

## PREFACE

The first edition of this book was published in 1990 by Parish Ministry Publications, the publishing arm of the Sydney Catholic Adult Education Centre. It was subtitled: 'A revelation that history is graced' and was dedicated with gratitude to Father Ugo Vanni of the Society of Jesus whose delightful clarity as a teacher provided me with the key to unlock the meaning and the beauty of the Apocalypse. In 1992 there was need for a second printing. We decided to change to the New Revised Standard Version which had become available. Otherwise the text of the second edition remained unchanged. I have taken the opportunity of this third edition to re-format the text in order to keep the focus on the inspired word itself and to link the commentary to it in a more user friendly way. I have also revised the commentary, though it remains substantially the same as the earlier editions.

In the meantime an excellent book in The Bible and Liberation Series published by Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York, has become available. Entitled *Unveiling Empire: Reading Revelation then and now*, it is written by Wes Howard-Brook and Anthony Gwyther. I recommend it as giving a thorough background to the Apocalypse. They make the point in a convincing way that it was not so much overt persecution that was the problem facing the Christian communities. Rather it was the seductive attraction of the Roman way of life. Resistance marginalised the Christian community, to its enormous economic and social disadvantage, even, at times, placing their lives in danger. Systematic, life-threatening, persecution belongs to a later period.

The Apocalypse (also called the Book of Revelation) is a wonderful book. It was written towards the end of the first century to challenge Christian communities in what was then the Roman province of Asia (Western Turkey) to resist the seduction of the way of life imposed by Rome and welcomed enthusiastically by those in the provinces who hoped to profit by it. It was written to encourage the Christian communities to remain faithful to the way of life lived by Jesus, and to the intimate communion with him which they enjoyed, even though this set them apart from the bulk of society.

The early Christians dreamed, as we do, of a world united in the love that Jesus lived and preached. But they were being crushed by the Roman system in which love and justice were subordinated to the political and economic power of an oppressive empire. Their faith, and at times even their lives, were endangered when they refused to conform by 'worshipping Caesar.' The temptation to compromise was ever present. The Apocalypse reminded them of the power of the exalted Christ and of his active presence among them. It reminded them that all are called to enjoy divine intimacy, and that no power can prevail that opposes the values that were so dear to their heart. It challenged them, for their own sake and for the sake of their mission, not to compromise.

Surely we who live in a world in which religion is often an instrument of the power of the state, and in which the values of unjust economic systems are worshipped so blatantly, do not need to be convinced that we can learn from the message of the Apocalypse.

## Symbolic language

We who use the word Christian must rekindle our sense of mission and dare to live as Jesus lived, for the world today, like the Roman world then, desperately needs to experience the truth that it is graced and that all power other than love must fail. It is true that the Apocalypse is accepted by Christians as the word of God,<sup>1</sup> but, as with all of the sacred scriptures, the divine word is expressed in human words,<sup>2</sup> with all the power but also all the historical conditioning and necessary limitations that are inseparable from human words. To accept it as God's word is to accept that the author was responding to inspiration when he composed the work and that it cannot be read properly outside an environment of prayer. To recognise that God communicates himself to us through *human* words is to acknowledge the need to discern the meaning of this communication by using the ordinary tools of literary criticism.

The language of the Apocalypse is highly symbolic. Symbolic language keeps a close link between ideas, images and sense experience. It expresses reality in a way that touches human sensibility, fires the imagination, engages the affections and stirs the will. It is a most appropriate vehicle for communicating religious truth. Its difficulty is that like a prism it reflects light in many different directions at once, making it difficult to grasp the fullness of its meaning in a clear way. Fortunately, the author of the Apocalypse is a highly intelligent writer. He writes in an imaginative way, but he does so in an extraordinarily controlled fashion. As we hope to demonstrate, the basic direction of his meaning can be made accessible to the modern reader.

The Apocalypse belongs to a style of writing of which we have many examples.<sup>3</sup> The symbols used by the author have a history of meaning that is plain to any one familiar with them. But even apart from a study of other apocalyptic writing of the time, the book itself, from internal evidence, is self-explanatory. Images are decoded by the author himself. One key to decoding his symbols is to watch for the first time a symbol is used, for its first use provides the context for further uses of the symbol, and the author is very consistent. A careful reading eliminates all kinds of interpretations as patently missing the mark.

The aim of apocalyptic writing is to draw people away from putting their trust in the structures established by the powerful for their own aggrandisement, by refocusing on the presence and action of God. Because apocalyptic writing is typically highly imaginative it can be very confusing to a reader who attempts to find a way through it without a guide. This is obvious from the way the Apocalypse itself has been interpreted, especially, but not only, in modern times.

<sup>1</sup>The Apocalypse is used and quoted by Christian writers of the second century. Origen (about 235AD) places it among the 'generally accepted' books of the New Testament. Athanasius (367AD) includes it in the canon of sacred scripture. Jerome (about 400AD) includes it in the Vulgate. The synods of Hippo (393AD) and Carthage (397AD) include it in the canon. In the Eastern Church it had a checkered career because of the way it was used by heterodox groups to support their opinions (See 'The Apocalypse' in the *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1962). <sup>2</sup> See Vatican II *Dei Verbum*, n.13.

<sup>3</sup> For the Old Testament see Isaiah 24-27; Ezekiel 40-48; Zechariah 9-14; Daniel. James H. Charlesworth (Ed.) *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* Vol 1 'Apocalyptic Literature and Testaments' (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1983) is devoted to Apocalypses or to Testaments with apocalyptic sections, written, for the most part, between 200BC and 100AD.

Rather than attend to its hard message which challenges the reader to live an authentic Christian life here and now in difficult circumstances and to oppose evil, some see the Apocalypse as referring to an indefinite future and choose to throw up their hands and wait for God to intervene. Alternatively, they read the symbolic language as indicating that God is intervening right now and call people to join their sect in order to escape involvement with the real world and prepare themselves to be caught up by God into a new state of being. No matter how weird an idea may be, its proponents seem to be able to find support for it somewhere in the Apocalypse. They dismiss as being in league with the 'beast of the Apocalypse' anyone who opposes their strange, unsupported and frequently blatantly absurd interpretations of the text. They are especially keen on locating signs in current happenings of the coming of the end of the world. We are assured that these happenings were foretold in this book of prophecy. Chapter and verse are readily supplied.<sup>1</sup>

The uninformed reader readily falls victim to such propaganda, because its perpetrators claim to be in possession of important information from God which provides the key to an otherwise complex and confusing world. By asserting that the Apocalypse, as they interpret it, is God's word, they claim that their interpretation is beyond the reach of reason or the ordinary laws that govern meaning in human communication. Mindless acceptance and rote memorisation are all that are required of the reader.

Summing up the fruits of scholarship concerning the Apocalypse, Brevard S. Childs writes:

There is a wide consensus that all interpretations which would see in the book a prefiguring of various epochs of world or church history are misconstrued ... Modern commentators, both conservative and liberal, are agreed that the book arose during a crisis of the first century, and was addressed to the needs of its recipients of the same period within the thought patterns of that era. In sum, the book offers neither a blueprint of future history nor a timeless symbol system.<sup>2</sup>

Some apocalyptic writings reveal a fascination with the other world, and take the reader on imaginary journeys into heaven or hell. Scholars note an influence here from Greek<sup>3</sup> and also from Persian<sup>4</sup> literature. Others, especially the Book of Daniel (the only apocalypse in the Old Testament canon), and the Apocalypse (the only apocalypse in the New Testament canon) are concerned directly with *history*.

<sup>1</sup> If you think I am exaggerating read *Armageddon* by Jimmy Swaggart (Louisiana, J. Swaggart pub. 1987). The author uses the Apocalypse as though it were a ball by ball description of the final days of human history, with the wicked finding their due punishment from God, while the just are rapt into the heavens by God, escape the judgment, and then come back and reign on the earth for a thousand years. And so it goes on. Fine as science fiction, but the author believes that he is describing reality, and as revealed by God.

<sup>2</sup> *The New Testament as Canon: an Introduction* (SCM, 1984) 503.

<sup>3</sup> Plato b. 427 BC "The myth of Er" in *The Republic* Book X; Plutarch b. 45 AD 'On the delays of the divine vengeance'

<sup>4</sup> Several key features of the historical apocalypses were paralleled in Persian writings already in the Hellenistic Age, notably the periodization of history, eschatological woes, resurrection and the supernatural forces of good and evil' (John J Collins 'The Apocalyptic Imagination' [NY Crossroad, 1984] page 25).

## Living the life of Jesus

Like other apocalyptic works, the Apocalypse focuses on the supernatural world, for it intends to examine history from a divine perspective. Like them also, it is concerned to make the point that the ultimate judgment of history transcends space and time as we know it. Being a Christian work, its focus is on the influence upon history of the exalted Christ.

If you are studying the Apocalypse hoping to use it as a crystal ball that will give you inside information concerning the twenty-first or twenty-second century, you are in for a complete disappointment. A reading of the Apocalypse was never meant to by-pass either faith or intelligence. The inspired insights which the author had concerned his own world. They do, however, have much to teach us. If we understand him intelligently, and reflect in faith on what he has written, we will be helped as we seek divine assistance in responding to our world in the way in which Jesus responded to his.

## The Structure of the Apocalypse

The Apocalypse, like most of the works of the New Testament, was written to be proclaimed: in the case of the Apocalypse, by a preacher to the assembled community. After a brief introduction, we have the opening liturgical dialogue, followed by a prophetic instruction. The conclusion of the work mirrors its introduction.

The bulk of the work is made up of seven scenes, each of which is concerned with the historical situation confronting the author and his audience. In a masterful way, the author provides the preacher with the means of drawing the assembly to grasp the divine design working through their history. The movement is one of gradual concentration, as wider circles narrow and spiral in towards the centre.

Between each scene, we are taken from the earthly to the heavenly plane as the author focuses the attention of his readers on the 'real' world, present and active at the heart of our human experience, but transcending the limited, false and surface world in which we are tempted to live our lives. The 'real' world is the world of God's action, a world visible only to the eyes of faith. In this way he reveals the true meaning of history in the light of the already achieved victory of Christ. The first of these explorations of the transcendent is a powerful portrait of the exalted Christ, the lord of history. This portrait is meant to remain before our eyes throughout the work.

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c: Prophetic commission	1:9-11	16
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Scene 1. Seven letters	2:1 - 3:22	23
<i>The Transcendent</i>	4:1 - 5:14	40
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- <i>Religious Experience</i>		
- <i>The Crucified and Risen Christ</i>		
- <i>Christ and the meaning of history</i>		
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1. Action of Christ in history		
2-4. War, famine and death		
5. Martyrs vindicated		
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1-4. Suffering is everywhere but limited		
5. Demonic war		
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- <i>The Final Reign of God</i>		
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- <i>The Woman versus the Dragon</i>		
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Scene 4: Forces for good and evil	12:13 - 14:5	80
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Interlude	14:6-20	87
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The good will be saved		
The wicked will be condemned		
<i>The Transcendent</i>	15:1-8	90
- <i>The Final Victory of God</i>		
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1-4. Comprehensive Judgment		
5. Fall of Rome		
6. Har Mageddon		
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<i>The Transcendent</i>	19:1-10	104
- <i>The Defeat of Evil</i>		
- <i>The Wedding Banquet</i>		
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b <sup>1</sup> : Liturgical dialogue	22:8-17	123
a <sup>1</sup> : Conclusion	22:18-21	125