

THE TRANSCENDENT

This is the seventh and final announcement. The loud voices indicate that it is important and to be understood (see 1:10). It brings to a conclusion the revelation made upon the breaking of the seventh and final seal. Everything from this point to the end of the apocalypse is a spelling out of the final insight which John has into the ultimate meaning of history. It has already been prepared for:

In the days when the seventh angel is to blow his trumpet, the mystery of God will be fulfilled, as he announced to his servants the prophets.

– Apocalypse 10:7

The seventh trumpet coincides with the third and final woe. Just as the opening of the seventh seal revealed all that is announced by the seven trumpets, so the sounding of the seventh trumpet announces all that is revealed in the remainder of the book: the destruction of all that opposes God and the ultimate vindication of the good. The reign of God, through the life-giving of his Messiah, is assured of triumph.

The hymn of thanksgiving takes us to heaven, that is to say, to the presence of God and to the community of God's people (see 4:4) who are celebrating the divine conquest as an achieved fact. There is no going back and no doubt. The final trumpet has sounded. Note the absence of 'and who is to come' in 11:17.

We examined the concept of God's wrath earlier (see 6:16-17). The final outcome of the destruction of evil by God is spoken of in terms of a kingdom (see 1:6). One could translate this as 'empire': the empire of God's loving action in the world, as distinct from the Roman and other empires which are built on murder, lies and injustice. Jesus himself spoke often of the kingdom of God – language which is familiar to readers of Old Testament apocalyptic literature:

The God of heaven will set up a *kingdom* that shall never be destroyed.

– Daniel 2:44

On to him (the son of man) was was given dominion and glory and *kingship* ... and his *kingship* is one that shall not pass away.

– Daniel 7:14

¹⁵Then the seventh angel blew his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, saying, 'The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah, and he will reign forever and ever'.

¹⁶Then the twenty-four elders who sit on their thrones before God fell on their faces and worshipped God,

¹⁷singing, 'We give you thanks, Lord God Almighty, who are and who were, that you have taken your great power and begun to reign.

¹⁸The nations raged, but your wrath has come, and the time for judging the dead, for rewarding your servants, the prophets and saints, and all who fear your name, both small and great, and for destroying those who destroy the earth'.

¹⁹Then God's temple in heaven was opened, and the ark of his covenant was seen within his temple; and there were flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, an earthquake, and heavy hail.

¹A great portent appeared in heaven:

a woman clothed with the sun with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars.

²She was pregnant and was crying out in birthpangs, in the agony of giving birth.

John opens this scene with the ark of the covenant, for he wishes his readers to see in what follows the fulfilment of God's promise to establish a new and everlasting covenant with his people. This is the climax of God's action in history, and John dramatises this by adding heavy hail to the symbols that appeared in 8:5.

We are reminded of the legend which tells of the prophet Jeremiah hiding the ark prior to the destruction of Jerusalem. Its revelation now signifies that the end has come:

The place shall remain unknown until God gathers his people together again and shows his mercy. Then the Lord will disclose these things, and the glory of the Lord and the cloud will appear.

– 2Maccabees 2:7-8

The first sign : The woman in labour

A sign is a revelation that is given in symbol. John is presenting this symbol and inviting his listeners to interpret its meaning. The word 'great' is in an emphatic position in Greek, indicating the importance of what is being expressed here.

The significant reality which John is about to describe is seen in heaven, that is to say, in the realm of the transcendent. By means of revelation, the prophet, in the Spirit, sees God's design. His mission is to communicate what he perceives.

'Woman' in the Old Testament is used symbolically for the people of God as spouse (see Hosea 2:1), and as mother (see Isaiah 60:4; 66:7-9). John follows this tradition as he portrays God's people as loved by him, and as having an obligation to do all in their power to carry out the mission of the Messiah on earth and so to bring history to its goal. This mission, as the churches of Asia know only too well, involves them in suffering.

Though this passage is not speaking of Mary, in Johannine theology the use of the symbol woman for the community readily brings to mind the woman who was, in fact, the mother of the Messiah.

Writing to the Galatians, Paul could speak of himself being ‘in the pain of childbirth until Christ is formed in you’(Galatians 4:19). The role of the Church is to continue to bring Christ to birth in his members. Once again we think of Mary, the woman who stood with the Beloved Disciple by the cross (see John 19:25-27).

Clothing symbolises the way a person or a community is seen by others (see 1:16).¹ John presents the Church, symbolised by the woman, as clothed in the sun: presenting to the world the glory and the nurturing warmth of the exalted Christ (see 1:16).²

The moon speaks of religious festivities and of the enduring covenant (see Psalm 89:37). These have attained their goal in the life of the Christian community (compare 11:19).

The crown indicates victory in the struggle (see 2:10). The stars represent the glory of heaven (6:13). The community is at present undergoing persecution, but it will finally experience glory. The twelve represent the twelve tribes and the twelve apostles (7:5-8; 21:12-14), and so the universality of the community. There is an interesting contrast here with Isaiah who pictures the people as grieving that they have failed to give birth to salvation:

Like a woman with child, who writhes and cries out in her pangs, when she is near her time, so were we, because of you, O Lord; we were with child, we writhed, but we gave birth only to wind. We have won no victories on earth, and no one is born to inhabit the world.

– Isaiah 26:17-18

By contrast, the Christian communities are, according to John, bringing salvation to the world, and so he encourages them to remain faithful in spite of difficulties which they are undergoing and the sacrifices which they have to make.

¹God gave the first clothing (Genesis 3:21). Note also the splendid clothing of Jerusalem (Isaiah 52:1), the ‘garments of salvation’(Isaiah 61:10).

²Compare the transfiguration scene, Matthew 17:2, and Psalm 104:2.

The second sign : The dragon

³Then another portent appeared in heaven: A great, red dragon with seven heads and ten horns, and seven diadems¹ on his heads.

⁴His tail swept down a third of the stars of heaven and threw them to the earth. Then the dragon is standing before the woman who was about to bear a child, so that he might devour her child as soon as it was born;

⁵And she gave birth to a son, a male child, who is to shepherd all the nations with a rod of iron (Psalm 2:9). But her child was snatched away and taken to God and to his throne;

⁶and the woman fled into the wilderness where she has a place prepared by God, so that there she can be nourished for one thousand two hundred sixty days.

The second sign is of a dragon (compare Isaiah 27:1). In the case of the woman it was the sign that was described as great; here it is the dragon. As a sign the dragon is of secondary importance. It is red and therefore associated with the demonic (see 6:3-4). John chooses an animal, thereby indicating that he is referring to something that belongs to the created universe but is, at the same time, beyond human comprehension.

The seven heads and the seven royal crowns signify the fullness of the kind of power exercised by the kings of the earth.² Horns symbolise the exercise of power. This mysterious and evil reality has ten horns, for the power while seeming complete is in fact limited.³ The dragon opposes the forces empowered by God (the stars, 1:16, 6:13), but as only a third of these are swept down (see 8:7-12), any victory he has is essentially limited. We find the same kind of imagery in Daniel's symbolic description of Antiochus Epiphanes IV, the Syrian king responsible for persecuting the Jews:

The horn grew as high as the host of heaven. It threw down to the earth some of the host and some of the stars, and trampled on them.

– Daniel 8:10

The child refers primarily to Christ,⁴ born of God's people: the promised one. The powers of evil attempted to destroy him, but God raised him up and glorified him. The image includes those to whom the church has given birth.

God is protecting his people from evil.⁵ For those journeying from Egypt to the Promised Land, the desert was more than a place of trial. It was also a place where they experienced a special intimacy with God (Hosea 2:16-17). The church, too, receives its bread from heaven in the desert prepared for it by God (see Exodus 16).

¹That is, royal crowns as distinct from the crowns of victory. They are symbols of kingly power.

²Always a negative term in the Apocalypse (See 1:5).

³This is the way the Apocalypse uses the symbol ten (See 2:10),. Compare Daniel 7:7 and 24, for the same imagery of the ten horns.

⁴Note the reference to Psalm 2:9, and compare Apocalypse 2:27 and 19:15.

⁵1260 days = three and a half years: symbol of persecution and trial (See 11:3).

The transcendent view

The historical battle between good and evil, being waged on earth between the disciples of Jesus and the powers of evil, is here transposed by John into heaven. That is to say, it is looked at, not in its historical realisation, but from a transcendent perspective. Michael is the angelic counterpart and heavenly representative of the people of God. John is borrowing once again from the imagery of the book of Daniel:

At that time Michael, the great prince, the protector of your people, shall arise. There shall be a time of anguish, such as has never occurred since nations first came into existence. But at that time your people shall be delivered, every one who is found written in the book. Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky; and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever. But you, Daniel, keep the words, and the book sealed until the time of the end.

– Daniel 12:1-4

The book has been unsealed. The end time is here. John is declaring that the battle has been won.

The dragon is here called ‘that ancient serpent’, reflecting ancient mythology (see Isaiah 27:1). It is identified as the Devil and Satan.

‘Satan’ is a Hebrew word meaning ‘the accuser’¹. This was an especially apt title in Asia Minor at that time, when some of the Jews were accusing Christians before the Roman authorities.² ‘Satan’ was translated into Greek as *diabolos* (whence our English ‘devil’) at a time when Satan was imagined, not only as testing people’s innocence, but also as deceiving people and tempting them to evil.

¹See Job 2:1ff and Zechariah 3:1-6.

²See Apocalypse 2:9 and 3:9 where John refers to the Jews as the ‘synagogue of Satan’.

⁷And war arose in heaven, Michael and his angels fought against the dragon. The dragon and his angels fought back,

⁸but they were defeated, and there was no longer any place for them in heaven.

⁹The great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world -

he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him.

¹⁰Then I heard a loud voice in heaven, proclaiming, 'Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Messiah, for the accuser of our comrades has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God.

¹¹But they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they did not cling to life even in the face of death.

¹²Rejoice then, you heavens and those who dwell in them!

But woe to the earth and sea, for the devil has come down to you with great wrath, because he knows that his time is short!'

In the New Testament, Satan, or the Devil, is a symbol for the mysterious powers of evil that oppose the reign of God. The imagery of our present passage recalls that of Luke:

The seventy returned with joy, saying, 'Lord, in your name even the demons submit to us!'. He said to them, 'I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning. See, I have given you authority to tread on snakes and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy; and nothing will hurt you. Nevertheless, do not rejoice at this, that the spirits submit to you; but rejoice that your names are written in heaven'.

– Luke 10:17-20

Satan is thrown down to the earth, and so the identity of Satan, and the evidence of his deceiving activity is to be sought on earth, in the ambit of the human historical situation.

The hymn of praise (12:10-12) echoes that of 11:17, adding the word 'salvation.' The imperial myth was that Roman military power and trade brought salvation. John's view is the exact opposite. Salvation is offered by Jesus and it is gained by victory over the forces of evil which reign in empires such as that of Rome.

John reminds his readers that God chose to exercise his power in history through Jesus, who gave his life (blood) and in doing so gave a faithful testimony to the truth that God is love. The Christian community shares his life and carries on his testimony,¹ even to the point of martyrdom – giving their life as Jesus gave his.

John is preparing his readers for his description of the great battle between the woman and the dragon, between the church and its enemies. Here, as is his custom, he assures them that the people of God are certain to be victorious, because of the life-giving sacrifice of Christ.² We are reminded of Jesus own words:

Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.

– John 12:25

¹ Compare 6:9 and 20:4.

² 'To him who loves us, and freed us from our sins by his blood ... to him be glory and dominion *unto the ages*' (1:5).

From the ultimate perspective of the transcendent, evil has already been conquered. However, the struggle is still going on here on earth. John is summoning the church to courage, to perseverance and to hold on to the victory already achieved by Christ, whatever the appearances and the price of the struggle. The power and frustration of evil is evident in the way the Christians are being persecuted. But 'his time is short'. Evil has no enduring significance and has already suffered the essential defeat. As John said earlier: they are in the desert, but they are being nourished by God there (12:2).