

THE BOOK OF REVELATION – ITS MESSAGE FOR TODAY¹

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The Book of Revelation has been regarded as perhaps the most difficult to understand within the canon of Scripture. The early church found difficulty with it. Luther would have denied to the Revelation a place in the New Testament. In it, he said, Christ is neither taught nor acknowledged. Zwingli was equally hostile to the book. Revelation is the only book in the New Testament on which John Calvin did not write a commentary. Other commentators, however, have loved it. Some eccentric Christian writers have tried to take out of it all sorts of remarkable, chiefly futuristic, interpretations. Today, it remains for many Christians largely a closed book, and many preachers rarely turn to it. Nevertheless, we must wrestle with it prayerfully until it begins to give us its blessing and open its riches to us.

The Revelation is part of Scripture and is in complete harmony with the rest of Scripture, so that an adequate understanding of it is essential for a right appreciation of the biblical message as a whole. This is all the more true today when people and nations are living through a time of crises, and there is so much sin in the world with all its consequences.

Ordinary people are asking about the meaning of life. Are people completely at the mercy of their fellows, or of blind, impersonal, economic forces? Will the forces of materialism prevail? Does God control the purposes and plans of

1 This paper was originally presented to a conference on the theology of T. F. Torrance in April, 2011, in Firth, Scotland. In the writing of it I was much indebted to the following sources: T. F. Torrance, *The Apocalypse Today* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids: 1959), D. T. Niles, *As Seeing the Invisible: A Study of the Book of Revelation* (SCM Press, London: 1964), and J. H. B. Masterman, *Studies in the Book of Revelation* (SPCK, London: 1919). In its present revised form, I am grateful for the practical help of the copy editor of *Participatio*, Ben Taylor.



peoples and nations? Will God's love and patience break the power of sin? What of the Church and its future? What of its witness to Christ? How does the Church, in these days of crises when sin is rampant, discharge its task?

The Book of Revelation has light to shed on all these questions. It had a profound and stirring message of hope to give to the Church of John's day, to the Church of every age, and perhaps, in a special way, to the Church of our day, despite the fact that much within the book will probably always remain a mystery.

The Occasion of the Book's Writing

John wrote his book at a time of grave danger to the Church. Savage persecution had broken out, and many had already suffered for the Faith. John himself was an exile on the island of Patmos. Although the name of only one martyr, Antipas,² is mentioned, many more had been slain for the Word of God and for "the testimony of Jesus." The book makes clear this was the result of sinful earthly power rebelling against its Heavenly King — Christus Imperator, Christus Pantokrator, Christus Victor.

The first main source of hostility was unbelieving Jews. This hostility was present right up to the time of John and in the year 155 AD was effective enough to cause the martyrdom of Polycarp in Smyrna. Apart from martyrdom, the Christians suffered at the hands of the Jews from periodic outbursts of mob violence which issued in looting and physical cruelty.

The second and more serious source of hostility was the Roman State. During the period of the early emperors, there was a growing suspicion of Christians. This afforded a pretext for emperors like Nero (AD 54–68) to indulge in sporadic outbursts of great cruelty against the Church. Gradually, with the growth of emperor worship, this changed for the worse. Attitudes on the part of the State hardened. The issue of conformity to the State religion became the real cause of persecution of Christians. With Domitian, in whose reign (AD 81–96) the Revelation was probably written, persecution was the result of deliberate, calculated decision. The State felt that the Christian faith endangered the unity

2 Revelation 2:13.

of the empire and challenged the position and status of the emperor. Therefore, it had to be suppressed.

Domitian decreed that all his subjects should burn incense to him "as Lord and God" (this was an act of prayer), and that those who refused should be punished. Those who supported the Caesar cult were to wear a "mark," and those without it were boycotted in the markets and ostracised in social life.³ For Christians, prayer to Caesar and the acceptance of the religion of the State was impossible. The State was claiming the absolute obedience and surrender of its citizens, body and soul, and claiming to be divinely autonomous! This, Christians could not accept. Jesus Christ alone was Lord of the individual and of the nation. He who was man's Saviour from sin was also the Ruler of the kings of the earth. This refusal to conform to the religion of the State precipitated the most terrible and determined persecutions in which thousands perished.

Third, the Church was threatened not only by the State but also by those Christians who compromised and found the pressures too great. The latter John calls "Nicolaitans," "Balaamites," and "followers of Jezebel." They were a source of great weakness in the Church. The Revelation is as much a warning against them as it is a warning against the claims of Rome.

Authorship

We will not concern ourselves with the author of the Revelation. It neither affects the inspiration of the book nor our understanding of its content and message. Some believe, as I do, that the author was John the Apostle. Others, no doubt also with good cause, believe it was another John. No matter! It is "enough to know that John the Seer, was one of the greatest gifts of God to the Church of his day; and that the Church of all ages has cause to be thankful for the strength of his faith, the certainty of his hope, the clarity of his vision, the glow of his imagination, and the fervour of his writing."⁴

It is clear from the book itself that the author saw his visions and wrote his book on the island of Patmos where he had been banished, no doubt to work in

3 Revelation 13:15-17.

4 D. T. Niles, *As Seeing the Invisible*, 21

the stone quarries, for his testimony to Christ. In reading his book, one can feel his soaring triumphant spirit defying the hardness of his own condition and the weariness of his own body.

Apocalypse

The word by which John describes the message which he communicates is the word "apocalypse." It is a revelation, an unveiling, an uncovering of Jesus Christ and his purposes for mankind and creation. God the Lord is unveiled as the Author and Finisher of the course of human history, the Initiator and Fulfiller of the course of the world redemption, the Beginning and Ending of the course of divine judgment. Here in the Revelation it is affirmed that God's plan in creation will be fulfilled and consummated, that Christ's work of salvation will be concluded. The Holy Spirit will perfect his work of restoring in man the image of God.

Other apocalyptic literature

Although in many respects the Revelation is unique, in its outward form it is not. There are a number of other books written in a similar style. Among canonical writings there is Daniel, along with certain chapters in Ezekiel and in the Gospels. Outside the canon of Scripture — and written in the last two centuries BC and in the first two centuries AD — are Enoch, The Sibylline Oracles, Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs (claiming to be the last words of the twelve sons of Jacob), The Assumption of Moses, The Ascension of Isaiah, The Apocalypse of Baruch,⁵ and so on. The authors of these books tried to follow in the steps of the Old Testament prophets. They did their best to keep alive the faith of the prophets in times when the flame of faith and hope burned low. Not infrequently, they were motivated in their writings by the activities of tyrants who oppressed the people of God. They therefore tried to convey messages of hope for God's saints in dark days. Above all, they looked for the fulfilment of God's promise of a kingdom in which sin and death and sorrow would be swallowed up.

Large tracts of apocalyptic writings are written in the style of the old prophets, but especially characteristic of them are descriptions of visions received in trance or dream. Many of these visions take the form of highly coloured parables in

5 Baruch was the scribe of Jeremiah.

which angels and demons abound, and people and nations are depicted in the guise of animals. No doubt, people accustomed to reading books and hearing sermons that used this kind of symbolism would not experience our difficulty in understanding them. Probably the closest modern parallel to such a method of communication is the political cartoon, which is a fairly standard feature in the daily press of most countries. The purpose of these cartoons is the embodiment of a message relating to the concrete situations of the day. They reflect judgements on the doings and fluctuating fortunes both of national and international groups and alliances. Cartoonists often employ stereotyped symbols of people and animals to represent parties and nations, and frequently they set them in bizarre and exaggerated situations, or portray their characters in bizarre ways, in order to convey their message more plainly. Consider the following cartoon headings: "Uncle Sam and John Bull ought to shake hands"; "They cannot afford another Boston Tea Party"; and again "The American Eagle and the British Lion should woo the Russian Bear, for the Chinese Dragon is breathing fire over the nations." A cartoonist would enjoy himself and amuse his readers by giving beasts suitable faces resembling the leaders of USA, Britain, Russia, and China.

The ancient apocalyptists did something like this in their own day. Many of the symbols which they used in portraying the political powers of their times — as well as the spiritual powers which they saw behind them — were as traditional as Uncle Sam, John Bull, the Russian Bear, and the Chinese Dragon. For example, the many headed, many horned dragon of the Revelation, who in Chapter 13 is said to emerge from the sea, is none other than the sea monster of primitive Middle East religious traditions. In an ancient saga, which circulated throughout the lands of the Middle East, the sea monster was an evil spiritual power that defied the power of heaven, but finally was defeated and rendered powerless. In due time, the monster became the standing traditional symbol for evil political powers.⁶ The application of the figure to oppressor nations indicated both the nature of their evil government and their certain down-fall through the judgement of God. In the Revelation this symbol is applied to the anti-Christian empire and its ruler. Above all, it is applied to the devil who stands behind all the evil of the world.

6 For example, see Isaiah 27:1, 51:9–10, and Daniel 7:21–25.

Principles of Interpretation

Some suggested broad principles will be helpful to guide us in our interpretation of this book. Firstly, it is important to distinguish in a broad sense, between “prophecy” and “apocalypse.”⁷ Prophecy is a thrust of the Word of God into the present, summoning people to repentance and obedience, often calling for social, economic, and political justice. Apocalypse is characteristically an unveiling of the meaning of the present in the light of the final end. Whereas far too often apocalyptic literature outside the canon is a flight from history, the Revelation is a genuine attempt to interpret history, the whole sweep of history, in the light of the final end. It is an unveiling of the present relationship of the Church and the world to the Risen Christ, who will come again to consummate his reign.

Even so, it is significant that in addition to the apocalyptic form, John adopts the prophetic posture: “Thus saith the Lord.” He affirms that he is proclaiming a direct word from God to present and future generations, and not teaching (speculative) doctrine. The substantiation of John’s claim lies in the fact that his message applies to every age. It is not helpful to give particular definitive interpretations to particular visions. Because it is prophecy that John writes, it illuminates the meaning of every time and age, and affords guidance for living in every generation. This does not preclude the possibility that there may come about in the end a yet more literal fulfilment than what has been manifested previously.

Second, it is important to distinguish the Book of Revelation from other apocalyptic literature by noting the primarily canonical source material of its pictures and symbols. The language of apocalyptic literature depends to a large extent for its effectiveness and power on the fact that it draws pictures and symbols from contemporary literature, particularly from the other writings of its genre. The Revelation, however, draws its symbols and pictures from the Old and New Testaments. D. T. Niles notes that “within the four hundred and four verses of the book, there are five hundred and eighteen quotations from the Old Testament, apart from countless suggestions of it.”⁸ Likewise, there are many quotations that indicate that the writer of the book is familiar with the sayings

7 Niles, *As Seeing the Invisible*, 27.

8 *Ibid.*, 32.

of Jesus and the Gospel story. Whereas the study of the non-canonical books of apocalyptic literature can help us appreciate the use of dramatic pictures and symbols commonplace to a specific genre and period of history, it is to the Old and New Testaments that we must turn to understand the imagery in Revelation.

Third, the message is symbolically coded. This was partly for the purpose of ensuring secrecy. It would have greatly worsened the situation for the Church had the book explicitly mentioned Rome and fallen into Roman hands. Rome would have deemed such writings subversive. It was thus written in code and therefore unintelligible to the outsider! It was spiritual marching orders issued in code! Our problem today is to discover the code, without which much of the book will continue to remain unintelligible.

However, another reason for this symbolism is to arouse lively, emotional responses to the message. To achieve this result, John employs various devices. In the first place, he uses archetypal images with a naturally strong emotional content — for example, dragon, beast, abyss, throne, feast, horse, key, war, warrior, crown, blood, and pit. He also assaults the imagination with a tremendous array of colour — for example, a red horse, a red dragon, a scarlet beast, a woman in purple, white robes, a white throne, a white horse, golden harps, golden crowns and so forth. In the third place, he uses sound — for example, thunders, trumpets, the sound of many waters, a lion's roar, harps, hail, a multitude of song, an earthquake, a voice from the altar (the shout "Hallelujah"), the cry "Fallen is Babylon," and "Woe," the call "Come," and the announcement "It is done." Finally, he uses dramatic pictures and forms — robes dipped in blood, blood up to the bridles, drunk with the blood of the saints, fire from heaven, fire upon the altar, eyes and lamps of fire, lightning in the sky, the fallen star, the hurled mill-stone, an angel in mid heaven, a beast upon the shore, and so forth.

However, John intends his symbols to be interpreted in a distinctive way. "As John makes plain, this exuberance of symbolism offers no license for arbitrary allegorising. His symbols, to use his own word, are intended to 'signify'; that is, they should not so much be interpreted as to be allowed to awaken imagination. They are neither representative nor allegorical; but are, as it were, habitations in which the thoughts expressed dwell, and the atmosphere of the habitations is indicative of the nature of the occupants. The apocalyptic sculptor, or painter, is not so much concerned with portraying the person who sits, as with creating

an image in which the sinner's spirit can dwell. The reader is invited to visit these images and to hold converse with those who dwell in them. He cannot be a mere spectator. He must participate in the total activity. The drama is the drama of men and women in real history, and the reader too is included."⁹

The failure to take seriously that the terms used are symbols, not actual representations, as well as to logically follow the consequences of this fact, has led many commentators into error. For this reason we cannot accept the view of liberal scholars who regard the prophecies of this book as wholly concerned with the circumstances of John's day. Nor can we accept the historicist interpretation of many Reformed scholars who construe the visions as a preview of history from the time of the writer to the end of the world. Nor can we accept the future view (held in the earliest centuries and fairly widely by evangelical Christians today) which places the relevance of the visions entirely at the end of the age, largely divorcing them from the prophet's time.

The book and its visions have distinct order and form (though not chronological order). John is dealing with and interpreting real historic fact. He wrote for the churches under his pastoral care with a practical situation in view, that is, the imminent possibility of the popular Caesar worship of his day being imposed on all Christians. Grasping the spiritual issues involved, John saw the logical consequence of this imposition, with mankind divided between obedience to Christ and obedience to anti-Christ. John saw the real correspondence between the crises in his day and the last great crises of the world which would inevitably come about. Just as the Church in John's day was faced with a devastating persecution by Rome, so will the Church of the last days find itself violently attacked and persecuted by the prevailing world power. The outcome of that final struggle, as of every other previous struggle, will be the coming of Christ in Glory and the establishment of the Kingdom of God in power. Christ is "at hand" and will ever be "at hand" until finally he comes in a way in which "every eye will see him." The message of this book has within it a past, present, and future reference, and its message is for every age.

The fourth guiding principle of interpretation is an understanding of the specific meanings of John's symbols. For example, John intends eyes for vision,

9 Ibid., 29.

horn for power, and *white* for purity. He also uses numbers with given meanings. This numerology, largely rooted in Jewish story and history, is fairly simple and can be easily set out:¹⁰ *two* is the symbol for "adequate witness"; *three* for completeness; *four* for anything that concerns the earth (earth is thought of as a square with four corners); *five* for smallness; *six* for sin; *seven* for "perfection," or perfect unity in diversity (three and one half is the symbol of imperfection, or evil perfection); *ten* for fullness, or completeness achieved in aggregation (not integration as with *seven*); *twelve* for the Church; *twenty-four* (i.e., twice twelve) is the symbol for the continuous Church of God through Old and New Testament times; *ten thousand times ten thousand* for an innumerable number, a vast host; and 666 is the symbol for a trinity of evil.

This last symbol requires further comment. The principle of interpretation is, as John says, that of counting. In the Hebrew and Greek alphabets each letter had a certain numerical value. It was common practice in John's day to add the numerical value of the several letters of a name and to use the total as a symbol of that name. This type of calculation was known as *gematria*. John says that 666 is the number of the beast. He also says it is the number of a man. The beast then is sin personified. He is 666. We can note that by counting up the numerical value of the letters we can get both the word "therion" (the Greek word for beast), and also "Nero Caesar," the terrible and cruel persecutor of the Early Church.

However, I suggest that we should not press the name of any one person too closely. For the real meaning of 666 would appear to be deeper. 666 is a trinity of evil that falls short of the Holy Trinity of 777 (7 being the number of perfection and 6 the symbol for sin). In this case, 666 is a trinity of evil imitating the Holy Trinity. As each 6 falls short of 7, so all the plagues (6 seals plus 1, 6 trumpets plus 1, 6 bowls of wrath plus 1) are not complete in themselves. They are held in the hand of God. In spite of appearances, God rules over all the chaos of the world. Evil does not have the final mastery. The victory and triumph is the Lord's. The Revelation is a very uplifting book; it is a great encouragement to faith.

10 Ibid., 30.

Revelation is the Unveiling of Jesus Christ

This is the significance of the first verse in chapter one. God was veiled, hidden, in the Incarnation. God the Son came among us in such a fashion that the full glory of his divine majesty was veiled in the humanity of Jesus. God was concealed in Jesus behind his flesh and suffering. In this book he will be unveiled; the curtain will be drawn aside. Although the working of the cross is still veiled to the outward eye, God is, even now, overruling the world and its sin. Until we have seen in the Spirit Jesus Christ in the unveiled richness of his glory, we cannot understand this book.

In chapter 1 we are given a vision of Jesus Christ. It is the same Jesus about whom we read in the Gospels. Yet, how different! Now he is transfigured and seen in the full power of his Resurrection. John seeks to write what he sees. He reaches out after all sorts of symbols and pictures to try to convey the full reality of Christ, but words fail him and he falls down as one dead. He worships him who stands before him in the full blaze of his holiness and majesty. Behind the thunder of the trumpets is heard the immortal, gracious voice of him who spoke like no other man. This is the same Jesus of Galilee and Judea, of the cross and empty tomb.

This unveiling of Jesus Christ means an unveiling of history which has already been invaded and conquered by the Lamb of God. "Apocalypse" means the tearing aside of the veil to reveal the decisive conquest of organic evil by the Incarnate Son of God. It means the unveiling of the new creation, as yet hidden from our eyes, behind the ugly shape of sinful history. There is to be a new creation which is the outworking of the cross in the teeth of all the principalities and powers of darkness. In the advent presence of Jesus Christ, there is to be a new heaven and a new earth. God is in complete control. He governs the course of history. When Jesus Christ comes at the last, we shall see with our eyes that which we see now only by faith.

Order and Outline of the Book

As this unveiling is unfolded, John's description follows a distinct order. That order, I believe, has been presented and largely shaped by the worship of God's

people in the Feast of Tabernacles. Only someone whose whole mind and being had been steeped in, and shaped by, the worship of God and by the Feast of Tabernacles, could have presented his revelation and message in this particular order and form. We can learn an immense amount about the worship of the Church in John's day from this book, but we cannot enlarge on that here. The design and pattern of it are themselves part of what the book is about. Its message is also in the form in which that message is articulated.

In addition to the introductory and concluding passages, there are three main sections.¹¹ Below is the general outline with the main sections and their principal themes:

Introduction: The title of the book, the address, greetings, preface, and statement of contents (1:1-11).

Section 1: The Lord and his Church — Christ's Person is unveiled (1:1 2-3:22).

Section 2: The Lord and his world — Christ's Purpose is unveiled (4:1-11:19).

Section 3: Christ as Lord of all — Christ's Power is unveiled (12:1-22:5).

Conclusion: The Seven Last Words (22:6-21).

Each of the three main sections opens with a Christophany, a vision of Jesus Christ. The first section begins with a vision of the Lord, the Bridegroom of the Church. The vision is followed by what the Bridegroom has to say to his Bride. He calls her to love and fidelity, and warns her against entanglement with false lovers. The complement to the vision of the Bridegroom at the beginning of the book is the vision of the Bride with which the book comes to its conclusion.

The second section begins with a vision of the Lamb amidst the throne. Here in this vision the hymn of redemption is already heard and the revealing of the sons of God is already sure. The Lamb has redeemed a people unto himself, and the Book of Life with their names written in it is already in God's hand. The Book is not yet open. Though Heaven's joy is the joy of certainty, it is also a joy in anticipation. Fulfilment comes only as the seals are broken. This fulfilment is the inner meaning of the judgements of God, for his judgements are also

11 Ibid., 97-98.

a call for repentance. Moreover, they are the means by which the remnant is gathered. The gathering of the remnant is one of the themes of Scripture in its treatment of history. As each age comes to its harvest, not only is it overtaken by judgement, but that judgement also discloses those who are the sons of God. It is this disclosure which mediates God's call to the world to repent. The "sons of God" suffer with and for the world, and in their suffering stand revealed. Those who repent because of them bear witness that "by their stripes we are healed."

Again and again in the course of human history events take place which correspond to the happenings that John portrays. Indeed, the simple fact that the happenings in Revelation have been identified with event after event through the centuries is ample proof of the sureness with which John understood the principles that determine the divine governance of the world, and of the appositeness of the symbols which he employs. The Kingdom of God is something which has come, is coming, and is to come, with the promise of fulfilment in the future when the "Kingdom of the world has become the Kingdom of our Lord and his Christ."

The third section is a vision of the birth of Christ. Here we have a transition from that situation in which people face both the judgement and mercy of God into a situation in which God is seen in an active war with evil. God wars with the monsters, the trinity of evil, and overthrows them. The harvest of human history is reaped, and the great city in which people become adulterous and idolatrous is destroyed. In the midst of lamentations of people at the passing away of so much that they held dear, there comes down from heaven the eternal city into which have been gathered the honour and riches of the nations. Faith leaps across the chasms of time and sees the end-event as immediate and near.

Let us now go back and look a little more closely at the second and third sections, and select some of the important themes. In chapter 4 John looks through an opened door into heaven, and he sees things which shall be hereafter. He sees the throne of God and all history, like a sea, stretched out before him, smooth as glass. Today, history is like a boisterous, stormy sea, out of which emerge frightening creatures, evil creatures like those we read about in Daniel. But John sees history now as calm as glass. The Almighty Eternal God is Lord of all history and Lord of the universe. He is worshipped and adored by twenty-four elders representing the Old and New Testament Church, and by four creatures

representing all creation. The whole of creation is tamed and redeemed and now worships and adores Him who is on the throne. These are things which must be hereafter. What a tremendous message of triumph for a persecuted Church!

In chapter 5 we look back behind the process of history. We stand, as it were, at the beginning of time, and we see the unfolding of the drama of redemption. There is a book in Heaven in the midst of the throne. It is the Book of Destiny, a volume of ordered history and divine purpose written by God's hand in love and righteousness. No one, except the Lamb, can open the book. It is sealed with the seals of Almighty God. Only the Lamb of God can unravel the secret of human existence and the riddle of human history. What a tremendous vision we have here of the centrality of Christ and the Power of the Lamb. Christ, through his death and Resurrection, alone holds the key to all our lives, the key to history and to the universe.

There follows in chapter 6 the breaking of the six seals of the Book of Destiny by the Lamb of God. The first four reveal horses in the following order: the white horse, which is anti-Christ; a red horse, representing war; a black horse, representing food rationing; a pale horse, representing death and hell. The fifth seal reveals the Church that is persecuted in the world and cries out, "Lord, how long?", and, at the same time, it is clothed with the purity and righteousness of Christ. With the sixth seal there is both a heaven-quake and an earthquake. The astonishing thing is not only the earthquake, but the heaven-quake. This is a cosmic event. A movement runs through the whole universe. Even the stars are loosed from their courses. There is an upheaval among the spiritual powers. The world of spirit is shaken to its depths, and principalities and powers and spiritual wickedness in high places become unseated and dislodged. This is the wrath of the Lamb in response to the cry of his Church. God cares for his Church and responds at once to the prayers of his people.

Six seals of the Book of Destiny in the hand of God have now been broken. One more, the seventh, remains to be broken. Before that happens there is recounted a pause in chapter 7 between the events of the sixth and seventh seals. It is a pause not so much in world events as in the progress of the vision, when we are given a look behind the scenes of history and catch a glimpse of God's angel holding back the storms and tempests and afflictions about to break on the earth in all their fury until other angels seal the servants of God with his

protecting grace. In the Gospel story of Jesus and his disciples in the boat, the winds and the waves obeyed only the Saviour of men. It is the same here. There is absolutely nothing that happens in this world but God, in Christ Jesus, governs it and uses it in the purpose of his grace. The four winds from the four corners of the earth cannot blow and vent their rage as they like, but only as they are made to serve the Church of Jesus Christ. Christ's sovereign rule, and his love and protection of his Church, is the recurring emphasis of this book.

In chapter 8 the seventh seal is broken, and there is a ghastly silence in Heaven for half an hour in which the whole of creation seems to choke and swallow its breath in terror and awe. But the end is not yet. The last seal reveals still more aspects and involutions of world history. Out of the seventh seal there come seven angels with seven trumpets. The final woe breaks up into seven more. Here we have, in part at least, a repetition of the first seven series of visions and a repetition from a new angle, where God's judgement descends on all creation, as well as on men and women.

Before the first angel with the trumpet sounds, we are made to see further and deeper into the secrets of God. We are shown two things. First, John shows us that though for a time the dark powers of the world seem to triumph over the cause of God, the real power behind the world is the prayer of God's people mixed with the fire of God. John tells us that he saw the angel take the censor which was filled with the prayers of the saints, kindle it with fire from God's altar, and cast it on the earth. With that there were voices, thundering and lightning, and an earthquake. Then the seven angels began to sound their trumpets one after the other and to let loose seven plagues on the earth. From that it is clear that the real cause of the world's disturbance is the prayer of the Church mixed with the fire of God. The Church may be small and persecuted, but its prayers mixed with the fire of God shake and disturb the world. What an exhilarating message! What comfort for Christ's suffering Church!

Surely we in the Church today need to understand afresh the power of prayer. It is through prayer that the Spirit of God comes upon the Church in tongues of fire. It is through prayer that Satan falls like lightning to the ground. It is through prayer that the voice of the Gospel thunders through clouds of darkness. It is prayer that causes earthquakes and shakes history to its very foundations. That is the deep secret of God's Book of Destiny and the first fact revealed in

the opening of the seventh seal. Jesus Christ came not only to bring peace but a sword. He came to cast fire on the earth. All history is tortured by that fire burning at its heart. All history moves at the impulse of prayer. The real initiative of history is held by the prayers of the saints and the fire of God mixed with their prayers.

The second thing that John sees in these chapters is that the rest of mankind refuses to repent, even to its own eternal hurt.

Chapters 10 and 11 deal with the period between the sixth and seventh trumpets. Again we have a pause. Here we have an angel with a little book. This is a vision of the open Bible, the sovereign power of the written Word. John, like the rest of the Church, must eat the book. He must preach it, finding it both sweet and bitter. It is bitter because the preaching of it encounters trouble and persecution on the earth. How frequently a preacher today is tempted to hold back the Word of God because of the trouble it may cause. He is a peace-loving creature, yet the Word of God must come forth. It is God's fire. That is what Jeremiah found in the Old Testament.

John envisages a time when the outer courts of the Church's witness will be ravaged and trodden underfoot by unbelievers, and when the Church, ravaged and harrowed, will shrink to measurable proportions. Its worshippers will be able to live and bear witness only in sackcloth, which in this context means repentance. This is the moment of the Church's supreme power over mankind. An unreformed, unrepentant Church loses its grip over the world and quenches the Holy Spirit. A repentant Church is full of power. Such a repentant Church, with her prayer kindled by the fire of God, and with the mighty Word of God in her mouth, will seize such a hold upon the world that at last the great dragon will be raised from his abysmal lair and seek to destroy her as he tried to destroy her Lord.

The seventh angel sounds and a voice proclaims, "The kingdoms of this world have become the Kingdom of God and his Christ." With this we move on to the third section of the book.

In chapter 12 we have another panoramic view of world history, but this time from the perspective of the Kingdom of God. It is the same expanse of time or history that lies before us. Now, however, we look at it all from a higher dimension. God is actively at war with evil. Again we look right into Heaven and

see something of the eternal purposes of God and the way in which he works out the redemption of mankind through the ages. The child Jesus is born of a woman. Here we have a retelling of the story of the Incarnation within an apocalyptic setting. The woman clothed with the sun and with the moon under her feet is symbolic of Israel appearing before the gaze of the world as the great miraculous sign of God's intervention in humanity. She comes standing upon the reflected light of the Old Testament revelation, and she is clothed with the New Testament revelation which is as the sun shining in its strength. Out of this Israel of God there is born the Saviour who is Christ the Lord. There is war between God and the dragon as it launches its desperate attacks to destroy the child and God's purpose of Redemption.

The dragon is many headed; it keeps cropping up in history in many new guises. It deceives the world, and it accuses the brethren, the servants of God, keeping up that accusation day and night. John sees, however, that the servants of God overcome the devil, the dragon, by the blood of the Lamb, by the Word of their testimony, and because they love not their lives unto death. Here is faith.

In chapter 13 John gazes through the open door of heaven and looks down on earth where he sees two more monsters: the beast and the prophet. The beast is the earthly counterpart of the dragon, or the devil. John sees its embodiment in the totalitarian state of his day. This monster of evil actually dares to imitate the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. He displays a mortal wound that has been healed, and all the world wonders after him, bewitched by his miraculous powers and hypnotised by his Christian likeness. The beast is accompanied and served by the prophet, another monster of evil who pretends to be a lamb but speaks like a dragon. As the false prophet, he is the propaganda power of evil. Perhaps John is thinking of the powerful and popular call to Caesar worship. Together with the dragon, the beast and the prophet make up a demonic trinity of evil, seeking to imitate the Holy Trinity. This evil trinity has a name and a mark — 666.

In chapter 14 we see the triumph of the Gospel. Here we see those who have not worshipped the beast, the first-fruits of the harvest of the world, God's harvest. How desperately urgent it is for people to repent before Christ comes to reap his harvest. For that which is not of the harvest will be trodden under and cast out. Surely the Church today needs to recover this note of urgency in

her proclamation of the Gospel. If the Church has lost its note of urgency and anguished constraint, surely it is because it has detached the love of God from the judgement of God and failed to fully understand God's action in Christ at the Cross.

Chapters 15 and 16 are about the wrath of the Lamb. After the third interlude, seven angels pour out each of their bowls of wrath upon the earth. The angels issue in solemn procession from the sanctuary, where those who gained the victory in Christ sing the song of Moses and the Lamb and worship the Lord. The angels are the ministers, not of mere vengeance, but of the stern justice that is the counterpart of divine love.

This third series of calamities is not meant to be taken separately from the previous two, but all three are superimposed upon one another. With the seven seals and the seven trumpets we discovered that behind the outward fashion of history and its parade of evil powers the real forces were the power of the cross, the Word of God, the prayers of the saints, and the testimony of God's people. Now we see that shot through them all are the judgements of God upon people's defiant pride and godlessness. From this angle, the history of the world is seen to be the history of God's judgement upon it.

In chapters 17 and 18 we again see the trinity of evil: the dragon, the beast, and the false prophet. The dragon is John's apocalyptic way of describing the devil. The beast is the entrenchment of that power in the passions of men. It is the devil's human embodiment on earth. The false prophet is the devil's messiah whose lying spirit seduces the nations. In the climax of divine judgement, the trinity of evil is revealed to be the emergence in history of Babylon all over again, in which the nations of the earth are gathered up and united in one great empire. Now, to the sorrow of the nations, Babylon is overthrown.

Sometimes John speaks of Babylon as a wicked woman flirting with the nations; sometimes as a woman sitting upon the many waters of the nations, or upon a scarlet beast. Who, or what, is Babylon today? Though there is much that is baffling in all this welter of symbol and apocalyptic image, we can say that Babylon is the worship of the world, the deification of economic power and worldly security. It represents human collectivity in its pride and defiance of God. It is finally overthrown by God and swept away.

In chapters 19–22 we see how the great day of the Lord will dawn, when all the holy aspirations and holy yearnings of God’s creatures, when all the snatches of triumphant singing shall reach their fulfilment in a magnificent paean of praise and victory as history breaks into eternity, as the Word of God rides forth in complete sovereignty over all.

In chapter 19 we have the triumphant song of praise to Christ our King, together with the proclamation telling of the marriage of the Lamb and his Church, which is now perfected and arrayed in Christ’s righteousness. We also see the final overthrow of the beast and the false prophet who are thrown into the lake of eternal fire.¹²

Chapter 20 is perhaps, for many people, the most difficult in the book.¹³ It has to do with the prelude to eternity, which is mysteriously bound up with a thousand years. Again we need to remind ourselves that these are apocalyptic visions, not history. The thousand years is symbolic of a period of time, just as the 1,260 days in Revelation 11:3 and the three and a half days in Revelation 11:11 are not to be taken literally but are symbolic of a period of time. I believe that the thousand years is the period of time stretching from the first to the final advent of Christ.

Ever since the Incarnation, Crucifixion, Resurrection, Ascension, and Pentecost, the powers of evil have been defeated. Satan, the strong man in the parable,¹⁴ has been bound. Christ Jesus has the devil on a chain. Satan is alive and dangerous, but he can do nothing without our Lord’s permission. All power is in the hands of Christ. Christ holds the Book of Destiny. He controls everything, despite present outward appearances. That means that Christians, even now,

12 Here we may note that the Book of Revelation, despite its great use of symbolism, regards time as real, both for salvation and for judgement. There is time beyond death, time for the righteous in Christ and also for the damned.

13 Difficulty arises when people accept the symbolism of the earlier part of the Book of Revelation and accept that 1,260 days and three and half days are symbolic periods of time, and then mistakenly proceed to interpret a thousand years, and what follows, literally. The result of such mistaken interpretation has led to various dispensational theories.

14 See Matthew 12:28–29, Mark 3:23–27, and Luke 11:21–22.

although they are being persecuted, share in his victory over the world. They share in the triumph of the Resurrection.

All evil will be brought to a head, a final climax. So John tells us of a final desperate attempt on the part of Satan to delude the nations in the four quarters of the earth, from which he will gather them to battle against the Lord. In that ultimate spasm of wickedness, the devil will try his utmost to crush all that is of Christ. However, he will not succeed — he will be cast into the lake of fire.

In 20:11 a great white throne appears in Heaven, and the final judgement begins, which brings evil to its fulfilment and to its utter and absolute end.

In chapters 21 and 22 we are given visions of the eternal Kingdom. It is infinitely glorious and wonderful. There is a new Heaven and a new earth. Christ's glorious reign is manifest and complete.

In verse 19 of chapter 22 we also have this warning: "And if anyone takes words away from this book of prophecy, God will take away from him his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book." It is a remarkable promise! I believe that it should not only apply to the book of Revelation but to the whole Word of God as witnessed to in all Scripture.

As we have seen, the Book of Revelation is a prophetic word of the Lord to each generation of the Church. It is in full, harmonious continuity with the rest of Holy Scripture. In its joyful declaration of the victory of Jesus, the Lamb of God, over death and the devil, it speaks to our deepest questions and concerns. There is absolutely nothing that happens in this world but God, in Jesus Christ, governs it and uses it in the purpose of his grace. In his advent presence there is to be a new heaven and a new earth, a new creation which is the outworking of the cross in the teeth of all the principalities and powers of darkness. The Kingdom of God is something which has come, is coming, and is to come, with the future promise that the "Kingdom of the world has become the Kingdom of our Lord and his Christ." As such, it is a truly uplifting book and a great encouragement to faith. Would that God grant us ears to hear such an exhilarating and comforting message, and may we continue to wrestle with it prayerfully in openness to the boundless riches and blessings which are already ours in Christ.