

Christian Hope in the Book of Revelation

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BO-SS 108: The Apocalypse of St. John: A Walk Through the Book of Revelation

November 18, 2018

In this paper I intend to discuss the theme of Christian Hope as it is presented in the Book of Revelation. Particularly I will show how apocalyptic wisdom creates hope. I will then seek to apply the specific insights that arise from wisdom as hope to our own cultural situation. Here specifically, I will comment on its application to active euthanasia. I will attempt to show how apocalyptic hope confronts the missiology of the Powers as they create and adapt to our modern context.

Andrew of Caesarea's literary training in Antiochean exegesis helps him to see the value of the tropological level of the text and helps him to see the *wisdom purpose* of this genre. Stating the point of his commentary he writes "...we will expound [these things] as if supplying a training for the quick-wittedness of the mind..."¹ Gerhard Von Rad sees the apocalyptic genre as emerging from Old Testament Wisdom. Mangina, referring to Von Rad states, "The point of Israel's wisdom was always that *we ourselves* should become wise. Like wisdom, apocalyptic theology calls for the transformation of the mind and heart combined with prudent action; we must seek not only wisdom but apocalyptic wisdom, *the kind that sees deep into the spiritual cause of things*"² [italics mine].

Beale describing the Babylon imagery in Revelation writes succinctly of the "complex" of the "world's economic-religious system" and "the state".³ This reality is described in many ways in

¹ Andrew of Caesarea, *Commentary on the Apocalypse*, ed. David G. Hunter, trans. Eugenia Scarvelis Constantinou, vol. 123, *The Fathers of the Church* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2011), 53.

² Joseph L. Mangina, *Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2010), 27-28.

³ G.K. Beale and David H. Campbell, *Revelation: A Shorter Commentary* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2015), 349.

the imagery and literary structure of Revelation. Initially, the epistolary section refers to in the compromises with this “complex” to which the seven churches are tempted in their daily lives, through business contacts often associated with meal fellowship in pagan temples, through syncretistic theology, or simply through a spiritual “double-mindedness” (to use the language of the letter of James). Later in the book we can see highly intensified imagery, such of that Michael and the angelic army throwing the great dragon to earth. But whether in microcosm or macrocosm the reality is the same.

We could readily, reading clear eyed, from the end of Revelation surmise what this “complex” *is not*. Here, the reign of the Lamb is established throughout the cosmos in the final wedding feast and the New Jerusalem. God’s ultimate desire is to have all creation united in a great polyphonic liturgy⁴ is fulfilled. We could then see that the opposing powers (to use Origen’s term) represent a demonic parody of this. The union which the *great complex* seeks is unified but ultimately unstable. We can see how it turns upon itself in the destruction of Babylon. It has its own feast of sorts but it is a parody⁵. It is that of the great battle in which the flesh of all conditions of rebellious humanity is consumed. It is not even musically harmonious. As the Fathers emphasized its music is the meaningless and discordant croaking of frogs.⁶ It demands worship, but its worship is of that which emerges from chaos and which enslaves its worshippers in the worship of false

⁴ Mangina, *Revelation*, 52

⁵ Michael Barber, *Coming Soon: Unlocking the Book of Revelation* (Steubenville: Emmaus Road Publishing, 2005), 236.

⁶ William C. Weinrich, ed., *Revelation: Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2005), 257.

gods and leads to their destruction. It has its own liturgy, but it is that of the emperor cult ⁷which gives the emperor blasphemous names. It is a demonic parody of the New Jerusalem and the Wedding Banquet of the Lamb.

Through out the text the true and even personal nature in and behind this “complex” is revealed. It is an “anti-trinity”. ⁸ (“This calls for wisdom” Rev. 13:18 RSVCE2) It emerges from the depths of death and hell, it claims much for itself but is “was, and is not , and and is to ascend from the bottomless pit”⁹. It has authority (for a while), but it has no power and it has no place. It is non-being and creates structures, and propaganda to support these structures, which “cheapen” human life fashioning a “false image of what it means to be human...”¹⁰ It has even claimed authority over the liminality of death itself, ironically since it is non-being.¹¹ If this anti-trinity is non-being, then God and the Lamb are Being and thus Truth. This can be seen no more clearly than in Revelation 4-5 in the heavenly liturgy, which the prophet is invited to witness, and which discloses the Truth which is truly above and upholding all things. In the anti-trinity’s terms this is an unsolvable paradox. “So if we now ask ‘who rules the cosmos?’ the correct answer can only be ‘the Lamb rules the cosmos,’ that is ‘the crucified rules it’ This spells the end of any rationalist or materialist conception in which creation is a closed system tending towards death”¹² This reality

⁷ *Mangina, Revelaiton, 81*

⁸ *Ibid, 188*

⁹ *Barber, Coming Soon, 215*

¹⁰ *Mangina, Revelaiton, 165*

¹¹ *But see the false claim over liminality is rejected by the great angel who straddles earth and sea. see Mangina, Revelation, 128*

¹² *Mangina, Revelaiton, 91*

pervades the Book of Revelation, the Lamb who, while he has been slaughtered (by the *complex* of the anti-trinity) *stands* and is also the Lion of Judah. Out of his mouth proceeds the Truth, the Word of God. Thus indicating that this Lamb is no powerless victim but that his saving actions are acts of power. Revelation perhaps has no more evocative imagery than that of the two prophet-martyrs whose words (which are the Word of Truth) are flames which destroy their opponents and whose martyred bodies are witnesses to the Truth. These allude to various Biblical images but certainly to those in Zechariah. And also to the custom of Christian missionaries of travel in twos. Here we are reminded of Jesus' word to not "worry about what you will say...". Thus they are not to fear the opposing powers.

Kafka's work is said have been in the realm of apocalyptic literature. He could see *beneath the surface of modernity* and through his use of allusive symbolism and ironic use of narrative, *reveal what is really going on in the post-Enlightenment world* that we have created. John M. Ellis points out that Kafka demonstrated the falsehood of the Enlightenment project (at least in its totalizing ambition) that "faith in reason must lead us to better moral values..."¹³ And he came to the strange insight that superstition and myth which he Enlightenment rejected had apparently conveyed genuine insight. That is that the institutions which we inhabit and which we participate in maintained while impersonal are also *rightly personified*. Writing about

¹³ John M. Ellis, "How to Read Kafka Part I," *The New Criterion*, vol. 37, no. 2 (October, 2018), 7

The Castle, and its central character K. Ellis writes “...though nobody can touch or see it, everyone behaves as if it had a will and a personality. It is greatly feared, and its presence dominates”.¹⁴

Two years ago Canada legalized “medically assisted death”. This is properly “active euthanasia” at the request and consent of a person who is faced with the inevitability of death “in the foreseeable” future. This legislation explicitly sees persons in post-Enlightenment terms, that is, as autonomous and rational individuals whose freedom choice must be respected. The state is obliged to respond by this person’s request by providing this person with a lethal injection. Peter Steinfelds wrote in 1975 that he was concerned with a trivializing of death. “How long before some *Joy of Dying* (‘A Gourmet Guide to Passing Away’) makes the best seller list”¹⁵This is very much how this is currently being presented, This has been actively promoted especially in our state owned media while the reality on the ground has now been shown to be profoundly different.¹⁶

Rightly, in a recent article Fr Jonathan Turtle stated, “People are not autonomous beings but are rather located and understood as individuals only within a much richer web of filiation and relationships. Should we not take into account the common good, even if that good is only common

¹⁴ *Ibid*,9

¹⁵ Lawrence Whytehead and Paul Chidwick, *Dying: Considerations Concerning the Passage from Life to Death* (Toronto: The Anglican Book Centre), 58

¹⁶ In a recent Comment article Peter Stockland shows that, for example, economic concerns may a driver in active euthanasia. The Quebec medial association has expressed concerns that it may be only type of “end of life care”. There are also instances of involuntary euthanasia and the killing of people who are currently in good health. https://www.convivium.ca/articles/maid-and-modern-medicine?fbclid=IwAR0gtXai7bhDqzLFQGjyJovFFOyGc_-KfzIKs4k_k6HVCXI7HSB5jDg_084

to one family?"¹⁷ This reminiscent of John Paul II's statement that human social nature must be not just political but "realized in various intermediary groups...which stem from human nature itself and have their own autonomy"¹⁸The legislation and its application guidelines do not reference mediating institutions. We simply see the State relating directly to unencumbered "autonomous, rational individuals" seeking death. Those who have dealt directly with this will testify that, in fact, because we are deeply social, fear and isolation are major factors in choosing this type of death. The will, in fact, does not exist in some sort of transcendent Gnostic purity. It is deeply social and encumbered by "all the ills that flesh is heir to". The State's view of humanity is efficient, technical, without compassion or understanding. It has claimed authority over the liminality of death. The State and its attendant institutions, the *complex* of institutions have agreed on the autonomy of individuals. This is delusion, even deception, as Kafka has shown. This *complex* itself is collective and more than collective. It cloaks itself (in the Marxist sense) in the "ideological superstructure" of modernity. *But the apocalyptic imagination allows this to be seen through for what it is, the state killing its citizens.*

What is the hope here? *The hope is in the act of unveiling.* This wisdom inspires and creates hope because it imparts a deep knowledge of the events in which one (including the original hearers) are involved. This wisdom gives genuine insight into the culture in which Christians exist. It also provides strategies for wisely navigating this culture which can be seen both empirically and even more clearly, through the use (like Kafka) of highly intensified symbols and nar-

¹⁷ Jonathan Turtle, <https://livingchurch.org/covenant/2018/10/24/assisted-death-and-the-churchs-vocation/>

¹⁸ Jonathan Chaplin "Living with Integrity in a Splintered World" *Comment* vol. 36, no. 3 (Fall,,2018), 13

atives. It is rooted in the Truth which is true *telos* of humanity found in the Lamb who was slain and who (and not the State) reigns even in and over death itself. Even here, he and not Caesar, is Lord.

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Is there any book of the Bible that sparks as much controversy and confusion as the book of Revelation? Some believers form strong dividing lines over different interpretations. Many Christians scratch their heads as they read through John's illustrative visions. Perhaps you share the curiosity of one of our church members who recently asked me, "Why did God have to end the Bible like that?" It's a fair question. What are we to make of this seemingly odd conclusion to God's Great Book? The purpose of this post is not to engage (let alone settle) the common debates regarding Revelation. My goal is more simple and more general: I want to show you some of the broad themes of Revelation that every Christian can agree upon, and every Christian needs to know. The Book of Revelation cannot be adequately understood except against the historical background that occasioned its writing. Like Daniel and other apocalypses, it was composed as resistance literature to meet a crisis. It is a triumph that unfolded in the history of Jesus of Nazareth and continues to unfold in the history of the individual Christian who follows the way of the cross, even, if necessary, to a martyr's death. Though the perspective is eschatological—ultimate salvation and victory are said to take place at the end of the present age when Christ will come in glory at the parousia—the book presents the decisive struggle of Christ and his followers against Satan and his cohorts as already over. The book of Revelation or The Apocalypse of John Ἐπιφάνειας, from Greek ἀποκάλυψις ἰωάννου... ἰωάννου, ἀπο- ["away from"] and ἰωάννου, or kaluptein ["cover"]—meaning literally "to pull the cover away from") is the last canonical book of the New Testament in the Bible. It is the only biblical book that is wholly composed of apocalyptic literature. The book is frequently called by the incorrect name Book of Revelations. However, the actual title of the book is The Revelation of Jesus Christ unto his servant John The Book of Revelation (also called the Apocalypse of John, Revelation to John or Revelation from Jesus Christ) is the final book of the New Testament, and consequently is also the final book of the Christian Bible. Its title is derived from the first word of the Koine Greek text: apokalypsis, meaning "unveiling" or "revelation." The Book of Revelation is the only apocalyptic book in the New Testament canon. Thus, it occupies a central place in Christian eschatology. Next (Book of Thomas the Contender). The Book of Revelation, also called Revelation to John or Apocalypse of John, is the last canonical book of the New Testament in the Christian Bible. It is the only biblical book that is almost wholly composed of apocalyptic literature. Other apocalypses popular in the early Christian era did not achieve canonical status, although 2 Esdras (The Apocalypse of Ezra) is canonical in the Russian Orthodox and Ethiopian Orthodox Churches.