

THE TRANSCENDENT

John was told: ‘Write what you see, what is and what is to take place after this’(1:19). In his seven letters to the churches he has written about ‘what is’. For the rest of the book he is writing about ‘what is to take place after this’. He is sharing with his readers an inspired insight into their situation, drawing on his faith in what God has already done in Christ, and in the transcendent design which God has for the world as revealed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

Before focusing upon what is going to happen to the communities, he looks beyond history to the divine reality that transcends it. Everything is to be seen in the light of what John describes here.

¹After this I looked, and there in heaven a door stood open! And the first voice, which I had heard speaking to me like a trumpet said, ‘Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this.’

²At once I was in the Spirit, and there in heaven stood a throne, with one seated on the throne!

³And he seated there looked like jasper and carnelian, and around the throne is a rainbow that looks like an emerald.

⁴Around the throne are twenty-four thrones, and seated on the thrones are twenty-four elders, clad in white robes, with golden crowns on their heads.

1. God's throne and the saints

John is modelling his account on that of Ezekiel:

The heavens were opened and I saw visions of God ... As I looked, a stormy wind came out of the north: a great cloud with brightness around it, and *fire* flashing forth continually, and in the middle of the fire, something like a gleaming amber. In the middle of it was something like *four living creatures*. This was their appearance ...

The four had the face of a *human being*, the face of a *lion* on the right side, the face of an *ox* on the left side, and the face of an *eagle*; such were their faces.

Their *wings* were spread out above ... In the middle of the living creatures there was something that looked like burning coals of *fire*, like *torches* moving to and fro among the living creatures; and the *fire* was bright, and *lightning* issued from the fire. The living creatures darted to and fro, like a flash of *lightning* ...

Over the heads of the living creatures there was something like a dome, shining like *crystal* ... I heard the sound of their wings like the sound of mighty waters, like the *thunder* of the Almighty, a sound of tumult like the sound of an army ...

And above the dome over their heads there was something like a *throne*, in appearance like sapphire; and seated above the likeness of a throne was something that seemed like a human form ... and there was a splendour all around. Like the *bow* in a cloud on a rainy day ... This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord. When I saw it, I fell on my face, and I heard the voice of someone speaking.

– Ezekiel 1:1-14, 22-28

Similarities can be found in Isaiah's inaugural vision which also has a liturgical setting:

I saw the Lord sitting on a *throne* , high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six *wings*: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. And one called to another and said: '*Holy, holy, holy* is the Lord of hosts; The whole earth is full of his *glory* .

Isaiah 6:1-3

It is important to keep reminding ourselves that John's visions are not descriptions of what he sees with his eyes. He is sharing what he has come to see with his mind and heart as he was inspired to penetrate to the ultimate meaning of things with his intelligence enlightened by faith. He invites the reader (or rather, the assembled community) to see what he has seen: 'I looked, and there (look!)'(4:1; see 1:7).

He draws their attention firstly to the fact that the divine transcendent reality is not closed to them: Christ has opened the door of heaven. He has gone through to full communion with God, and, through the open door he can communicate from God to us, and we can communicate to God through him.¹

The voice that speaks like a trumpet is that which spoke to him earlier (1:10). It is the voice of Christ himself, mediated through the angel, as in all apocalyptic works. The risen Christ is about to reveal to him the meaning of history and the ultimate destiny of mankind. He is about to reveal to him the way God judges things to be, and so what ultimately matters. John speaks of himself as being in the Spirit (see 1:10). What he has come to understand and what he is about to share is the fruit of prayer and the gift of Christ's own Spirit.

The throne is the centre of power in a kingdom. God is said to be seated there, for, whatever the appearances, it is God who is the Lord of history and who is in possession of the kingdom. John focuses on the throne here for his interest is in God's action in history, and in the establishment of God's reign through the action of Christ. The beauty of heaven, captured with the images of precious stones and the rainbow, with sparkling flashes of red, yellow and green light , reminds us somewhat of Moses' vision at Sinai:

Moses and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the *elders* of Israel went up, and they saw the God of Israel. Under his feet there was something like a pavement of sapphire stone, like the very heaven for clearness ... they beheld God.

Exodus 24:9-11

There are twenty-four thrones for those who belong to the twelve tribes of Israel along with those who are followers of the twelve apostles of Christ (see 21:12,14). They are clothed in white, for they participate in the luminous radiance of the risen Christ (see 1:14). The effective power of God in history is shared by the saints of the Old and New Testaments, who have achieved victory in their lives and now participate in God's glory – hence the golden crowns on their heads. Crowns, because they share in the victory of Jesus over all that is evil (see 2:10). Golden. because it is communion with God that they are enjoying (see see 1:13).

¹Later on the whole of heaven will be spoken of as completely thrown open (19:11).

⁵Coming from the throne are flashes of lightning, and voices and peals of thunder, and in front of the throne burn seven flaming torches, which are the seven spirits of God; ⁶and in front of the throne there is something like a sea of glass, like crystal. And in the midst of the throne, and on each side of the throne, are four living creatures, full of eyes in front and behind: ⁷the first living creature like a lion, the second living creature like an ox, the third living creature with a face like a human face, and the fourth living creature like a flying eagle. ⁸And the four living creatures, each of them with six wings, are full of eyes all around and inside.

2. Religious Experience

John is contrasting the worship of the true God with the imperial cult. In place of the cult priests there are the priestly people of the new Jerusalem (the twenty-four elders; see 4:4); in place of the sun and moon and the five known planets, there are the seven spirits of God; in place of the creatures of the zodiac of Babylonian astrology, there are the four living creatures. In place of the patronage of Zeus, the God of thunder and lightning, there is the constant communication coming from the throne of God. The communication is enlightening (hence ‘flashes of lightning’); it is intelligible and so meant to be understood (hence ‘voices’; see 1:10). However, it transcends human comprehension (hence ‘peals of thunder’).¹

To speak of God’s action in history is to speak of the Spirit (hence the ‘seven spirits of God’; see 1:4). The flaming torches remind us of Deuteronomy: ‘The Lord your God is a devouring fire’ (4:24), and of the words which John the Baptist speaks concerning Jesus: ‘He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire’ (Matthew 3:11).

The Jews were a *land* people, unlike their northern neighbours, the Phoenicians. In Jewish literature, the sea is a symbol of chaos, representing the environment over which humans have no control and in which they venture at their own risk.⁴ Chaos is excluded from heaven. The only ‘sea’ in heaven, therefore, is of crystal,³ adding beautifully to the translucent splendour surrounding God.

The four living creatures are taken from Ezekiel. There are four of them, because they symbolise the ways in which divine activity is manifested throughout the whole of earthly reality as well as the ways in which earthly reality responds to the divine (hence ‘four’, for the four points of the compass). Because these ways are partly incomprehensible they are represented as animal. One might speak of the ways in which the transcendent is immanent in creation or of the many mysterious ways in which we are moved by religious experience. The lion symbolises power; the ox, fecundity; man, reason and love; and the eagle, movement.

¹ Compare Exodus 19:16 (Sinai), and notice the gradual build up from this present scene through Apocalypse 4:5, 8:5, 11:19, to 16:18-21.2.

² The classical image is in Genesis 1:1, where primeval chaos is represented as swirling, trackless water. See Apocalypse 13:1 and 21:1.

³ See 15:2.

They are full of eyes for nothing is hidden from God. We read in Zechariah:

These seven are the eyes of the Lord, which range through the whole earth

– Zechariah 4:10

God is immanent in the whole of creation which is caught up in a cosmic hymn of praise, echoed by the saints, the members of the Christian community, made holy because of their union with Jesus. We are reminded again of Isaiah's vision, though here, as well as the glory of God seen in creation and history ('God Almighty who was and is'), we are directed to the coming of the glorified Christ as the full revelation of God ('and is to come'; see 1:4,8).

The Christians of Asia are tempted to throw in their lot with those who fall down in worship of the Roman state and the benefits it brings to those willing to comply with its rule. True worship, says John, is to be offered only to the true God, the God of Jesus, the creator.

The final prayer picks up some of the themes of the prayer of David:

Blessed are you, O Lord, the God of our ancestor Israel, forever and ever. Yours, O Lord, are the greatness, the power, the glory, the victory, and the majesty; for all that is in the heavens and on the earth is yours; yours is the kingdom, O Lord, and you are exalted as head above all. Riches and honour come from you, and you rule over all. In your hand are power and might; and it is in your hand to make great and to give strength to all.

– 1Chronicles 29:10-12.

Day and night without ceasing they sing, 'Holy, holy, holy, the Lord God the Almighty, who was and is and is to come.'

⁹And whenever the living creatures give glory and honour and thanks to the one who is seated on the throne, who lives forever and ever, ¹⁰the twenty-four elders fall before the one who is seated on the throne and worship the one who lives forever and ever; they cast their crowns before the throne, singing, ¹¹'You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honour and power, for you created all things and by your will they existed and were created.'

Christ is able to unveil the meaning of history

¹Then I saw in the right hand of the one seated on the throne a scroll written on the inside and on the back, sealed with seven seals;

²and I saw a mighty angel proclaiming with a loud voice, 'Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?'

³And no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll or to look into it.

⁴And I began to weep bitterly because no one was found worthy to open the scroll or to look into it.

⁵Then one of the elders said to me, 'Do not Weep not. See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals'.

⁶And *in the midst of* the throne and the four living creatures and *in the midst of* the elders, I saw a Lamb standing as *having been* slaughtered, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth.

3. The crucified and risen Jesus

The scroll represents the whole of history. There are no gaps, no empty spaces: it is 'written on the inside and on the back'.¹ It is in God's right hand (see 1:16), for history reveals the power of God. However, it seems that the meaning of history is to remain forever hidden, a completely closed book: 'sealed with seven seals'.² John is alluding to the instructions given to Daniel:

You Daniel, keep these words secret and the book sealed until the time of the end.

– Daniel 12:4

John's disappointment is relieved when it is revealed to him that the crucified and exalted Christ knows the mind of God. History has reached its end, its goal, in Christ. He has revealed the meaning of history by showing us who God really is and how God has chosen to reveal himself to us in history. He has also revealed what it is truly like to be human and how we are to live so as to enjoy the fullness of divine communion.

In Christ the Messianic promises are fulfilled, for he is the king who is bringing about the reign of God on earth. He is linked to Old Testament history by the two titles: 'the Lion of the tribe of Judah' and 'the Root of David'.

Judah crouches down, stretches out like a lion ...
The sceptre shall not depart from Judah ... until
tribute comes to him; and the obedience of the
peoples is his.

– Genesis 49:9-10

That day, the root of Jesse (David's father) shall
stand as a signal to the peoples; the nations shall
inquire of him, and his dwelling shall be glorious.

– Isaiah 11:10³

At the centre of divine action in the world (hence 'in the midst of the throne'), of religious experience (hence 'the four living things'), and of the communion of those united to Jesus (hence 'the elders'), stands the crucified and risen Christ.

¹Compare Ezekiel 2:9-10.

²Compare Isaiah 29:11-12.

³This text is quoted in Romans 15:12.

The symbol of the Lamb that has been killed but that is standing victorious over death recurs again and again right through to the final scenes of the Apocalypse, twenty-eight times in all. The primary reference is to the Paschal Lamb whose blood saved the Israelites from death on the day of their redemption from Egyptian slavery.¹ It is picked up again in reference to the suffering servant of God who offered his life for the people:

He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth, like a lamb that is led to the slaughter.

– Isaiah 53:7

The so-called power of the Roman empire is based on military conquest and the injustice of controlled trade. The power of God is something entirely other. It is the power of love, and the Christian community is called to follow one who is symbolised by a lamb. In terms of the power exercised in this world, he was a victim (he was slaughtered). But he conquered death and now stands as the one through whom all God's creative and redeeming love is poured out on the world.

In the Gospel of John the crucified Jesus is described in terms that recall the Passover Lamb: 'None of his bones shall be broken' (John 19:36). Jesus, though crucified, is alive. He has conquered death. He is 'the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world' (John 1:29). The striking symbol of the slaughtered yet victorious Lamb expresses well the idea conveyed by the following statement of John's Gospel in relation to the risen Christ:

The first day of the week² ... Jesus stood among the disciples ... and showed them his hands and his side ... and said to them, Receive the Holy Spirit.

– John 20:19-22

His hands and his side witness to the crucifixion. Yet he is standing there victorious over death, and the source of God's active power in the world.

The risen Christ has seven horns, that is to say, fullness of active power; seven eyes, that is to say, nothing is hidden from him;³ seven spirits, that is to say, the fullness of the power and activity of the Holy Spirit.⁴

¹Exodus 12:1-27; Leviticus 23:5-6; Deuteronomy 16:1-7. The imagery is found in two Christian adaptations of Jewish inter-testamentary writings. 'And I saw that a virgin was born from Judah, wearing a linen stole; and from her was born a spotless lamb. At his left there was something like a lion, and all the wild animals rushed against him, but the lamb conquered them... Honour Levi and Judah, because from their seed will arise the Lamb of God who will take away the sin of the world, and will save all the nations, as well as Israel' (The Testament of Joseph, 19:8,11). 'Through you will be fulfilled the heavenly prophecy concerning the Lamb of God, the Saviour of the world, because the unspotted one will be betrayed by the lawless, and the sinless one will die for the impious by the blood of the covenant for the salvation of the gentiles and of Israel' (The Testament of Benjamin, 3:8).

²See 1:10. The reference is to the Sunday liturgical assembly.

³Compare Apocalypse 1:14; 2:18; 4:6,8.

⁴Compare Apocalypse 1:4; 3:1. See also John 20:22. Also Sirach: 'There is but one who is wise, greatly to be feared, seated upon his throne - the Lord. It is he who created wisdom; he saw her and took her measure; he poured her out upon all his works, upon all the living according to his gift; he lavished her upon those who love him' (1:8-10).

Christ is able to unveil the meaning of history

4. The meaning of history will be revealed by Christ

⁷He went and *has received* the scroll from the right hand of the one who was seated on the throne.

⁸And when he *took* the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell before the Lamb, each holding a harp, and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints.

⁹They sing a new song: 'You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slaughtered and by your blood you ransomed for God saints from every tribe and language and people and nation;

¹⁰you have made them to be a kingdom and priests serving our God, and they *reign* on earth'.

The crucified and risen Christ has received the scroll, for God has willed to place all of history in his hands. He can reveal its meaning to all who are in communion with him.

All creation ('the four living creatures', 4:6), and the people of God (the 'saints') of the Old and New Testaments ('the twenty-four elders', 4:4) burst into a lyrical liturgy of praise of Christ. Significant is the presence of the bowls - the sprinkling basins containing the blood of sacrifice.¹ They are golden because they are for divine worship (1:13).

In this case, reference is to the blood of the martyrs (especially, no doubt, the blood of the martyrs of the churches of Asia; see 2:13). Their lives have not been given in vain, and are offered up in prayer that God will once again vindicate the just, liberate the oppressed, and condemn those responsible for injustice.

It is a new song that is being sung in honour of the new deed of God in glorifying his Son, Jesus.² John highlights the fact that the redemption effected by Jesus is of universal significance, encompassing all, Jew and Gentile alike.

Once again, the disciples of Jesus are spoken of as priests (1:6). By living Jesus' life, they are already carrying out the priestly function given by him to be his instruments in bringing about God's reign on earth.

¹2 Kings 16:13,15.

²Psalms 33:3; 40:3; 96:1; 98:1; 144:9-10; 149:1; Isaiah 42:10. 'I am about to do a new thing'(Isaiah 43:19).

To the hymn of the material universe and of the people of God is added that of the myriads of beings that belong to the sphere of the transcendent. We are reminded of the following from Daniel:

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.

– Daniel 7:10

All proclaim the wonder of Christ. He is able to effect the divine purpose ('power'). He enjoys and is able to give a superabundance of divine life ('wealth'). He reveals the mystery of God's saving action ('wisdom'). He is already exercising his power ('might'). 'Honour' is due to him for the wonder of who he is and what he has done. So is 'glory', for the resplendent beauty of God is manifested in him. So too is 'blessing', that is to say, praise for his role in pouring out the blessings of God on the whole of creation.

The final Amen comes from the Spirit moving in creation and responding to the movement and revelation of God. Thus is completed the heavenly liturgy, and it is this transcendent scene that dominates the whole of the rest of the Apocalypse.

Whatever is taking place in Asia, it must be understood in the light of the triumph of the exalted Christ - a triumph in which the martyrs of the persecution are already sharing, and which is recognised, beyond time and beyond history, by the whole cosmos.

John is seeing with the eyes of faith. He is seeing the way things really are, as God sees them. In the light of these ultimate truths, he now turns to focus on the meaning of what is happening in his world as revealed by Jesus.

¹¹Then I looked, and I heard the voice of many angels surrounding the throne and the living creatures and the elders. They numbered myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands,
¹²singing with full voice, 'Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honour and glory and blessing!'

¹³Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, singing, 'To the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honour and glory and might forever and ever!'

¹⁴And the four living creatures said, 'Amen!' and the elders fell down and worshipped.