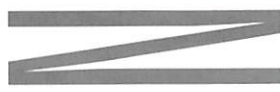
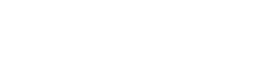




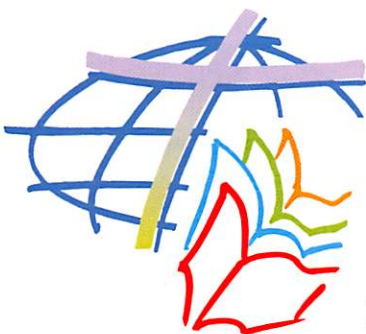
# DEIVERBUM



**Catholic Biblical Federation**



## The Revelation of John



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## EDITORIAL

### Dear Readers,

Bloodshed, war, wild animals, cosmic upheavals: the kaleidoscopic picture-world of John's Revelation terrifies and repels. The book seems almost unfit for spiritual reading. Nevertheless – or perhaps because of this disturbing content – the interest in apocalyptic literature is enormous. This is traditionally so at major turning points in history such as the dawn of a new millennium; though the interest is surely also there because the last book of the Bible deals with real and fundamental dimensions of human existence: the war between good and evil. Questions and anxieties, misinterpretations, and above all the misuse of apocalyptic literature represent no small challenge to the biblical apostolate.

But it is not only the symbolic language, which is no longer perspicuous to us moderns, that favors misunderstanding and misuse of Revelation; a fundamental misapprehension of the purpose of this book also creates barriers that hinder access to its thought. The two articles of Dieter Bauer offer exegetical information and reflections that make possible an understanding of this book and that lay the foundations for a 'wholesome' interpretation. Healthy aspects of apocalyptic are also worked out by Werner Thiede in his article 'Damaged Apocalyptic', wherein he also contrasts these with an 'unhealthy' apocalyptic of the kind often found in the interpretation of the Christian sects. That Revelation as resistance literature from below, written in a time of fierce persecution, bolsters hope and breathes a fearless spirit is brought out in the article of Felix Porsch. The central message of

the last book of the Bible comes down to this: even if evil is actively at work in the present time – it is not the last word.

Under the rubric 'Life of the Federation', the present issue does not give the usual news from the various regions; instead, you will find here a discussion of a survey sent out to bishops, in the context of the Bishop's Synod, on the theme of the bishop as minister of God's Word, the results of which have been assembled and evaluated by the president of the CBF, Bishop Wilhelm Egger. The CBF sees dialogue with the bishops and active involvement at the level of bishops' conferences as an important task.

The rubric 'Books and Materials' contains a select bibliography on the theme of the issue, in various languages, which it is hoped will provide further incentives for your work on the topic of Revelation. In addition, the section contains references to new and interesting publications.

Oppression and privation, sin and death are part of our world and at times even seem to define it. That in the end stand liberation, salvation and the fullness of life is the faith-conviction Revelation communicates. And that this end-time is not merely some far away, future occurrence, but begins already in the today – this is what we as Christians are allowed to hope, to experience, and to live. Let us be people of apocalyptic vision in this sense.

*Alexander M. Schweitzer*



## A Book with Seven Seals?

### Introduction to the Revelation of John

DIETER BAUER

*Alongside the symbolic and imaginative language, which is often difficult to decipher, it is above all a misconception of the intention of Revelation that hinders access to its thought. Its visions are often read as predictions of the future rather than as interpretation of the present. The two contributions by Dieter Bauer offer a condensed introduction to Revelation and, with their exegetical observations, lay the foundations for a wholesome interpretation.*

*Since 1981, the theologian Dieter Bauer has been education consultant in the German Catholic Biblical Association (Katholisches Bibelwerk) in Stuttgart, Germany. For over a decade he was editor of the periodical "Bibel und Kirche" and he has made significant contributions to the concept of an introductory course in the Old and New Testaments. He has dealt with apocalyptic literature in a number of courses and publications.*

For most Christians the Book of Revelation is initially "a book with seven seals". Any engagement with it is likely to arouse suspicion today because it is primarily sects and peripheral church groups that have shown an interest in this book and that have drawn a variety of conclusions from it. The Book of Revelation (= Rev) belongs then also to the most frequently misused books of the New Testament. Why is this so? For one thing, the book contains rich symbolic and pictorial language that does not immediately speak to us

today. Such language is simply too foreign to our way of thinking.

The book also contains many allusions that were highly relevant at the time the book was written but that would require explanation today.

A third point that makes access to this writing difficult is a fundamental misconception of the book's purpose or intent. Very often, for example, the visions of this book are read as if they were intended as a kind of prognosis of the future that must be deciphered only with refer-

ence to our own era. This is the same misunderstanding we often encounter with respect to the prophetic writings of the Old Testament. Like the prophets, the seer John is not attempting to interpret the future but the present (i.e., his own present). His purpose is to console and encourage oppressed communities, his sisters and brothers in the Faith, to arouse their hope and to strengthen their faith.

John is in exile on the island of Patmos off the coast of Asia Minor. He writes this book to seven communities in Asia Minor to whom he must be known. He is in exile "for having preached God's word and witnessed for Jesus" (Rev 1:9). This makes it possible at least to surmise that the Christians were being oppressed by a State-authorized persecution. But what would this situation of persecution look like up close?

### The Situation of Oppressed Communities

According to early ecclesiastical tradition Rev was written toward the end of the reign of the Roman emperor Domitian (81-96). Domitian was famous for the fact that, like no other Roman emperor before him, he fostered emperor worship; indeed, he even tried to push through a full-blown divinization of the emperor. For example, he would have the official circular letters sent to his officials begin with the formal introduction: "Our Lord and God commands...". For any Christian such an expression, applied to an earthly ruler, would of course have been a scandal!

But nowhere did emperor worship find such a high profile as in Asia Minor itself, that is, in the Roman province of Asia. In Ephesus, the provincial capital, Domitian was honored by his very own temple that had been erected to him there. And excavations have unearthed a head and an arm of an imperial





cult-image that belonged to a many times life-size statue.

Now because emperor worship was no mere religious event - in religious matters the Roman empire was in fact extremely tolerant - but above all also a political exercise, one can easily imagine how quickly people who took no part in local temple cult came to be thought of as enemies of the State. This is precisely what happened to Christians who refrained from honoring the emperor as "Lord and God". They were denounced, ended up in prison, and in the worst cases even suffered the death penalty for insubordination to the Emperor.

### Character of the Letter

So thus it is in this situation that John writes this book - or rather, this circular letter to the communities in the province of Asia. The individual communities to which this letter as a whole is addressed receive each a letter of their own addressed to them at the beginning of chapter 2. It is interesting to notice too how John understands himself: he is indeed writing these letters, but they are being dictated to him by Christ himself. This also explains the book-title that opens the text itself: "the revelation of Jesus Christ" (1:1). Functionally speaking, the purpose of these letters is to prepare the communities for what follows in the book. Each letter begins with the words: "I know you", and proceeds to outline specific conditions in the community in question. There follows in each case an appeal for perseverance and a promise of rewards for those who stand firm. Thus prepared, the hearers can now allow themselves to enter into the visionary depictions of the second and larger part of the book.

### The Throne Room Vision

In chapters 4-5 John portrays his vision of the throne room of God. As a kind of overture to what is to

follow the real power, whose presence no one can withstand, is here brought onto center stage. For the audience it thus becomes comfortably clear from the start that no power on earth can even come close to the power of God, let alone pose any kind of a challenge to it.

Next we hear of a book with seven seals that God holds in his hand and that evidently contains his salvation plan. It is the contents of this book that those on earth who are undergoing suffering and persecution are most eager to learn. Yet no one is found worthy to reveal God's plan of salvation, so that the seer John, who is as eager as anyone to join in contemplating the contents of the book, must weep profoundly.

But just then he spots a Lamb, who is found worthy for the task; and this new figure very obviously represents Christ. He alone is fully endowed with power to reveal the secrets of God's counsels. For the audience this means that as community of Jesus Christ they are co-initiates into the salvation plan of God and they can now find out what it has to tell them about their situation. By the very fact that they now understand what is going on in heaven, they can also understand what is happening on earth.

### The Terrifying Visions

The opening of the seven seals that now follows unleashes a drama upon earth that is unfolded in three times seven scourges: the opening of the seven seals, the seven trumpet-blasts and the seven bowls of wrath. The significance of the three-fold repetition of the seven scourges remains mysteriously suspended. It does not amount to a three-fold repetition of the same thing. But at the same time no clear development is to be observed. Most probably these three series of scourges are to be understood as circles; ever new aspects are unlocked, clarified, ever new images

are sought to explain the same situation.

And interpretation of the communities' situation is what these visions of the scourges are all about. Much that is said is very relevant to the hearers; many of the things the seer John is playing with in his pictorial descriptions can already be seen on the horizon of the communities' imminent future.

In the middle of the book we find the famous vision of the woman with the dragon. A great sign appears in heaven: a woman, clothed with the sun, with the moon beneath her feet and a crown of twelve stars over her head. She is with child and is crying out in the pangs of child-birth. And another sign appears in heaven, a red dragon, who is waiting for the child to be born so he can devour him.

The sign of the woman symbolizes chosen Israel, the true Israel in its setting apart as people of God, from whom the Messiah has come. The Messiah is indeed persecuted, but the powers of evil ultimately can not touch him, because he has been taken up to God. The woman too, the true Israel, as the Church understands herself, is under the protection of God.

The battle of angels that is then described merely spells out again some of the consequences of the persecution of the child and of the woman. God himself steps in and causes the downfall of the dragon through the agency of the heavenly host. The decisive blow is dealt to the powers of evil and the saving victory is here. However, all of this takes place in heaven. On earth, the devil is still at large. Nevertheless, for the audience it is comforting to know how the slaughter now taking place on earth will turn out in the end: against the power of evil.

Nevertheless, evil is a terrifying reality and to this reality the author devotes his attention at great length in the following chapters.



## The Unmasking of the Imperial Power

In chapter 13 a beast rises up out of the sea - a beast who derives his power from the dragon. This beast is described very much in the words of the apocalypse of Daniel, in the sense that he combines in himself the hideousness of all four of the beasts of Daniel 7. There can be no doubt whatsoever that the seer sees here the Roman empire, and that he wishes to explain that this empire derives its power ultimately from Satan. The dragon is also the one to whom worship belongs because he has empowered such a monster. The entire chapter is one great parody on the Lamb who takes his place on the throne in the throne room vision of Rev 5. This is precisely what makes the beast so dangerous in the eyes of the seer John: that he is such a good mimic:

- Just as the Lamb sits on the throne holding the sealed book in his hand and thereby receives power, so is power handed over to the beast through the dragon.
- Just as the Lamb is the ruler of people from every tribe, nation and tongue whom he has bought through his blood, so the beast rules over tribes, peoples, tongues and nations.
- Just as the heavenly beings offer homage to the Lamb as representatives of the whole of creation, so all the inhabitants of the earth fall to the ground before the beast and sing to him a song of praise.
- Just as the Lamb is recognized through the banquet of his slaughter, so the beast too carries a deathly wound that has been healed.

Through this device of parody the seer unmasks the Roman world empire for what it is - a bad copy. Only those who "are not written in the book of life of the Lamb" fall for this copy and render him homage.

Those who are able to resist, will suffer harsh persecution, but because their names are written in the book of life they need not fear. They know that everything is contained in God's plan of salvation. No call for resistance is heard. Christians are summoned to endurance in their witness of faith, and also to take upon themselves the inescapable consequences.

After the beast that comes out of the sea John sees a beast rising up out of the earth. It has two horns like a lamb and looks deceptively similar to the Christ Lamb. This beast attempts to induce all the inhabitants of the earth to worship the first beast. He even works spectacular signs and wonders and seduces many thereby. He has a statue of the first beast erected and sees to it that all who refuse to worship this statue are killed.

I think that at least here the background of emperor worship shines through with full clarity. Here the author is speaking of the emperor's eager henchman. What John then also sees coming - namely, the vision of all, small and great, rich and poor, free and slave being forced like slaves to carry the seal of the beast on forehead and hand - probably did not literally correspond to reality, but what was meant by this observation is clear enough: all are becoming slaves to the Roman imperial power. And anyone who refuses to become a slave, says John, will not be allowed to sell or to buy, will be completely boycotted, will not be able to enter any of the commercial guilds, because they are all tied in with the cultic celebrations. This is reality for many Christians: those who refuse to take part in emperor worship are being excluded from economic life. Or, stated in reverse: economic life functions only where the emperor is acknowledged. Or, more revealingly still: the real interests of the power holders are profit and gain; this is what it is all about, not incense and

prayers. Under cover of incense smoke the pursuit of business can only proceed more cleverly and efficiently. Behind the whole thirteenth chapter of Revelation stands the anxious question: alongside God, how can such a monstrous anti-godly power as the Roman empire was at the time exist? John's response is: "this is all a mimic of God's reign!". It is not as though we have two powers here, engaged in battle on equal footing with one another; it is not as if God's realm is simply heaven, and that of Satan, the earth. Such a view would be a serious misunderstanding of Revelation.

John is saying that there is only one power, that of God, and that the victory has always been his. The second power, the one that appears to exist, is built on lying and deceit; it is not real. In other passages of Rev, John even speaks of its being already condemned and destroyed. But this is only the one side of the coin.

This violence that is grounded in lie and deceit is also however very real violence. It derives its reality from the fact that it is accepted: this is precisely what John is unmasking. He is pointing out these deceptive mechanisms, and where the real power lies. It is enlightenment work that John is engaged in here. He is unmasking the devices of the hold on power enjoyed by the Roman Empire, with the intention of thereby removing its legitimacy and the recognition it receives. This is subversive work. It is a non-violent affair, even if the violence it invites is no less real. This State violence is an object of very real experience and John would certainly not have belonged to those who would have denied the existence of the devil, as so commonly happens today. He took this power very seriously, but he saw through it and pointed out that it owes its existence only to faith, or rather to gullibility and superstition. And his aim was to remove this foundation from it.



## Consolation or Stringing Along?

I think it is particularly appropriate at this time to address an often expressed suspicion that all of this is nothing more than one great stringing along under the guise of a comforting word. The powerless, meanwhile, become more powerless still, as their right to rebel is denied them, and in addition everything that happens is divinely legitimated in terms of God's great, impervious plan of salvation.

I understand how this suspicion might arise, particularly since such "comforting" attempts are only too familiar to us from our own church history.

With reference to this suspicion I would like to point out just one circumstance that I believe to be very important, namely, the question regarding the author of such texts.

There is a world of difference whether a text like this is intentionally generated by the powerful themselves or whether it arises among the powerless. A Christian text can by no means stem from the powerful, since Christians are powerlessness personified, if they are following Jesus. John introduces himself with the words: "I, John, your brother who share with you in Jesus the persecution and the kingdom and the patient endurance, was on the island of Patmos because of the word of God and the

testimony of Jesus" (1:9). Only one who knows suffering can effectively console. When it comes "from the top down", consolation becomes only a form of stringing along. I regard this as an extremely important distinction, because by it the responsibility of the preacher comes into play in an entirely different way. God's word can become a lie in the mouth of the powerful without a single letter having been altered. This is why Revelation rings true only in situations where the following of Jesus is really being lived and where its consequences are pressingly palpable.

(Transl.: L. Maluf)



# A Fireworks Display of Images...

## Essay of an Overview on the Revelation of John \*

DIETER BAUER

If one attempts to construct an overview of the Book of Revelation (Rev) confusion can easily set in. This little book presents itself as something too colorful, too multifaceted:

Like a "fireworks display of images", one picture gives way to another; above, in the middle, and below something is always in motion; a drama plays itself out, with events happening in temporal succession, and yet somehow simultaneously; a

logical construction is impossible to make out at first sight.

This is also the reason why even today in exegesis the question of the inner ordering and structure of this little book is hotly debated. There are almost as many attempts of an outline as there are commentaries on Revelation. Since it can hardly be the intention of this article to add a further attempt to those that have already been made, we will supply here mainly an overview of the vari-

ous literary forms and patterns of the seer and an introduction to his compositional techniques.

The prints on the two following pages will illustrate what has been said.

### The Letter Form

The first thing we notice is the letter-form into which the book has been brought. Rev begins with an epistolary introduction (1:4-8) which immediately follows the foreword, and





it ends with a final greeting of the kind with which we are familiar from 1 Corinthians (16:22f) or Hebrews (13:25): "The grace of the Lord Jesus be with you all!". Moreover, the book contains in explicit letter form a further series of letters that are addressed to the seven communities in the province of Asia. This suggests that the contents of Rev as a kind of "circular letter" is to be made known in these seven communities, which symbolically represent all the Christian communities in the province.

## The Patterns of Seven

What first comes to light here as a structural feature in the seven letters, namely the series of seven itself, returns time and time again throughout the entire book: in the seven seals, the seven trumpets, the seven bowls of the divine wrath very clearly, but also, in a less obvious way, in the seven visions at the end of the book (each introduced with "Then I saw..."; 19:11, 17, 19; 20:1, 4, 11; 21:1) or the seven beatitudes found in the book as a whole.

Such numerical patterns are important for memorizing; but they also represent a kind of "code-language", that can be deciphered only by "those in the know":

"Seven" is the number of perfection, the sum of the divine number "three" and the number of the world "four" (four living creatures: 4:6, etc.; four apocalyptic riders: 6:2-8; four corners of the earth, four winds: 7:1).

Derived from the number "seven" is

its half: "three and a half". "Three and a half" is the limited time (limited, i.e., by God), that comes out in many variations: as three and a half years = "a time and two times and half a time" (12:14; cf. Dan 7:25; 12:8) = "42 months" (11:2; 13:5) = "1260 days" (11:3; 12:6). The number "six" is likewise indirectly derived from seven and finds its expression in the "number of the beast": 666 (13:18). The beast aspires to divine status ("three"-fold) and perfection ("seven"), but manages to achieve only "six", three times, a sign of its anti-God insolence.

## Insertions

Now these series of sevens are not simply successively narrated images and occurrences; rather, from time to time they are interrupted by "insertions". Thus, before the opening of the seventh seal we find a scene of the marking with the seal of the chosen ones of Israel (7:1-17), and the opening of the seventh seal is not simply followed by another event, as happened in the case of the first six seals, but there comes instead a "great pause": "for

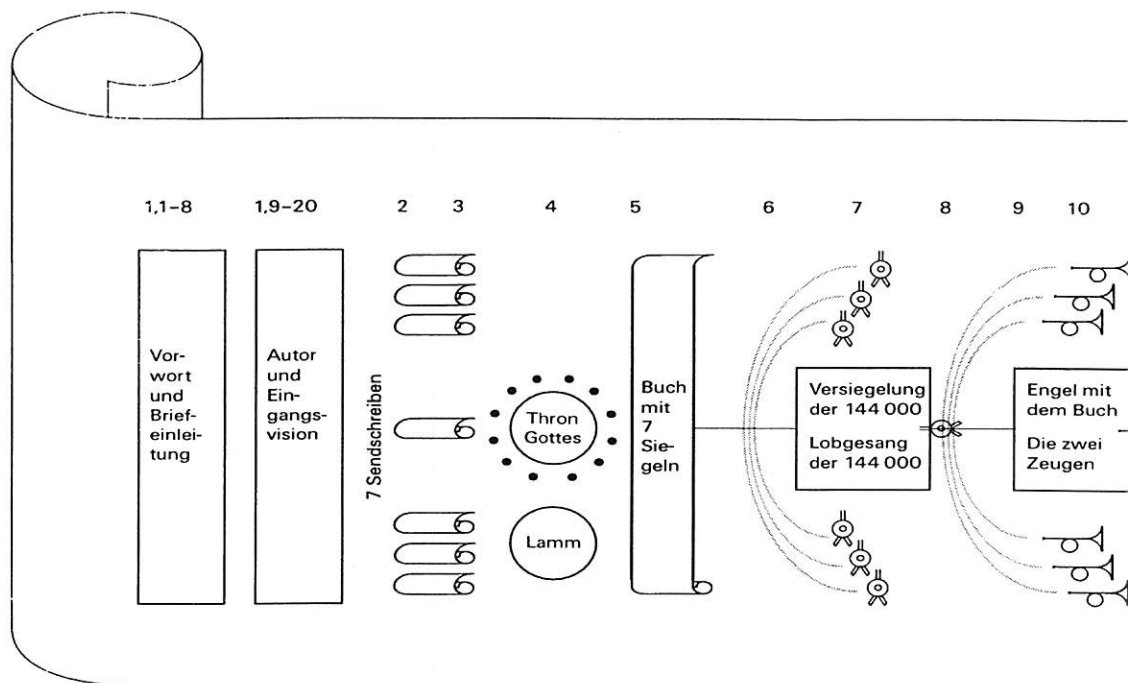
about half an hour" (8:1). After this a new series of seven opens with the handing over of seven trumpets to the seven angels. But before these trumpets are sounded, "another angel" is introduced, one who "brings the prayers of all the saints into God's presence". It is only after this "insertion" that "the seven angels make ready to blow the trumpets" (8:6).

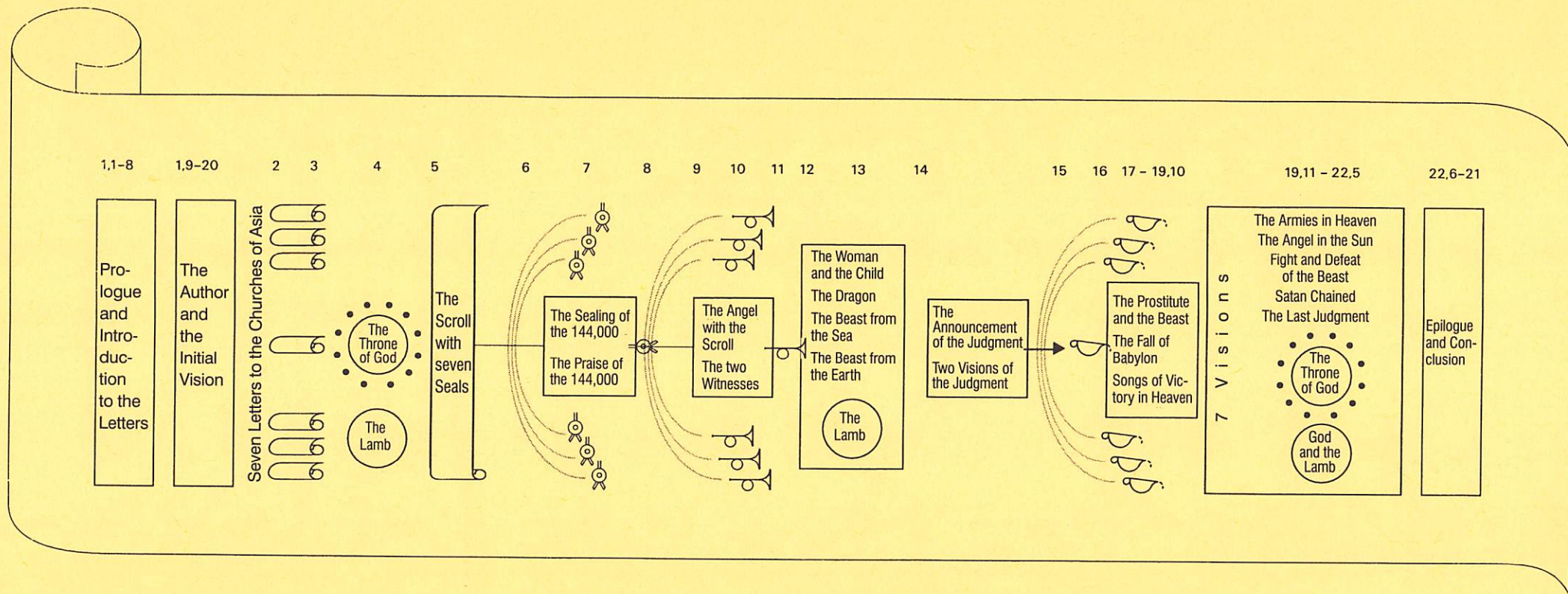
Again, before the blowing of the seventh trumpet we find another such "insertion" (10:1-11:14): the seventh trumpet is announced by a "mighty angel", who gives the seer a small book to eat; then the temple is measured and the coming of two witnesses is announced who will meet their death in Jerusalem.

## Anticipations

Actually, this "insertion" belongs already to the visions which will then be described in Chapter 12. Through the technique of "insertion" the apocalyptic writer to some extent anticipates what will be further developed at a later time.

A similar anticipation is found before the seven bowls of wrath: the









judgment of Babylon is already announced in 14:6-20, before the outpouring of the seventh bowl has been carried out (17:1-19, 10). Such "anticipations" also create a degree of tension.

While our Western mentality would more spontaneously expect a linear type of composition, where one image is placed immediately after another, the seer John works instead with insertions and interpolations, with anticipations and developments. Since these dynamic literary techniques - at least at first sight - have a potentially confusing effect on the audience, the author also uses some "stabilizing" devices. Among these, e.g.:

### Repetitions

Thus the *Lamb* not only takes center stage in the throne room vision (5:1ff), and then proceeds to open the seals of the book (6:1ff), it also appears again with its following in 14:1ff and, at the end of the book, in the "heavenly Jerusalem", together with God himself (21:22ff).

The throne of God too plays a central role not only in the throne-room

vision that frames the terrifying visions, but also within the horror visions themselves, the throne keeps coming back into view. In this way the readers and hearers are reassured about who has the real power (7:9-7; 14:1-5; 19:1-10).

It is also evident that each of the series of scourges - the seven seals, the seven trumpets, the seven bowls of wrath - is brought to a close with a hymn before the throne of God. These hymns likewise show that all the terrors seen in the visions should not really terrorize at all. People who are able to sing when in suffering, when under persecution, or in prison, are really more powerful than their persecutors.

### Framing Devices

This confident assurance that the persecutors ultimately can do no harm to the believers is conveyed by the seer likewise by the way he frames the visions of terror: God, "who is, who was and who is to come" (1:4) is the all-powerful one at the beginning of the book in the heavenly throne-room vision (Rev

4f) and he exercises his power at the end in the "heavenly Jerusalem" (Rev 21f); he is the "Alpha and the Omega" (1:8; 21:6; 22:13).

### Relecture

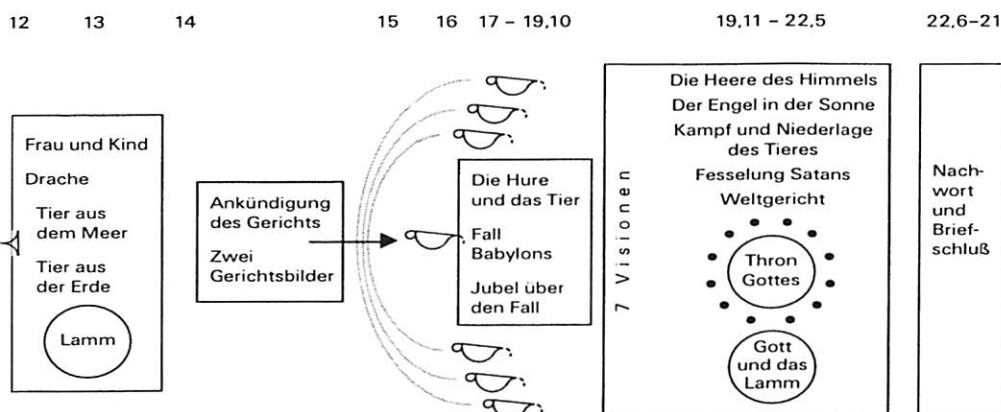
Looking at Revelation as a whole, John takes his reader and hearer on a journey, on a pilgrimage, which, like that of the Exodus, leads through scourges and plagues, into the promised Land, into "company with God", into the "heavenly Jerusalem". For the reader or hearer who is knowledgeable about Scripture this is no unfamiliar journey. They know a lot already. The apocalyptic writer is giving his audience assurance and comfort. They find themselves "in their own world", in their Holy Scriptures.

The direct allusion to the plagues of the Exodus narrative is especially drawn out in the scourges unleashed by the seven trumpet blasts, but also in connection with the bowls of wrath: hail (8:7; cf. Exod 9:23ff), water to blood (8:8; 16:3f; cf. Exod 7:20f), the darkening of the sun, the moon and the stars (8:12; cf. Exod 10:22), the locusts (9:3; cf. Exod 10:13ff), the painful sores (16:2; cf. Exod 9:9f), darkness (16:10; cf. Exod 10:21f), the frogs (16:13; cf. Exod 8:1ff).

In this *relecture*, this "re-reading" of the Exodus story the readers experience "their" plagues and live out their own exodus - not now out of Egypt, but at the heart of the Roman empire (*Pablo Richard*).

\* This article first appeared in *Bibel heute*, 3. Quartal 1997: *Die Apokalypse des Johannes*.

(Transl.: L. Maluf) □





# Damaged Apocalyptic

## The Book of Revelation in the Interpretation of the Christian Sects

WERNER THIEDE

*A Christological interpretation of apocalyptic perspectives in Revelation, as in other parts of Holy Scripture, helps to highlight aspects of the work that are useful for the understanding of the Gospel and to marginalize aspects that can lead to a sectarian mentality or practice. This article compares the structures of a wholesome apocalyptic with the interpretation of Revelation in the sects.*

*Dr. theol. Werner Thiede is pastor of the Evangelical-Lutheran Church in Bavaria and graduate of the Theological Faculty of the University of Erlangen.*

The last book of the Bible is, in a way, the first for many groups on the fringes of Christianity. In itself, this does not necessarily mean that they stand the Bible on its head. After all, the last things - and these are to a considerable degree the subject of Rev - are undoubtedly of primary importance for faith. It does however suggest that, as a consequence of the priority given to Rev, other central faith-expressions, which are also of the highest eschatological significance, are obliged to take a back seat. The very questionable reduction of the Christian message, inherent in this preference for the last book in the Bible, thus often attests a sectarian tendency.

To be sure, sectarian over-valuation often reminds the churches of an undervaluation, on its side, that is likewise problematic. As it is, the suppression of apocalyptic is a dominant characteristic of the modern consciousness, and it has left

its mark on theology and church in many ways as well. A faith that regards itself as progressive and contemporary no longer wishes to deal with a demolition brought about by a transcendent agency from without; likewise, in the post-modern era, the "end of history" is in any case conceived in the sense of an ongoing time process without dramatic rupture. In line with this taboo, the suppression of individual death has also been sharply on the increase; this phenomenon has been observed and, in a variety of ways, confirmed by philosophers and sociologists throughout the whole of the 20th century. Comparatively little reflection has taken place on the very widespread suppression of a possible world-death. But both of these instances of suppression of real threat have the same cause; they are based on the fact that people have taken leave of the God with whom is closely linked the hope of a resurrection from the

dead and a saving completion of a transitory world reality. Segments of modern theology have also participated in this leave-taking.

Now it is well known that suppressions allow strange excesses to arise and to replace the suppressed reality. To this extent the affinity for apocalyptic in the modern sects belongs to the dark side of our "enlightened" world and our "contemporary" church. Critical incidents in the last quarter of the twentieth century have made it impossible to simply look the other way: mass suicides of small religious groups whose leaders have consciously worked out a specific interpretation of Revelation! Events of this kind give a certain urgency to the question: what are some typical features of a "sectarian" approach to the last book in the Bible? Why is it that this book so strongly appeals to every variety of sect and sectarian mentality?

### Pitfalls in Revelation

One could begin by reflecting on the fact that Revelation is the only book of the Bible that makes something like a claim to verbal inspiration for itself already in its introduction. Here an immediate revelation event, based on communications and visions, is even more ostentatiously announced than in comparable prophetic-apocalyptic passages of Holy Scripture. And this corresponds in many ways to the function of visionary or seer as these offices are authoritatively claimed by modern prophets or sectarian leaders.

Then too, this book offers an abundance of images and symbols, which on the one hand elude "exact analysis and clear interpretation" because of their obscurity, and on the other hand, for this very reason, call more urgently for interpretative clarification. So-called "sects" have as a defining characteristic that they claim to possess the only cor-



rect hermeneutical key to the understanding of this symbolic discourse. The book of Revelation is thus endowed with the capacity, more effectively than any other book of the Bible, to solidify the exclusive claims by marginal religious communities to the understanding of Holy Scripture. Their engagement in this interpretative process is of course at clear variance with the instruction of Christ in Chapter 22 to neither add to nor detract from the book.

The apocalyptically grounded ethical rigorism of Revelation is another link with the sectarian mentality. If one understands the concept of sect not simply in a pejorative sense, but in the sense of a community of committed believers with a distinctly "otherworldly" life-goal, standing firm against the established church, the State, the society, yes, even the world (Ernst Troeltsch), it will immediately appear how close a natural affinity the so-called sects have to apocalyptic thinking. The inner conviction of not belonging to a world destined to catastrophic downfall is an absolute prerequisite for the formation and preservation of "special communities". They understand themselves, in accordance with ideals of holiness, as particularly obligated to a lived imminent expectation. Jesus' preference for the hot or the cold and his threat to vomit the lukewarm out of his mouth are thus quite to their liking and bolster their critical attitude toward the main-line churches. They interpret urgings to keep their distance from the whore of Babylon in this sense.

It is the horrendous threats of judgment of the properly apocalyptic visions that sectarian groups consistently apply not to themselves but rather to those from whom they have separated, or who have separated from them, i.e., the "renegades". In connection with the ever present fear of judgment the door is left wide open for tendencies to a

"works righteousness", that finds support in a few passages of Revelation.

Moreover, the historical situation of the persecuted communities at the time of John provides a welcome analogy to the oppression sometimes experienced, from a subjective point of view, by these marginal groups of Christians and religious minorities.

Importantly too, the motifs of election, particularly highlighted in the last book of the Bible, e.g. in the number 144,000 or the participants in the first resurrection, are suited to the cultivation of a sectarian consciousness: they bolster an elitist self-consciousness and supply stamina for a life of deliberate unworldliness.

Moreover, Revelation, like every apocalypse, encourages people to focus with particular intensity on the totality of the world process, and consequently on the meaning of the whole, in an absolute sense. Holistic perspectives such as sectarians and esoterics think they can offer, beyond enlightened rationality, take up quite comfortable residence in the shadow of Revelation. And all too near lies the danger that such a holistic approach will cross over into totalitarianism.

### **Structures of Wholesome Apocalyptic**

The above-named points indicate the dangers that result from a sectarian, an "unhealthy" apocalyptic understanding. If we can speak in this sense with Ulrich Körtner of a "damaged apocalyptic", it would be well to simultaneously expose the contours of a "healthy" apocalyptic. Three fundamental building blocks of early Christian apocalyptic stand out. These are central not only to New Testament apocalyptic as a whole, but also and specifically to Revelation itself:

In the first place, individuals who cherish apocalyptic hopes are convinced that their personal histories as well as the stories of their communities and of the whole of humanity, in spite of present or imminent crises, are not moving aimlessly along toward the void, will not end in utter chaos. Rather, God himself determines the meaning and the end of time.

Secondly, this same idea can be put in more concrete terms: in contrast to mythology and secular world-views that look forward in the short or long term to the end of everything that is or, in a best-case scenario, imagine a cyclical sequence of coming to be and passing away, those who have an apocalyptic faith trust in the promised completion of the created universe. They believe in a universal goal set for all of creation. Accordingly, they await a time when all things will be made right in a final and definitive way, either in terms of the executed judgment of God, or in terms of a more inclusive hope for a universal reconciliation.

Thirdly, an apocalyptic outlook is accompanied by the conviction that we are living in the end time, in the time immediately preceding the in-breaking of God's new world – which obligates us to an ethically lofty and actively missionary lifestyle. This understanding of the end time in more or less quantitative terms, which often leads into speculative calculations regarding the end of history, can also be interpreted in more qualitative terms. For those who think apocalyptically time is always "end-time", that is time fulfilled, time already qualified by the Spirit of the new, promised world.

### **Characteristics of "Unwholesome" Apocalyptic**

If these three fundamental building blocks characterize a "wholesome" apocalyptic consciousness, such as is basic to New Testament thought,





but also to any biblically grounded piety in history and in the present life of the Christian church, we can draw the following conclusions regarding the features of "damaged apocalyptic": it is present where these three fundamental building blocks have been deformed, indeed misused - for the purposes of self-glorification whether of the existence of the group or of the individual. While such distortions are found only in very marginal allusions in the New Testament (and notably in a few passages of Revelation too), they are almost universally encountered in the so-called sects, where they tend also to play a central role. The following three misconceptions of apocalyptic consciousness, above all, would correspond antithetically to the "healthy" forms:

The first building block, namely the idea that God determines the meaning and end of time, is converted into an arrogant election-mystery consciousness: God has carefully selected and destined for salvation precisely this one group, this particular leadership and these believers.

Similarly, the second building block, that the decisive element of the future is called fulfillment, not catastrophic downfall, is negatively employed and eschatological expectation is developed to a significant degree in terms of the extermination of unbelievers and of the refractory. The self-conscious satisfaction of those in heaven is, as it were, better savored against the background of the scene of damnation dramatically portrayed. The wicked world and its representatives, who here below continue to oppress the devout in a variety of ways, will be consigned to the flames of hell by God, or, if possible, by the now mightily empowered holy ones themselves!

The third building block, essentially a qualitatively conceived expecta-

tion of the end, will be distorted to become the quantitative idea that the holy ones have special access to a knowledge, imparted only to them, of the course of the end-time events. The deciphering of the map of events determined by the exigencies of salvation history is then closely linked, as a general rule, with a self-serving interpretation of Holy Scripture.

In modern times religious apocalyptic expectation is predominantly of this distorted form because theology and the churches have largely relinquished it to sectarian groups. But it is worth reflecting that the above named distortions have a considerable basis in the Book of Revelation itself. The negative aspects by no means all rest on sectarian distortion. Already in the early church, as is well known, Revelation was not integrated into the New Testament canon without difficulty. Later, to cite but one example, Martin Luther in his lecture on Revelation in the September Bible of 1552 complained that it gave such "hard" directives and threats. "I can't really get into Revelation. And this is adequately explained by the fact that I do not regard the book very highly because Christ is neither taught nor recognized in it. So I will stick with the books that offer me Christ bright and clean". Later, Luther backed away somewhat from this harsh judgment and he came up with a personal interpretation of apocalyptic symbolism, applying it to church history - an interpretation which then developed an emphasis on arbitrary naming of particular heretics, sects and opponents. The Reformer was of course right not only with respect to "others" when he observed that "quite enough tactless things are brewed into the text from their own heads".

### **The Hermeneutical Key: Jesus Christ**

It was natural, and indeed inevitable for the hermeneutical approach

to Revelation to be marked by a certain degree of arbitrariness before the historical critical method of exegesis came along. Modern scholarship has not of course given us full and definitive clarity on everything, but we are certainly far better equipped than we were before to understand the concrete historical and inner-biblical references in the seer John's world of symbols and images. Nevertheless, and indeed for this very reason, the temptation in our times to employ his apocalypse in a sectarian and arbitrary fashion is once again great. On the one hand, much of the book remains as exegetically unresolved now as it was before, and on the other hand the historical relatedness of its contents as such invites to a methodical re-application of this still highly provocative book of the Bible - in the conviction that the seer on the island of Patmos already intended his words, with their undoubtedly time-conditioned images, to refer also, or perhaps even exclusively, to the end-time of today.

The correct interpretation of the book of Revelation remains a profoundly theological question in the end. Those who have recognized that the heart of the Gospel message resides in the love of a God who communicates himself unconditionally, a love revealed through Jesus Christ, are equipped to appropriate the apocalyptic perspectives in the last book of the Bible with balance and discernment, just as they do with other parts of the Bible. They are able to highlight the "healthy" aspects, those that serve a proper evangelical understanding, and to give proportionately less emphasis to those aspects that can lead to a sectarian mentality. Where this is done successfully, sectarian claims on Revelation find the wind effectively taken out of their sails.

(Transl.: L. Maluf)





## Revelation as "Subversive Literature"

FELIX PORSCH

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*From 1984 till 1999 he was professor of New Testament at the theological faculty of Sankt Augustin.*

*Among his best-known publications are a Commentary on the Gospel of John and an Introduction to the Theology of the New Testament.*

In the past year I was touring Syria and Lebanon with a Bible group. At the border of Syria and Lebanon our Syrian guide was being exchanged for a Lebanese guide. The Syrian bus-driver was still with his bus and in our company. As the Lebanese guide greeted us and introduced himself, he would allude, in the course of his conversation, to the "Swiss" (sometimes using the expression "big sister"), whose presence, he informed

us, would be observed everywhere here and who had approximately 30,000 soldiers in Lebanon. It soon dawned on us that "the Swiss" was really his way of referring to the Syrian occupation force, but because the Syrian driver was within earshot he was deliberately avoiding any direct reference to the Syrians ("the enemy is listening!"). This incident reminded me immediately of the "encoding methods" of apocalyptic writers and their "Sitz im Leben".

### The Contemporary-Historical, Politico-Religious Presuppositions of Apocalyptic Literature

It is not by accident that the apocalyptic literature known to us originated in times of violent oppression and social and religious upheaval. This is as true of the Jewish literature from the middle of the second century B.C. as it is of the New Testament book of Revelation. A look at the peculiar character of Jewish apocalyptic and the societal conditions that gave rise to it can contribute then to a better understanding of Revelation.

### The Threat to Jewish Identity from Hellenization

From the year 198 B.C. Palestine was under the dominion of the (Syrian) Seleucids who had broken away from the Egyptian rule of the Ptolemies. As is always the case with an occupation, this foreign rule had two aspects: on the one hand, *material need and lack of freedom*, and on the other hand *a fascination for the foreign*, for the other, with the danger of assimilation, and consequent loss of one's own identity. It was precisely this second aspect that became the real problem and that gave rise to apocalyptic literature. It was a matter of defending and guarding Jewish identity with its monotheistic faith in Yahweh against the influences of Hellenistic polytheism. Now many Jews, above all in the more educated levels of society, and unfortunately also and especially in priestly circles, often even the high priests themselves, were in sympathy with the Hellenistic world view and practices. The high priests (e.g. Jason, Menelaus) were eager to transform Jerusalem into a Hellenistic city (polis) complete with stadium, theater, gymnasium, etc. The "progressives" preferred to dress in the style of the Greeks. All these innovations must have appeared to or-





thodox Jews as a defection from the faith of the fathers and as a revolting horror (cf. 2 Macc 4:10-17).

Moreover this process of Hellenization did not stop with the willing

**Apocalyptic literature offers the oppressed a symbolic world that makes possible the development of an identity under persecution and the threat of death. Apocalyptic is resistance literature from below**

adoption by some of these Hellenistic currents, this new "way of life". Under Antiochus IV Epiphanes (175-164) a massive, forced Hellenization was imposed, accompanied by an unrelenting and cruel persecution of Jews who remained faithful to their religion. The mere possession of a Torah scroll was considered a crime punishable by death. It was forbidden to circumcise male children. Moreover, the Jews in the whole country were forcibly induced to offer pagan sacrifices (it was such a sacrificial act that triggered the revolution of the Maccabees, cf. Macc 2:15-28).

### **Apocalyptic Literature as Response to the Crisis**

Such was the atmosphere in which apocalyptic arose, probably first as a form of underground literature, something like the "Samistat" in the earlier Soviet Union. At the beginning the literature must have taken the form of loose leaflets calling for resistance, as many scholars assume. Pseudonymity (publication

under a false name) is a trademark of this kind of literature as is an extensive use of symbolic language, accessible and comprehensible only to the initiate. This symbolic "encoding" includes, e.g., time references (cf. Dan 7:24f; 9:24), names of earlier rulers for the ruling monarchs (e.g., Nebuchadnezzar, Belshazzar), animal or other symbols for designating rulers, political realms and peoples (cf. the various materials of the statue in Dan 2:31-45 and the animal vision in Dan 7-8) and finally also pseudonyms for the author himself (e.g. Henoch, Daniel). This made it possible to avoid legal persecution and punishment. "Apparently unsuspecting, age-old writings composed before the

flood, by Henoch, who was not even an Israelite, longwinded stories of sheep, goats and other beasts, stories of ancient kings of Babylon and of the Medes... - such a literature can hardly fall under the ban against religion" (P. Lampe). This symbolic encoding can even take the form of spirited and biting satire that subjects the ruler and his cult to ridicule (such as when the name of the god Bel-Shamen, the "god of heaven" is written as "Shomem" in Hebrew, with the meaning of "laying waste" or when the crown of sun-rays that surround the head of the emperor, in his depiction as the sun-god Helios, is transformed into the ten horns of a beast).

For insiders, this type of literature was able to effectively strengthen their self-consciousness and their identity. The ongoing concern of this literature is above all to demonstrate the superiority of the God of Israel over all other gods and of the wisdom of Torah over Hellenistic wisdom. No major event, indeed nothing at all, happens independ-

ently of the will of Yahweh. What happens was planned by Him from before the beginning of creation, and even the enemy powers can ultimately do no more than carry out his eternal design. Decisive for the apocalyptic writer is the fact that the ultimate triumph of God and of his chosen ones is already secure. Of crucial importance too is the insight that now already the last things, the end-time has begun. The faithful of Yahweh stand in the thick of the final battle, and their deliverance will not be long in coming.

### **Subversive Elements in Revelation**

No reader of Revelation who has even a passing acquaintance with the Book of Daniel will miss the numerous allusions in Rev to this apocalyptic writing of the First Testament. This applies not only to the side of its contents. That is to say, Revelation also uses literary methods and devices similar to those employed by the author of Daniel. This can come as no surprise when one recalls the situation of the Christian audience presupposed by the work. Of course this situation is not identical to that of the second century before Christ (the Seleucid era), but there are strong parallels.

### **The Situation of the Christians**

It is of course true that the Christians living under Emperor Domitian (81-96 A.D., the most likely time of origin of Revelation) did not, according to the most recent research, suffer systematic persecution or execution - this happened only as a result of denunciation -, but they were exposed to massive social pressures. Since the social and religious realms were not very clearly separated from each other and the cult of the gods and emperor worship were very closely connected, Christians very easily became outsiders to the society. For example, they



were unable to take part in public events, which almost always involved paying homage to the gods and to the emperor. And since the various crafts were almost always engaged within the context of organized guilds, which naturally also honored their patron deities, this outsider status could also entail significant economic disadvantages for Christians (cf. 13:16f).

Alongside this enormous and continuous social pressure there is also the fascinating power of Rome, with all that it had to offer in terms of monumental construction and culture. So the danger of assimilation and accommodation (in line with biblical tradition, John refers to this as "adultery", cf. 2:14, 20) was truly not to be underestimated. H. Giesen is correct when he writes: "John sees the danger for Christians not in persecution and possible martyrdom..., but rather in the allure of the cult of the gods and of the emperor. This is why he seeks by means of every literary device at his disposal to dissuade Christians from taking part in pagan festivities with their cultic celebrations".

### The Literary Device of Encoding

Unlike the authors of the Jewish apocalypses, the Seer of Patmos does not hide behind the pseudonym of a known personality from the past. He does not go back beyond the Christ event. But, apart from this, he too employs the device of encoding, apparently in order to protect his audience from unnecessary danger. This is the language of the oppressed of all times. He never, for example, refers to the ruling emperor (Domitian) by name, but instead encodes him with the number 666, which "calls for wisdom" (13:18) to decipher. The Emperor himself and his henchmen, that is the State apparatus of the priesthood and civil

servants, he represents under the symbols of two beasts (chap. 13). The seductive art of the world power of Rome he describes under the cipher, already employed in Judaism, of the "great whore of Babylon", who sits on "the seven hills", or on "the great waters" (cf. chaps. 17 and 18). For insiders there could be no doubt who was intended by this great whore of Babylon who makes the peoples drunk with her wine. The emperor, as the embodiment of massive earthly power, appears in Revelation as a ludicrous mimic of the slaughtered lamb (cf. 13:2-8).

### No Compromises

Between Emperor worship and confession of Christ there can be for the author of Rev no compromises. The Christian must make a decision. The groups of the Nicolaitans, who attempted to accommodate with the imperial power, were the object of his fierce opposition (cf. 2:6, 14f). The only possibility open to the Christian was that of passive resistance, expressed in the refusal to pay the required tribute to the divinities of the empire and to the Emperor himself.

### The Dethroning of the Oppressor - Subversive Aspects

It is of the greatest significance that for the Christian author the decisive victory has already been won. Christ as the "Lamb who was slaughtered" has been elevated and enthroned as powerful "Lord and God". He has triumphed over the two beasts, both of whom stand in the service of the Satanic forces. This victory is celebrated by those already saved in hymns of the "heavenly liturgy" (cf. 5:9-13; 11:15-18; 12:10-12; 15:3-4; 17:14; 19:1-8). These in themselves politically harmless liturgical texts must have had a subversive effect to the extent that they proclaim that world

dominion belongs not to the Roman Emperor, who had himself addressed as "our Lord and God" (*dominus et deus noster*), but rather to a man who had been executed by the Romans as a political agitator. The announcing of the downfall of the city of the Rome and of the Roman world empire (cf. chap. 18) must of course also appear as an effective threat to the empire and as subversive of the ruling political authority. Finally, the assertion that Christians have become a "royal people and priests" might well have been perceived as dangerous and revolutionary. How must it have been taken when the behavior of such people came into conflict with the obedience owed to the emperor and with the requirements of pagan worship?

The results of this brief overview can well be summarized with the words of D. Dormeyer: "Apocalyptic literature offers the oppressed a symbolic world that makes possible the development of an identity under persecution and the threat of death. Apocalyptic is resistance literature from below" (D. Dormeyer / L. Hauser, *Weltuntergang und Gottesherrschaft*, *Topos Taschenbücher* 196, 1990, p. 98).

(Transl.: L. Maluf)





## The Bishop - Minister of the Word of God Attested in the Holy Scriptures

WILHELM EGGER

*In preparation for the 10th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, "The Bishop, Servant of the Gospel of Jesus Christ for the Hope of the World", the Catholic Biblical Federation, an organization approved by the Holy See which comprises those institutions to which the mandate of the biblical apostolate has been entrusted by the respective National Episcopal Conferences, has compiled suggestions from some forty bishops (biblical scholars and/or promoters of the biblical apostolate) on the role of the bishop with respect to the written Word of God.*

*The Catholic Biblical Federation addressed the following questions to bishops who are biblical scholars and to bishops engaged in the biblical apostolate:*

- *What method of Bible reading do you prefer for your spiritual life and ministry?*
- *What role does the bishop play in encouraging the faithful to read and to savor Sacred Scripture? In this regard, what are the methods and opportunities available to a bishop?*
- *How best can the bishop foster the return of the Word of God to the people and how best can he lead the people toward a more profound understanding of the Word of God?*

*The following is a summary of the responses drawn up by Mgr. Wilhelm Egger, President of the Catholic Biblical Federation:*

The role of the Federation is described in the Directory For Ecumenism (1993), n. 184: "The Pontifical Council For Promoting Christian Unity was involved in the setting up, in 1969, of the World Catholic Federation for the Biblical Apostolate (now Catholic Biblical Federation), as an international Catholic organization of a public character to further the pastoral implementation of "Dei Verbum" Ch. VI. In accordance with this objective, whenever the local circumstances allow, collaboration at the level of local churches as well as at the regional level, between the ecumenical officer and the local sections of the federation should be strongly encouraged".

From the responses of some forty bishops to the question as to what traits should characterize the figure of the bishop, the results are as follows:

### 1. The Bishop - Competent Communicator of Biblical Wisdom in a World of Communication

The bishop in a world of communication media should be an able communicator of biblical wisdom, not so much because of his formal training in Scripture, but as a result of a daily familiarity with the sacred books. He should be a guide for all beginners and seekers who daily open the Bible. In sum, a bishop who makes the Word of God and Holy Scripture the soul of the apostolate, a bishop who is a guide toward peoples' encounter with Christ, the living fountain.

We live in a time of many messages, in a world of communication. This is why the Word of God - even in its written form - takes on a new importance: it must be presented as a word that saves in a world of many messages and the invitation to reading and reception should be offered to persons who have nu-



merous means either for reading or for hearing/seeing today's messages.

In a world like this that is quick and open to ever new experiences the bishop works for a culture of memory.

## 2. The Bishop Formed by the Word of God

In the responses, the bishops say that for them, of the texts of Holy Scripture, those used for the Eucharistic celebration and the texts of the Breviary are of primary importance, as is also the continuous *Lectio Divina*.

The bishop should be in constant contemplation of the Word of God and it should be apparent in his every gesture and word that he draws his nourishment from the Holy Book. This will make it easy for people to be receptive to his urgings and to allow themselves to be drawn by this enthusiasm.

## 3. The Bishop in the Service of Holy Scripture

### 3.1 Sacred Scripture and Eucharist - Alpha and Omega of Episcopal and Priestly Activity

In a pastoral letter on "The Sacred Scripture and Saint Lawrence Justinian" the then patriarch of Venice, Angelo Giuseppe Roncalli, speaks of the alpha and omega of episcopal and priestly activity:

To teach Holy Scripture, and particularly the Gospel to the people, to make these children committed to our pastoral care close friends of the Sacred Book is as it were the alpha among the activities of a bishop and his priests. The omega - to prolong this apocalyptic imagery - is represented by the blessed cup of our daily altar. In the book, the voice of Christ always resounding in our hearts; in the

cup, the blood of Christ present for grace, for propitiation, for our salvation, that of the Holy Church and of the world. The two realities go together: the word of Jesus and the blood of Jesus. Between the one and the other all the other letters of the alphabet follow in order: all the affairs of personal, domestic, social life: everything else which is important too, but is secondary with respect to the eternal destiny of the children of God; things that are valueless except as they are sustained by the first and last letters, that is, the Word of Jesus always resounding from the Sacred Book in all its tones in the Holy Church, and the blood of Jesus in the divine sacrifice, perennial source of graces and of blessings (A.G. Roncalli, *The Holy Scripture and Saint Lawrence Justinian*, Pastoral Letter for Lent 1956).

### 3.2 The Bishop's Example

The best way to foster an enthusiasm for Sacred Scripture is the person of the bishop himself, formed by the Word of God. A bishop has a continuous opportunity to help the people to relish Scripture. Every time he speaks to the faithful, and in particular to the priests, he can give some example, some sampling of *lectio divina*. If he has learned to do this in a suitable way and to present the practice in a simple way, the faithful will learn.

### 4. Means at the Disposal of the Bishop in the Promotion of the Biblical Apostolate

In the responses of the bishops, a variety of formats were presented in which the bishop can promote the biblical apostolate. The image of the bishop is presented as one who can foster this apostolate through

promotion, formation, publications, enthusiastic support. Some areas of activity are also presented in the responses.

#### 4.1 Promotion

The bishop can promote the inculturation of the biblical message, ecumenical collaboration above all for the translation of biblical texts, and he can also promote a knowledge of the Church's documents on the Word of God (*Dei Verbum* above all).

#### 4.2 Promotion of Biblical Groups

The little communities in which the word of God is shared help people to read life in the light of the Word of God. People should be encouraged to read the Word of God in family circles, in little Bible groups, and also in grass roots groups.

A shared reading is important for the preparation of the Eucharistic liturgy and also for a "committed" extension of the celebration in peoples' lives.

For the charismatic groups and prayer groups one should insist on how important it is for prayer to be a response to the Word of God.

#### 4.3 Formation

An important task is the formation of priests and lay persons, so that the laity too can perform a positive role in the biblical apostolate.

Formation includes the knowledge of the Bible as well as the knowledge of a few simple methods of sharing the biblical message and a certain familiarity with *lectio divina*. It is important to foster a suitable method of reading (against fundamentalist tendencies and overly subjective or private readings).

Especially worthy of attention is *Lectio divina*, in the sense of a reading which is at the same time study, meditation, search for meaning, prayer and contemplation.





#### 4.4 Publications

Another means of fostering the Bible are publications, the publication of biblical texts and liturgical texts, but also the publication of pastoral letters that bring out the importance of the reading of the Bible. Care should also be given to the publication of easily accessible dictionaries, commentaries and other study aids.

#### 4.5 Creation and Support for Biblical Apostolate Structures

The centers of biblical formation and of the biblical apostolate are very useful. When a biblical apostolate has been assigned, the bishops are invited to entrust it to structures or centers at the national as well as the diocesan level. The structures to which this task has been entrusted in an official way by the national episcopal conference are invited to become members of the Biblical Federation.

#### 4.6 The Liturgy

The Missal with its ample Lectionary has an extraordinary importance. "The Lectionary and the Missal are really the regular means, vital and familiar to many, of coming to know and of nourishing the faith, and of finding in it the response to the questions of conscience. Priests should fully appreciate the value of these means and should know how to take their cue from them, through suitable proclamation and adequate commentary, for forming strong Christian individuals. The biblical text, through which Christ is always present in his Church, 'since it is he who speaks when Sacred Scripture is read in church' is the light of truth, the power of grace that effectively produces in the soul what it expresses, the viaticum that sustains us in our search and our commitment in the service of the good. The Missal, then, with

its ample Lectionary, daily 'table' of the Word of God, can well be regarded as the universal manual of catechesis for the whole people, in the parish, in every church or community" (John Paul II, *Ad limina visitis* of the bishops of Triveneto, 1991).

#### 4.7 Programming of the Biblical Apostolate

The presentation of a diocesan program on the Word of God could also be useful, as could the celebration of a Bible Sunday, a Bible Week, or a Bible Month.

#### 4.8 Institutionalization of the Ministers of the Word

The bishop should also give special attention to the service of the lector (who can also be responsible for the Liturgy of the Word), as well as to the "extraordinary ministers" of the written word, who can also conduct the liturgies of the Word. Among these ministers could also be persons who "adopt a certain number of families, visit them regularly until they have acquired the ability to read the Bible on their own".

#### 4.9 Catechesis

"The great tradition of the Church often speaks of initiation to the sacraments and it has various forms for realizing this initiation. But initiation to the Word of God is an integral part of initiation to faith. The Christian must acquire a certain competency in reading and understanding the word of Holy Scripture. To this end, one of the goals of the catechetical journey is to "introduce the initiate to a correct understanding of the Bible and to a fruitful reading of it which would enable the discovery of the divine truth it contains and stimulate the most generous possible response to the message God addresses to humanity through his Word" (from the Notes of the Italian

Episcopal Conference on the Bible in the life of the Church, 1995, n. 27).

#### 4.10 Mass Media

In the world of communication it is important to promote the use of media in the biblical field as well. This would include the promotion of the press, as well as audio-visual and radiophonic means for spreading the Word of God.

(Transl.: L. Maluf)







## The Book of the Revelation of John: A select bibliography in view of biblical animation

### First introductions

Pour en finir avec la peur : l'Apocalypse / Jean-Pierre Prévost. - Montréal : SOCA-BI : Les Editions paulines ; Paris : Médiaspaul, 1983. - (De la parole à l'écriture ; 2).

L'Apocalypse / Chantal van der Plancke. - Bruxelles : Lumen vitae, 1984. - (Le Temps de lire ; 1). - 111 p.

L'Apocalypse : espérance d'un peuple qui lutte / Carlos Mesters. - Montréal : Editions paulines, 1988. - 101 p. - Traduction de : Esperança de um povo que luta : o Apocalipse de São João. - São Paulo : Edições, 1986.

Pour lire l'Apocalypse / Jean-Pierre Prévost. - Outremont : Novalis ; Paris : Cerf, 1991. - 160 p.

Comprendre l'Apocalypse / Jean-Pierre Charlier. - Paris : Cerf, 1991. - 2 vol. - (Lire la Bible ; 89 et 90).

L'Apocalypse / Pierre Prigent. - Paris : Editions du Cerf, 1998. - (Lire la Bible ; 117).

Les apocalypses du Nouveau Testament / Elian Cuvillier. - Cahiers Evangile ; n° 110 (Décembre 1999).

No tengan miedo: Apocalipsis y comunidades cristianas / F.G.S Gorgulho, Ana F. Anderson. - Buenos Aires, 1980.

Apocalipsis: ¿Revelación del fin del mundo?: Estudio exegético-crítico del texto en sus contextos / Eduardo Arens. - 2da edición. - Lima: Centro de Proyección, 1988.

El Apocalipsis de San Juan: una lectura desde América Latina / Ricardo Foulkes. - Buenos Aires, 1989.

Conversaciones con Juan, el vidente de Patmos / J. Lopez. - Madrid: Atenas, 1993.

How to Read the Apocalypse / Jean-Pierre Prévost. - London: SCM Press, 1993. - 118 p.

Apocalipsis: Visión de un mundo justo / Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza. - Estella: Editorial Verbo Divino, 1997.

Para leer el Apocalipsis / Jean-Pierre Prévost. - Estella: Verbo Divino, 1998.

Revelation: Vision of a just world / Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza. - Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991. - (Proclamation).

Revelation / J.M. Court. - Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994. - 133 p. - (New Testament Guides).

Schreibe dem Engel Südafrikas: Trost und Protest in der Apokalypse des Johannes / Allan Boesak; aus dem Englischen übersetzt von Sabine Hinz-Wegner und Rudolf Hinz. - Stuttgart: Kreuz Verlag, 1988. - 158 p.

Das Buch der Offenbarung: Vision einer gerechten Welt / Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza. - Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1994.

Die Offenbarung des Johannes: Inspirationen aus Patmos / Luzia Sutter Rehmann. - Kompendium feministische Bibelauslegung / Luise Schottroff und Marie-Theres Wacker, (Hrsg.). - Gütersloh:



Christian Kaiser, Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1998. - 725-741.

Vom Mut, genau hinzusehen: Feministisch-befreiungstheologische Interpretationen zur Apokalyptik / Luzia Sutter Rehmann. - Luzern: Exodus-Verlag, 1998. - 160 p.

Das Buch der subversiven Hoffnung: Zugänge zur Offenbarung des Johannes/Hermann-Josef Venetz. - Freiburg/Schweiz: Kanisius Verlag, 1999. - 128 p.

Vom Ende her leben: Eine Auseinandersetzung mit der Offenbarung des Johannes in einer Zeit des Übergangs / Brigitte Schäfer, Daniel Kosch. - Berg am Irchel: kik-Verlag, 1999. - (Ankick-Texte; 4). - 83 p.

Angst oder Trost?: Zur Angstbewältigung im Buch "Offenbarung/Apokalypse des Johannes" / Juan Peter Miranda. - Stuttgart: Kath. Bibelwerk. - (Bibel und Theologie im Kleinformat; 16). - 16 p.

Ganzheitlicher Zugang zur Offenbarung des Johannes / Beate Kowalski. - Stuttgart: Kath. Bibelwerk. - (Bibel und Theologie im Kleinformat; 17).

Hans Gasper/Friederike Valentin (Hg.): Endzeitfieber. Apokalyptiker, Untergangspropheten, Endzeitsekten, Freiburg i. Br. 1997.

Werner Thiede: Sektierertum – Unkraut unter dem Weizen? Gesammelte Aufsätze zur praktisch- und systematisch-theologischen Apologetik, Neukirchen-Vluyn 1999.

#### **Choice of accessible commentaries**

L'Apocalypse : commentaire pastoral / Jean-Pierre Prévost. - Paris : Bayard Editions : Centurion ; Outremont : Novalis, 1995. - 179 p. - (Commentaires).

Los Enigmas del Apocalipsis / F. Fernández Ramos. - Salamanca: Univ. Pontificia de Salamanca, 1993.

Comprender el Apocalipsis / J.-P. Charlier. - Bilbao: DDB, 1993. - 2 vol.

Apocalipsis / F. Contreras Molina. - En: Comentario al Nuevo Testamento / S. Guíjarro Oporto, M. Salvador García (ed.). -

Madrid: Atenas; Salamanca: PPC-Sigueme; Estella: Verbo Divino, 1995. - p. 695-733.

Apocalipsis / Ugo Vanni. - Estella: Editorial Verbo Divino, 1998.

Guías para la Lectura del Nuevo Testamento: Apocalipsis / X. Pikaza Ibarrondo. - Estella: Verbo Divino, 1999.

Apocalisse: esegesi, ermeneutica, teologia / Ugo Vanni. - Bologna: Ed. Dehoniane, 1988. - (Supplementi alla rivista Biblica; 17).

L'ultima parola è di Dio: L'Apocalisse come Buona Notizia / Klemens Stock. - Roma: Ed. Apostolato della Preghiera, 1995.

Apocalisse / Ugo Vanni. - Brescia: Ed. Queriniana, 1999. - (Leggere Oggi la Bibbia).

Das letzte Wort hat Gott: Apokalypse als Frohbotschaft. - Innsbruck; Wien, 1985. - 158 p.

Johannes-Apokalypse / H. Giesen. - Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1996. - (Stuttgarter Kleiner Kommentar. Neues Testament; 18). - 191 p.

Apokalypse: Das Buch von Hoffnung und Widerstand: ein Kommentar / Pablo Richard. - Luzern: Edition Exodus, 1996. - 254 p. - Titel der spanischen Originalausgabe: Apocalipsis: Reconstrucción. San José, Costa Rica: Editorial DEI.

Revelation / Wilfrid J. Harrington. - Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1993. - 271 p. - (Sacra Pagina; 16)

The Book of Revelation / C. Rowland. - London: Epworth Press, 1993. - 166 p. - (Epworth Commentaries).

Revelation: The Book of the Risen Christ / W. J. Harrington. - Hyde Park, NY: New City, 1999. - (Spiritual Commentaries). - 166 p.

#### **A tour of biblical animation**

L'Apocalypse : notes exégétiques et plans d'animation / Animation biblique œcuménique romande. - Lausanne :



Evangelie et culture : Centre Catholique romand de formation permanente, 1992. - 124 p.

L'Apocalypse : plus loin que la terre / Paul Collet. - Paris : Action Catholique Générale Feminine, 1999.

Un mundo sin llanto ni dolor: Guía para una lectura comunitaria del Libro del Apocalipsis / Florencio Abajo [et al.]; bajo la dirección y coordinación de Santiago Guijarro. - Madrid: La Casa de la Biblia; Estella: Editorial Verbo Divino, 1999. - (Palabra y vida; 10). - Animador. - ISBN 84-8169-337-5. + Libro del participante

Ermütigung zum Christsein: Offenbarung / bearbeitet von Heinz Giesen [et al.]. - Stuttgart: Verlag Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1992. - (Bibelauslegung für die Praxis; 27). - 143 p.

Visionen: Lese- und Arbeitsbuch zur Offenbarung des Johannes / herausgegeben vom Katholischen Bibelwerk. - Stuttgart: Verlag Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1994. - (Bibel im Jahr '95).

Offenbarung / herausgegeben von Daniel Kosch; MitarbeiterInnen: Urs Joerg [et al.]. - Basel: F. Reinhardt; Zürich: Benziger, 1996. - (Bibelarbeit in der Gemeinde; 9). - 198 p. + 8 Dias. - Zürich: Verleih Bild und Ton, 1996.

Linzer Fernkurse zur Apokalyptik.

### Periodicals devoted to Revelation

Apocalypse, sectes et millénarisme. - Le Monde de la Bible (1978), n. 3.

Une lecture de l'Apocalypse. - Cahiers Evangile (Paris : Service Biblique Evangile et Vie : Cerf) 54 (1975), N.S. 11.

L'Apocalypse. - Les Dossiers de la Bible (Paris : Service Biblique Evangile et Vie : Cerf); 1992, n° 45

La femme et le dragon. - Les Dossiers de la Bible (Paris : Service Biblique Evangile et Vie : Cerf) ; n° 78 (juin 1999).

Patmos, l'île de l'Apocalypse. - Le Monde de la Bible (Paris : Bayard) ; n° 94 (1995).

L'Apocalisse nella storia. - Humanitas; 5 (1999).

Apokalypse. - Bibel und Kirche (Stuttgart: Verlag Katholisches Bibelwerk); 39 (1984), H. 2.

Die Apokalypse des Johannes. - Bibel heute (Stuttgart: Verlag Katholisches Bibelwerk); 33 (1997), Nr 131.

### CD Rom

L'Apocalypse : la tenture du château d'Angers / le texte de saint Jean ; interprété par Michaël Lonsdale. - Paris : Editions du Patrimoine ; Viroflay : Syrinx, 1997. - CD Rom PC + MAC. □

## The African Bible

### A great gift for the Great Jubilee

A recent issue of the weekly edition of L'Osservatore Romano carried a picture of a new Bible presented to the Pope not by representatives of the Bible Societies, but by Archbishop Robert Sarah of Conakry, Guinea, the Chairman of the Executive Committee of the Biblical Centre for Africa and Madagascar (BICAM) and Sr. Marcazzan of the Daughters of St. Paul in Nairobi, Kenya, the publishers of this Bible. This is indeed a great gift to Africa for the Great Jubilee.

What is so African about this Bible and what makes it a great gift? It is not the translation of the text. A team of African scholars certainly could have come up with a new translation of the Bible into English. But they were wise enough to adopt a well-known, and good, text – the New American Bible – and to invest their time and energy into producing an annotated Bible – in line with the explicit request of the II Vatican Council for "necessary and fully adequate explanations"

Pauline Publications Africa  
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(DV 25). Furthermore, they were obviously very much concerned with producing a Bible aimed at helping the reader in "reading the Bible in context." This is stated clearly in the last sentence of the General Introduction: "By paying attention to the context of life in Africa today and seeking to identify themes particularly relevant to African societies of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the African Bible aims to be a source of inspiration and nourishment for the people of Africa."

Here are some of its features:

1. Introductions to each book giving up-to-date information about the book and the theological and pastoral relevance for Africa today.
2. Explanatory notes are provided in the various domains of exegesis, theology and spirituality, as well as in catechesis and pastoral ministry.
3. The comments, running alongside the biblical text, work as keys to help understand a chapter or a section of the book

and to see the relevance of the passage in Africa today.

4. The illustrations aim at making the historical and geographical background easier to understand, and they offer an artistic insight into some texts.

The bible is enriched by cross-references, the 3-year cycle of liturgical readings, the chronology and the glossary / thematic index.

Indeed, an excellent tool for both the actualization and inculturation of the Bible - cf. the directives of "The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church" of the Pontifical Biblical Commission - as well as "for use in prayer and for study in the family and community" (Ecclesia in Africa, n.58). Would that many Africans be able to save the \$10 - or find a benefactor - to buy this African Bible.

The African Bible

St Paul Communications/Daughters of St Paul, Nairobi, 1999. ISBN 9966-21-450-x

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**L'année jubilaire et la remise des dettes: repères bibliques/** Thomas P. Osborne et Joseph Stricher. - Paris: Bayard Éditions: Centurion, 1999. - ISBN 2-227-36901-9. - 98 FF = 14,94 EUR.

At the Plenary Assembly of Hong Kong in 1996, the Catholic Biblical Federation committed itself to "working actively for the cancellation of international debts by the year 2000, in order to make it a real year of Jubilee, a lifting of burdens from the oppressed" (Final Statement, 8.1.7). Two members of the Latin-European subregion have taken this commitment to heart and have offered a reading of all the biblical texts that contribute to the discussion on the theme of the remission of the international debts of poor countries. The biblical dossier is not limited to Leviticus 25 and its so-called "Jubilee Year"; it extends to the "sabbatical year" (likewise of Leviticus) and the years of liberation, or of the remission of debts, of the Covenant Code and the Deuterono-

mic Code, as well as to the narrative texts of Nehemiah 5 and 10, but also to the "year of favor" of Isaiah 61 and the "acceptable year" of the Gospel of Luke.

In short, this book invites the reader to a true biblical inquiry. An exciting and rich inquiry, where one discovers how the biblical text still speaks today to our modern ears and how it can be a guide for action. Without falling into the trap of simplistic application to the complex questions of modern indebtedness, this little book brings out the sensitivity of the biblical authors with respect to the precarious situation of individuals and societies that become victims of indebtedness, exclusion and arbitrary transportations. It remains attentive to the biblical message concerning human labor, relationship to the land, ethnic solidarity ... At the same time, it allows these ancient texts to raise our level of sensitivity in this period of millennial change and to arouse our engagement in the sense of a



solidarity that transcends national, ethnic and even religious boundaries.

*Thomas Osborne, biblical scholar, professor at the Grand Séminaire and at the Institut Catéchétique of Luxembourg, is the head of the Diocesan Biblical Service*

*and coordinator of the Latin European subregion of the Catholic Biblical Federation.*

*Joseph Stricher, also a biblical scholar, serves as director for France of the Catholic Biblical Service Évangile et Vie.* □

BDV 51 deals with the theme "The Year of Jubilee and the Remission of Debt". Individual issues can be obtained through the General Secretariat of the CBF

**El apocalipsis fuente de esperanza... al comenzar el año 2000 – *The Apocalypse as Source of Hope... at the Beginning of the Year 2000.*** Episcopal Commission of Catechesis and Bible, CERJUC-SION, Costa Rica 1999

On the occasion of the seventh Bible Week in Costa Rica, which was celebrated in September 1999, a work-group of CERJUC-SION (Congregación de Nuestra Señora de Sión), in cooperation with

the department for the biblical apostolate of the Bishops' Conference, composed this booklet in Spanish.

The purpose of the booklet is to help people appreciate Revelation not as a book that inspires fear by broadcasting images of doom, but rather as a source of hope for the year 2000. By way of contents, the booklet offers practical instructions for the celebration of Bible Week both in families and in parishes.

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Franz Kogler – Klaus Schacht (eds.): **Stolpersteine der Bibel III**, 144 pages, ATS 70 (Euro 5) ISBN 3-9500079-8-9

This German language volume contains seminar papers of the ecumenical events series "*Stumbling Blocks in the Bible*" which took place in Linz in 1997 and 1998. Approximately half of the articles deal with apocalyptic themes, ranging from the question "Is the world coming to an end" on the theme "How apocalyptic is Christianity?", to the "eschatological message of John the Baptist and Jesus" and the "Interpretation of Revelation". In this book hot topics such as the death penalty, assisted suicide, abortion, ho-

mosexuality etc. are also examined from a biblical perspective by Catholic as well as Protestant theologians.

Dr. Franz Kogler is director of the department Bible and Theology in the pastoral office of the Diocese of Linz, Austria, and member of the Administrative Board of the Austrian Catholic Biblical Association (Österreichisches Katholisches Bibelwerk).

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The Catholic Biblical Federation (*CBF*) is a world-wide association of Catholic organizations committed to ministry to the Word of God. At the present time, the *CBF* membership includes 90 full members and 217 associate members coming from a total of 126 countries.

The activities of these organizations include the preparation of Catholic and interconfessional Bible translations, the propagation of Bibles and in general the promotion of a deeper understanding of the Holy Scripture.

The *CBF* promotes the biblical pastoral activities of these organizations, provides a forum for the world-wide sharing of experiences in the field, searches for new ways of bringing the joy of God's Word to the faithful throughout the world. The Federation seeks collaboration with the representatives of biblical scholarship as well as with Bible Societies of various confessions.

In particular, the *CBF* works toward the promotion of the reading of the Bible within the context of concrete life situations and the training of ministers of the Word in this direction.

The ministry to the Word of God is ministry to the unity of and communication between human beings. A world which grows together with the help of modern communications and yet continues to show signs of hate and destruction needs more than ever words of peace and of fellowship with God and with each other.

**Wilhelm Egger, Bishop of Bozen-Brixen, President of the CBF**