

## THE TRANSCENDENT

John declares that he could ‘see the voice.’ (The NRSV attempts to ‘make sense’ of the expression by translating ‘see whose voice it was’). This expression ‘see the voice’ occurs forty-three times in the Apocalypse. The reference is not to a vision properly so called (one does not *see* a voice), but rather to a faith-perception, an inspired insight which is the fruit of mature Christian reflection.

He sees ‘seven golden lampstands’. Seven, as we have already noted (see 1:4) indicates fullness. Gold symbolises divinity, here and throughout the rest of the book. In the midst of the lampstands which, as will soon be explained (see 1:2), symbolise the seven churches of Asia, he sees ‘one like the Son of Man.’ The reference is to the Book of Daniel

As I watched, thrones were set in place, and an Ancient One took his throne; his clothing was white as snow, and the hair of his head like pure wool; his throne was fiery flames, and its wheels were burning fire. A stream of fire issued and flowed out from his presence; a thousand thousands served him, and ten thousand times ten thousand stood attending him; the court sat in judgment and the books were opened ... As I watched in the night visions, I saw one like a human being coming with the clouds of heaven, and he came to the Ancient One and was presented before him. To him was given dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations and languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion, that shall not pass away, and his kingship is one that shall never be destroyed.

– Daniel 7:9-10, 13-14

Both Daniel and the Apocalypse are concerned with judgment. For John, the ultimate judgment of what really matters is made by the exalted Christ. It might appear that the Roman Empire and the Jewish Synagogue were in a commanding position, leaving the Christian communities defenceless. The truth, however, is that Christ reigns and he will vindicate those united to him. Jesus is the ‘Son of Man’ of Daniel’s vision (see also 14:14). The title expresses his commitment in solidarity to the poor, the broken and the persecuted. It expresses also that he and those with whom he identifies (including those to whom this work is addressed) will be vindicated by God.

**<sup>12</sup>Then I turned to see whose voice it was that spoke to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands,**

**<sup>13</sup>and in the midst of the lampstands I saw one like the Son of Man**

**[one like a Son of Man]  
clothed with a long robe  
and with a golden sash  
across his chest;**

**<sup>14</sup>his head and his hair  
were white as white  
wool, white as snow; his  
eyes were like a flame of  
fire,**

**<sup>15</sup>his feet were like *brass*,  
refined as in a furnace,  
and his voice was like  
the sound of many wa-  
ters;**

**<sup>16</sup>In his right hand he  
held seven stars,  
and from his mouth  
came a sharp, two-edged  
sword,**

**and his face was like the  
sun shining with full  
force.**

We are reminded of another of Daniel's visions:

I looked up and saw a man clothed in linen with a belt of gold around his waist ... his face was like lightning, his eyes like flaming torches, his arms and legs like the gleam of burnished bronze, and the sound of his words like the roar of a multitude ... I fell into a trance, face to the ground. But then a hand touched me.

– Daniel 10:5-6,9-10<sup>1</sup>

This marvellously rich symbolic portrait of the exalted Christ forms the backdrop to this first section of the Apocalypse; indeed, to the whole of the work. The risen Christ stands centre-stage. Everything is to be seen in the light of his active power in history.

The prevailing colour here is white. This first use establishes its significance for the rest of the work. It symbolises the luminous splendour of the glorified Jesus who, through his resurrection, participates in divine glory.

The churches, symbolised by the seven golden lampstands,<sup>2</sup> are divine sanctuaries in which people come to participate in the radiant splendour of the exalted Christ who is dwelling in the midst of his people. They are his instruments in effecting the reign of God on the earth.

Clothing, too, has symbolic value for our author, representing the way in which the person wearing it relates to others. The long robe and the golden sash are priestly vestments,<sup>3</sup> for his is a central mediatory role, uniting in his person the divine and the human and so able to draw the world into divine communion. He is the king-priest present in the sanctuary of the assembled Christian communities (see 1:6).

The head is the seat of vital energy and decision. It is white because the risen Jesus participates in the radiant splendour of God.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Compare Isaiah 6:5; Ezekiel 1:28.

<sup>2</sup> See 1:20; compare Exodus 25:31-40 and Zechariah 4:2.

<sup>3</sup> See Josephus, *Antiquities* 3.7.2; Exodus 28:4; Sirach 45:8.

<sup>4</sup> See Daniel 7:9.

Jesus' eyes are portrayed as a 'flame of fire', for nothing is hidden from his purifying judgment.<sup>1</sup> The feet symbolise strength and dominion. Christ stands victorious and invincible. The sound of many waters<sup>2</sup> expresses the power of his words; the right hand symbolises the power of his actions. As belonging to the heavens, stars are associated with the realm of the transcendent. We see the exalted Christ holding in his hand seven stars, decoded later as the 'angels of the seven churches'(1:20), referring probably to the historical churches themselves, viewed in their transcendent dimension, that is to say, seen as God sees them.

Unlike the weapons with which the Roman legions subdue and oppress, the sharp two-edged sword issues from Jesus' mouth. His power is in his word. We recall the powerful eulogy of the word of God in the Letter to the Hebrews (4:12-13):

The word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And before him no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to his eyes. *The word for us is towards him.*

– Hebrews 4:12-13

'His face was like the sun shining in full strength'. The Roman Emperors borrowed from the Egyptians the image of the sun in their claims of divinity. John is appealing to the Christians not to be seduced by this, but to keep their eyes fixed on Jesus. We recall the words of Paul to the Corinthian church:

It is the God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness', who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.

– 2Corinthians 4:6

<sup>1</sup>See Daniel 10:6; also 'The Lord your God is a devouring fire' (Deuteronomy 4:24).

<sup>2</sup>Compare Ezekiel 1:24; 43:2.

**<sup>17</sup>When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead.**

**But he placed his right hand on me, saying,**

**'Do not be afraid; I am the first and the last,<sup>18</sup> and the living one;**

**I was dead, and see, I am alive forever and ever, and I have the keys of Death and of Hades.**

**<sup>19</sup>Now write what you have seen, what is and what is to take place after this.**

**<sup>20</sup>As for the mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand, and the seven golden lampstands: the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.'**

His encounter with the exalted Jesus overpowers John who responds as one does to a theophany. Jesus, however, places his strong right hand upon him,<sup>1</sup> echoing words spoken by God through the prophet Isaiah:

Do not fear ... I am the first and I am the last; besides me there is no god.

– Isaiah 44:2,6<sup>2</sup>

Christ died, it is true; but he is alive,<sup>3</sup> and for ever, and can release whom he wills from death. The salvation offered by the Roman system is for this life only and it fails to satisfy our deepest yearnings. He has conquered death itself and promises life eternal. He will see that they live with him.

John is commanded to write what he has seen, that is to say, what he has come to understand because of his communion with the risen Jesus. He is to write what is, that is to say, the judgment of Christ concerning the present state of the churches.<sup>4</sup> He is commanded to write also what is to take place hereafter, that is to say, the immediate and ultimate destiny of the churches because of the transcendent influence of their exalted Lord.<sup>5</sup>

Finally, John introduces the word 'mystery', for, as we have already noted, the revelation of John concerns the design of God, but it is expressed in symbolic language, and so needs to be interpreted with the aid of divine wisdom.<sup>6</sup> John uses symbolism because his insights are into something that remains essentially mysterious. Those with whom he is sharing his prophecy can receive it only to the extent that they share in the awe and wonder of John's experience and have the wisdom to interpret his meaning. It is the same for us. For the most part the meaning of John's symbols is grasped from the context of his first use of them. Here he decodes two of his symbols: the stars and the lampstands.

The assembled Christians are meant to apply the message of the Apocalypse to their own lives. This is John's primary focus. The action of the exalted Christ, however, persists in history. And so, without looking for detailed expressions of our history in the Apocalypse, we too can receive its central message with something of the same awe, and, guided by the Spirit who inspired John, we can be led to insights that inform our own understanding as well.

<sup>1</sup>See 1 Kings 18:46 re Elijah; 2 Kings 3:15 re Elisha; and Ezekiel 1:4.

<sup>2</sup>Compare 1:8 – 'I am the Alpha and the Omega.'

<sup>3</sup>'I live forever'(Deuteronomy 32:40); 'He who lives forever created the whole universe'(Ben Sira 18:1).

<sup>4</sup>This takes the form of the seven letters, 2:1 - 3:22.

<sup>5</sup>From chapter four to the end. <sup>6</sup>See 13:18; 17:9.