, only for it to be restored. Also, in view of this explanation now given, we see the reason for the description of the dragon in 12:3. The dragon, who is Satan, exercises his power through the beast.

The *ten kings* of 17:12 given as an explanation of the ten horns of the beast probably refer to the other kings of the earth who, in John's time, shared in the power of Rome, though only partly, *for one hour*. They, too, make up the world that is opposed to Christ and assist in the persecution of the Church (vv. 13-14). But eventually they *and the beast* will turn against Rome and destroy her (vv. 15-18). John not only predicts the destruction of the Roman Empire, by picturing the beast which previously has been described in terms of that very empire now in opposition to it, he shows that he does not see the power of antichrist simply identified with Rome. It is a power that continues and that will outlive Rome.

Fall of Babylon **(Revelation 18-19)**

Chapter 18 consists first of a proclamation of the ruin of Babylon (vv. 1-8), a tissue of quotations from Isaiah and Jeremiah chiefly, in this order: Jeremiah

51:8, Isaiah 21:9, Jeremiah 50:39, Jeremiah 25:15, 27, Isaiah 48:20, Jeremiah 50:8, Jeremiah 51:45, Psalm 137:8, Isaiah 47:7-8, etc. Then in verses 9-19 the kings of the earth, the merchants, and the seafaring people are pictured mourning over the fall of Babylon that has deprived them of the glory they share with it. These laments are taken almost word for word from Ezekiel 26-27. They are interrupted briefly by v. 20, the contrast of the rejoicing of heaven over the overthrow of evil, in language that appears frequently in the Old Testament (Deuteronomy 32:43, Isaiah 44:23, Jeremiah 51:48, etc.). Finally, the last of chapter 18 (vv. 21-24) repeats the confident prediction of Babylon's fall in the language of Jeremiah 51:63, Ezekiel 26:21, Jeremiah 25:10, Ezekiel 26:13, Isaiah 24:8.

The jubilation over Rome's defeat continues in 19:1-10 which is at the same time an introduction to the last triumphant scenes of the Apocalypse to follow. Here again these heavenly songs of praise have been closely modeled on the Old Testament sources which we have already seen. In v. 9 is mentioned for the first time *the marriage supper of the Lamb*. This was a common Jewish figure for the messianic kingdom. John employs it to mean the ultimate triumph of Christ and His Church – for the Church is the bride in this marriage – which will be celebrated in his final chapters. In v. 10, carried away with emotion, John kneels at the feet of the angel and is rebuked. Probably John has included this reminiscence chiefly to oppose the worship of angels, which seems to have been widespread throughout Asia Minor and which is condemned especially in the Epistles to Colossians and the Hebrews.

The somber pictures of Revelation are for the most part done with. What is to come is the vision of the heavenly Jerusalem.

VI

THE NEW JERUSALEM

In the last part of Revelation, beginning with 19:11, John's picture of the future is almost wholly devoted to the brighter side, the triumph of Christ and of His elect.

The vision of the triumphant warrior (19:11-16) is, as is obvious, a vision of Christ at the head of the heavenly host. The picture depends on Psalm 2 and Isaiah 63:1-3, among other passages. Likewise on the Old Testament Book of Wisdom (omitted in the Protestant versions of the Bible), which reads in 18:14-16: "When peaceful stillness encompassed everything and the night in its swift course was half spent, your all-powerful word from heaven's royal throne bounded, a fierce warrior, into the doomed land, bearing the sharp sword of your inexorable decree. And as he alighted, he filled every place with death; he still reached to heaven, while he stood upon the earth."

There follows (vv. 17-18) a vision of an angel standing at the summit of heaven calling upon birds (ancient symbols of ill omen) to eat the enemies of God borrowed from Ezekiel 39:17-20). Still the picture is of confident triumph. This is completed by vv. 19-21 where once more the defeat and eternal punishment of all Christ's enemies, the beasts and all their host, is described.

The Millennium (Revelation 20)

All this is the introduction and summary of a more detailed description that is now to follow. First, says John, Satan is bound *for a thousand years*. And after this thousand-year period *he must be loosed for a little while* (20:1-3).

What is this thousand-year period? It is the life of the Church on earth. Before, we have seen that John has spoken of the Church's life on earth as three and a half years, forty-two months, etc. In those cases, however, he was speaking of the life of the Church under the aspect of a trial, as it is to be continually beset by Satan and his hosts. Here is the other side of the picture. With the Lord a thousand years is but a day (2 Peter 3:8). If, in one sense of

the matter, the Church's destiny on earth is to suffer and to struggle against temptation, in another sense the Church lives in a world where Satan has already been conquered, even though he must be loosed for a little while. Therefore John can speak of the Church's existence under both considerations, using different numbers to make the distinction clear.

This should not confuse us if we compare this passage with the rest of the New Testament. If we are told that the Christian life on earth is a warfare (2 Corinthians 10:4), that it is the lot of the Christian to suffer persecution (2 Thessalonians 1:5) and the like, we are also told that the evil one cannot touch the children of God (1 John 5:18), that Christ has already invaded Satan's house and bound him (Matthew 12:29), that He has led away every hostile power in triumph (Colossians 2:15), and so forth. The Christian life is both one of suffering and of triumph – the triumph, however, awaits confirmation, and though Satan has been conquered in principle, the conquest must still be fought out in every Christian soul with the help of Christ's grace. Both pictures are therefore true, though here it is the positive side that is emphasized.

This interpretation is confirmed by the picture in vv. 4-6, of those who *came to life again, and reigned with Christ a thousand years*, that is, during this same period. Who are they? They are, first of all, the martyrs, and secondly, *those who* (so the text should read) *did not worship the beast*, that is, Christ's faithful servants. They have a *first resurrection* which *the rest of the dead* do not have. This is the resurrection of which Paul speaks so frequently, for example in Colossians 3:1: "If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God." The Christian united with Christ is already raised up with Him while those who are spiritually dead do not rise *until the thousand years are ended*, that is, at the end of the Church's life on earth, when the final judgment and resurrection come. Those who share in the first resurrection of grace *shall be priests of God and of Christ*, as Peter describes the Christian life (1 Peter 2:9), and over them *the second death has no power*. The second death was a Jewish expression for eternal damnation.

Thus the thousand-year reign is not something confined to the end of the world. It is now going on. The chaining of Satan is one way of saying what was put quite another way in 12:7-9. There, Satan was pictured cast out of

heaven to lead the world astray. Here he is cast out and submitted to control. Both facts are true.

At the end of the thousand years, that is, when the Church's life on earth has run its course, once more is described the great battle between Christ and Satan's minions, the powers of the earth (vv. 7-8). Here they are given the names Gog and Magog, as in Ezekiel 38ff. They will be defeated (v. 9) and Satan will be sent back to hell (v. 10), where the two beasts have already been said to have been sent (19:20). Since the beasts for John represented proximately the Roman Empire and paganism, he has told us that Satan's power is more enduring and will outlast these.

Then follows the general resurrection (the second resurrection) and the final judgment (vv. 11-15).

Heaven: The Church Glorified (Revelation 21)

With this the Apocalypse opens upon a vision of the heavenly Jerusalem, that is, the eternal and glorious state of God's elect. It is called *a new heaven and a new earth* in the language of the prophets (e.g., Isaiah 65:17), but it is clearly heaven. Since John is adhering to Old Testament sources throughout, he describes the final state of glory in terms familiar to the Old Testament, especially to the prophets who had thought of God's restoration as a new creation, a new earth, a new Palestine, a new Jerusalem, and a new temple. John's perspective goes far beyond the Old Testament, however. He uses its language, but the Jerusalem he describes is "the Jerusalem above, our mother" (Galatians 4-26).

The heavenly Jerusalem (21:1-8), the abode of God's elect, from which are excluded the obstinately sinful whose lot is hell, is further described (vv. 9-21) as the Bride of the Lamb, in language borrowed from Ezekiel 40 and 48, Isaiah 54 and 60, and other sources. Here the number twelve, that of heavenly perfection, figures frequently. The Church which had struggled on earth is now the Church glorified.

Its spiritual character is strongly brought out in 21:22-22:5. There is *no temple in the city*, for no intermediary of religion is needed when God is possessed as He is. With most of the figures in this text we are by now familiar. In the first few verses of chapter 22 the description is reminiscent of

the second chapter of Genesis in the story of man's primitive innocence with God.

This is, in fact, the end of Revelation. Once more John is told to publish this book (vv. 6-11). He is not to seal up the words of this prophecy (v. 10) because *the time is near*. The words of this revelation apply here and now, and what has been prophesized will surely fall upon every present evildoer and will be the reward of every just person (v. 11). So confirms the voice of Christ (vv. 12-13), and in this spirit is a final blessing of the just (v. 14) and a final warning to the wicked (v. 15). The book closes with a final attestation of Jesus and of John (vv. 16-21).

Appropriately, since throughout Revelation the people of this world and the rulers thereof have signified the enemies of Christ, the final triumph and restoration is pictured as the creation of a new world, a new creation. Appropriately, too, John should have chosen the glorious, exuberant details of Ezekiel's description of this new creation to sound the final notes of this vision of hope and consolation.

A Message of Joy and Hope

Evidently, we have been able only to skim the surface of the meaning and significance of the Apocalypse. We have tried to show why it was written, and along what lines it should be interpreted. On these interpretations, with a difference of opinion here and there on minor details, there is a fair amount of agreement today among serious students of the Bible. At least, the principles according to which the interpretation must be made are in any case certain and agreed upon.

If the reader will look again at the first few pages of this booklet where those principles are explained, he will now have the benefit, from having seen them applied, of understanding them better. Understanding these principles should also help in seeing how the Apocalypse, despite its style and form which are so utterly foreign to those of our day, has a meaningful message for the Christian of today, as for the Christians of John's age. If we can do nothing more than emphasize this point, we shall have accomplished much. It would be a great victory for the cause of truth and the Christian life if this book could be recovered from the curiosity seeker and the religious fanatic and restored to its proper place as a document of Christian joy and hope.

A B O U T T H E A U T H O R

Father Bruce Vawter, C.M., was a Professor of Religious Studies at De Paul University, Chicago. His field of study and teaching was sacred Scripture. This text, written about 1969, is theologically solid and it addresses the questions still asked today.

