

CHAPTER XVIII

How Christian is the Book of Revelation?

G.R. Beasley-Murray

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Marcion's answer to the question would have been plain, even if we had not possessed Tertullian's record of his rejection of the book: "Not Christian at all, far too Jewish!" That answer has been echoed down the centuries by many who would have no desire to be linked with Marcion in any way. Apart from the effect of Dionysius' rejection of the apostolic authorship of the Revelation, its uncertain place in the canon of the New Testament and the ambivalent attitude of many Christians to it have in no small measure been due to the sheer obscurity of the book and the difficulty of discovering its specifically Christian message. It is well known that Luther found the Revelation offensive; he judged it as neither apostolic nor prophetic, for he could not find "Christ" in it—i.e. Christ in the Gospel. Calvin was also dubious as to its worth, and passed over it in eloquent silence in his exposition of the New Testament.

Modern writers frequently experience the same difficulty as Luther, and the charge of the Jewish character of its outlook is often made. This may be illustrated in C. H. Dodd's comments on the book in his early work *The Apostolic Preaching and its Developments*. Dodd regarded the book as manifesting a revived Jewish eschatology; in his view its excessive emphasis on the future has the effect of relegating to a secondary place the distinctive elements of the Gospel, namely the finished work of Christ and the sense of living in the divine presence here and now. He further asserted that its conception of the character of God and of Christ falls below the level not only of the teaching of Jesus but of much of the Old Testament. "The God of the Apocalypse can hardly be recognized as the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, nor has the fierce Messiah, whose warriors ride in blood up to their horses' bridles, many traits that would recall him of whom the primitive kerygma proclaimed that he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil".¹

Rudolf Bultmann maintains a similar viewpoint. He describes the Christianity of Revelation as a "weakly Christianized Judaism", wherein the significance of Christ is practically limited to his giving assurance to the eschatological hope. He writes:

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The peculiar "between-ness" of Christian existence has not been grasped. In fact, not even in the chronological sense does the present possess the character of an interval, because the author does not reflect about the past which in Christ has been brought to its end and out of which believers have been transplanted into a new beginning. Hence the present is understood in a way not basically different from the understanding of it in the Jewish apocalypses: namely as a time of temporariness, of waiting. The clear symptom of this understanding is the fact that *pistis* is essentially conceived as "endurance," as in Judaism.²

¹ *Op. cit.*, pp. 40 f.

² *Theology of the New Testament*, vol. II, London 1955, p. 175.

The chief objections to the book therefore relate to the allegedly sub-Christian nature of its Christology, its eschatology and its doctrine of God and the combination of all three is believed to result in an obscuring of the apostolic gospel which lies at the heart of the New Testament. These are serious charges to make. If they are true we ought presumably to imitate Luther's courage, and insist that the book be placed in a kind of New Testament apocrypha, and warn Christian people of its lack of Gospel truth. The issue is sufficiently important to warrant an examination of such elements of the text as can shed light on it. In this article we can do no more than give pointers to the direction which the exegete must take.

Before we start, however, it may be worth recalling the pilgrimage of R. H. Charles in this field. His Jowett lectures on eschatology were based on a first-hand investigation of the eschatological teaching contained in the Biblical, apocryphal and pseudepigraphical writings of the Jews. In the first edition of the lectures, published in 1899, he anticipated Dodd and Bultmann by characterizing the thought of the Revelation as "unadulterated Judaism" (p. 347). In the second edition of the lectures, 1913, that remark was expurgated, although Charles still considered that the author's attitude to the world reflects the temper of Judaism rather than of Christianity (p. 403). In 1920 he brought twenty five years of study of the Revelation to a conclusion in the issue of his great commentary on the Book of Revelation; in the introduction he resists the view of scholars who affirm the Jewish character of John's doctrine of God, and affirms, "To draw such a conclusion betrays a total misapprehension of the question at issue" (vol. 1. p. cix), and time and again he extols the virtues of the book which he has now come to regard as in some respects the greatest in the New Testament. Charles's experience suggests that first impressions as to the teaching of the Revelation may require revision on patient investigation into the book itself.

One observation, however trite it may appear to the scholar, should be made at the outset, namely the necessity to distinguish between the form and content of a work like the Book of Revelation. In form, as all know, the Revelation is one with the Jewish apocalypses which proliferated in the

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last two centuries B.C. and the first century A.D. These works were rooted in the thought of the Old Testament prophets, and followed in the wake of their great exemplar, the Book of Daniel. Their authors took over the poetic and symbolic language of the prophets, and developed to a degree unknown before the cartoon method of presenting religious ideas. This is particularly well seen in the seventh chapter of Daniel, but perhaps no author presented his teaching with such luxuriant imagery and with such a profusion of symbolism as the prophet who wrote the Revelation. So far as form is concerned, John is the apocalypticist par excellence. The point at issue however is not John's expertise in the employment of religious cartoons, but what he teaches through them.

This may be illustrated by comparing two characteristic apocalyptic passages, wherein the deliverance of the Messiah is portrayed under the unusual image of the intervention of the Lamb; the one comes from the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs and the other from the Revelation. The Testament of Joseph ch. 19 presents the highly original doctrine of the Testaments concerning the Messiahs, the one from Aaron and the other from Judah, in the following passage:

"Hear ye the vision which I saw. I saw twelve harts feeding. And nine of them were dispersed. Now the three were preserved, but on the following day they also were dispersed. And I saw that the three harts became three lambs, and they cried to the Lord, and he brought them forth into a flourishing and well-watered place, yea he brought them out of darkness into light. And there they cried unto the Lord until they gathered unto them the nine harts, and they became as twelve sheep, and after a little time they increased and became many flocks.

And after these things I saw, and behold twelve bulls were suckling one cow, which produced a sea of milk, and there drank thereof twelve flocks and innumerable herds...

And I saw in the midst of the horns... a lamb, and on his right was as it were a lion; and all the beasts and all the reptiles rushed against him, and the lamb overcame them and destroyed them.

And the bulls rejoiced because of him, and the cow and the harts exulted together with them.

And these things must come to pass in their season. And do ye, my children, honour Levi and Judah, for from them shall arise the salvation of Israel."

Once it is recognized that the harts are changed into lambs, and the lambs into bulls, and that all of them represent the people of God, the meaning of the passage becomes tolerably clear: Israel is surrounded and attacked by the nations, but a Lamb will arise from the flock of God and will overcome and destroy the mighty nations; so the salvation of Israel will come, and God's people will rejoice in the peace of his kingdom. It is notable that this deliverance, featuring the exercise of messianic

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power over the enemies of God's people, is wrought by the Lamb and not by the Lion. Self-evidently the deliverance lies in the future.

In Revelation ch. 5 we are presented with another apocalyptic picture of the deliverance of the Messiah, portrayed as the Lamb. God on his throne holds in his hand a scroll written within and without and sealed with seven seals; the scroll represents either the common doubly-inscribed contract, here signifying God's covenant promise of the kingdom, or a testament declaring his will to bestow the kingdom to mankind (the ultimate meaning is virtually the same). No one in the universe, however, can bear to look upon the scroll, or take it and open it. But an elder says, "Weep not; lo, the lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals".

"And between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders, I saw a Lamb standing, as though it had been slain, with seven horns and with seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth; and he went and took the scroll from the right hand of him who was seated on the throne...

And they sang a new song, saying,
Worthy art thou to take the scroll and to open its seals,
for thou wast slain and by thy blood didst ransom men to God
from every tribe and tongue and people and nation,

and hast made them a kingdom and priests to our God,
and they shall reign on earth...".

The innumerable angels in heaven join in offering worship to the Lamb who was slain, and finally every creature in the universe ascribes glory and honour and power to God and the Lamb.

We will ignore the comparative banality of the employment of the imagery in the Testament of Joseph, as against the majesty of the picture in Revelation 5, and concentrate on the meaning of the two passages. The Jewish document reproduces the traditional expectation of Israel's deliverance from its enemies and its felicity in the kingdom of God. The unusual element in it is the idea that God will send two Messiahs for this purpose, the kingly Messiah from Judah, fittingly represented by the Lion, and the priestly Messiah from Aaron, depicted as the Lamb. But the deliverance comes in the orthodox way, i.e. by conquest in battle, for the Messiah Lamb is a mighty warrior. His representation as a Lamb has nothing to do with sacrifice, but with his origin as the young champion of the flock of God. He will be thought of as a strong, horned ram.

In the Revelation the figures of Lion and Lamb are fused together; the Christ is the Lion of Judah, the Root of David and the Lamb of God. The Jewish background is assumed, so there is no intention of conveying a paradox in the picture. This is emphasised in the statement that the Lamb has "seven horns and seven eyes". In the Old Testament horns represent

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strength (Dent. 33:17) and royalty (Dan. 7:7). Seven horns will signify immense strength, the fulness of might. As in the Testaments, the Lamb is a horned ram, and so a powerful fighter. Similarly seven eyes would originally have represented fulness of knowledge, or omniscience, as in Zech. 4:10; John however identifies them with the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth; i.e. they represent for him the energies of the sevenfold Spirit loosed into the world. This reinterpretation has been made possible because an event unprecedented and unprovided for in Jewish apocalyptic has taken place: the Lamb stands "as though it had been slain", i.e. It has been slaughtered, but lives again. In view of the constant appearance of the exodus typology in the Book of Revelation it is almost certain that John wants his readers to recognize in the Messiah-Lamb God's passover Lamb (in 5:9 the Lamb has "ransomed" men to God, i.e. freed them for life in the fellowship and service of God, as in the doxology of 1:5). The warrior Lamb thus has "conquered" through his accepting the role of the sacrificed passover Lamb, and so made possible a second exodus. It is in consequence of his death and resurrection that he has sent into the world the seven Spirits of God. Here we have passed over from the traditional Messiah of prophetic and apocalyptic hope to the crucified and risen Redeemer of the new covenant.

The significance of this transformation cannot be exaggerated. It is more than the change of an apocalyptic figure into a Christian symbol for the Saviour. The very nature of salvation and of eschatology has been transformed in this change of concept of the Messiah. We are told that by his death and resurrection the Lamb has "conquered", and that through his sacrifice he has "ransomed men for God and ... made them a kingdom and priests to God". The long awaited deliverance that initiates the new age has then been achieved. The new exodus has come to pass. And the Christ Redeemer, unlike Moses, whom the Jews viewed as the first

Redeemer, is not merely on the march to the promised land; he has entered upon the inheritance and ascended the throne prepared for him by God. Accordingly in Rev. 5:12 all heaven ascribes to the Lamb the honours due to the divine King (the worship given to the Lamb in 5:12 is given in terms almost identical to that given to God in 7:12). The "worth" ascribed to the Lamb in 5:12 does not relate to a future gift of sovereignty, but to that which he has already "received". We must take it therefore that the handing to the Lamb of the scroll of the kingdom in v. 7 is in virtue of the victory which he has won in his death and resurrection, and that it marks his assumption of authority. Only so can we comprehend the adoration which is rendered to him in the subsequent hymns. The purport of the vision of the Lamb in Revelation 5 therefore is to declare that *in the redemptive acts of the Lamb of God the turn of the ages has taken place*. The Christ has commenced his rule, and he incorporates his people into his royal priesthood. Heaven has acclaimed his sovereignty already,

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but the rest of creation has yet to render the acknowledgement due to the Lamb, much as in the early Christian hymn cited in Phil. 2:6 ff. The later visions of the Revelation make it evident that a special exercise of the sovereignty of the Lamb must take place before all rebellion is ended and the universe owns its Lord; but this does not represent a further elevation of the Lamb to a position of exaltation not yet accorded to him, it is the consequence of the central action described in the vision.

The same understanding of the significance of Christ's redemptive action lies at the heart of John's version of the Redeemer myth in ch. 12. Whereas the story taken over by John depicts the overthrow of the Devil as due to his ejection from heaven by Michael and his angels, John's addition in v. 11 shows that the conquest is in reality due to the sacrifice of Christ. The event is celebrated in the song of v. 10: "Now the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ have come, for the accuser of our brethren has been thrown down...". The nature of John's sources however does not allow him to present the fulness of meaning entailed in this song as he has done in ch. 5. He develops the story of the Dragon's persecution of the messianic community, and the Church's sufferings under the Antichrist, culminating in an account of the messianic judgements and the parousia of the Son of Man (chs. 13-14). The picture in ch. 5 is more self-contained. It ignores the processes which have to be worked out in history, and so the passage of time between the resurrection and the parousia, and concentrates all attention on the Lamb. The result of this is to present the action of Christ in redemption and establishing the kingdom as an indivisible event. Since the song of vv. 9 f. has in view the death and resurrection of Christ, and the adoration of creation in v. 13 the outcome of history in the rule and glory of God and the Lamb (21:22 ff., 22:1 ff.), we must take it that the vision of ch. 5 takes into a single sweep the whole action of God in Christ from the incarnation to the end of the parousia in the new creation. This is a different way of representing the "now" and the "not yet" of the kingdom of God, such as we find in Paul and even in Jesus, but it embraces the great moments of God's saving sovereignty in a unity, such as perhaps is natural when one enters heavens door (4:1) and views history *sub specie aeternitatis*. The idea therefore that the prophet John has no understanding of the significance of the present, or of the Gospel facts of Christ's death and resurrection, is irreconcilable with the meaning of his central vision in ch. 5. To my knowledge there is no analogy in all Jewish apocalyptic literature to the eschatological teaching of Revelation 5, and for that there is a simple reason: the vision is an exposition of the Gospel of the crucified and risen Christ such as only a Christian prophet can give.

Strange as it may seem, it is in this context that John's millennial teaching falls to be considered. That it has parallels in contemporary Judaism is well known, though the complexity and variety of that teaching is seldom

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appreciated. The thousand years duration of the kingdom of Christ is probably rooted in Jewish speculation, but it is equally likely that for John the significance of the thousand years lies not in its measurement of time, but in its characterizing the kingdom of Christ as the sabbath of the week of history, so fulfilling the type of the kingdom in the Sabbath of creation.³ The Biblical origin of the concept will have been seen by John in the prophecies of Ezekiel 36-39, for the pattern of these prophecies seems to have determined the presentation of his visions of the kingdom in chs. 20-22. To what extent his thought may have been determined by traditions of the teaching of Jesus we cannot possibly know, but John can hardly have been ignorant of the Lord's Prayer, with its burden that the kingdom of God should come "on earth as it is in heaven", and the beatitudes, wherein blessing is pronounced on the meek, who will inherit the earth, and on those who hunger and thirst to see right prevail, whose desire will be satisfied. Above all however there lies at the heart of John's doctrine of redemption the conviction that in the life, death and resurrection of Christ the turn of the ages took place, so that in and through the work of Jesus as the Christ the kingdom promised through the prophets came among men. John was led to believe, through the Scriptures and the prophetic understanding of the word and work of Christ, that the kingdom which came in grace and power among men through Jesus Christ, thereby determining the course of history and of the universe itself, shall have a glorious revelation in history by the intervention of Christ at his parousia. That same kingdom of grace and glory will reach its consummation in the transcendent order of the new creation. Through all times it is the one sovereign act of God in Christ which manifests itself among men. Whatever debt this eschatology owes to Jewish apocalyptic, it can hardly be denied that it is fundamentally a christologically determined eschatology.

The like is true of John's view of the City of God. There are various hints in Revelation 20-22, above all in 20:9, that the City which descends from heaven to earth is manifest in the kingdom of Christ and continues into the new creation. Was John familiar with the idea, prominent in Hebrews (12:22 ff.) and known to Paul (Gal. 4:26), that the Jerusalem which is above is our City even now, and that it vitally affects the life and worship of the Church of Christ in this time? We cannot tell, but it should not appear alien to us to contemplate that that same City should become the determinative factor in the story of man, as represented in the highly pictorial fashion of Revelation 21-22. There is not a line of John's description of the City of God which is not capable of realization in

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³ For the idea of the world week, and the relation of the kingdom of God thereto, see 2 Enoch 32-33 and the Epistle of Barnabas ch. 15. On the various uses made of this idea in Rabbinical literature, and other speculations regarding the length of the messianic kingdom, see Strack-Billerbeck's *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud and Midrasch*, München 1922, vol. III, pp. 824 ff.

measure within history, although its perfect expression requires the transcendent order, as John makes plain. Whether in this or any other order, it is Christ alone who brings the City of God to man, for the City is the context of man's existence under the divine sovereignty. To characterize such teaching as "Jewish", in a pejorative sense, is difficult to comprehend; undoubtedly it is rooted in the teaching of the Old Testament prophets, but it embraces also the hopes of mankind as known in John's day and voiced in ours, and it partakes of that kind of fulfilment in Christ which is the hall mark of New Testament Christianity.

Our main concern thus far has been the eschatology of Revelation. But the brief consideration we gave to the vision of Revelation 5 shows how closely interrelated are the three areas of eschatology, christology and the doctrine of God in the Revelation. The doctrine of Christ assumed in ch. 5 is clearly very lofty. Worship is offered to the Lamb such as belongs alone to God. And this is characteristic of the whole book. The risen Lord is described in the opening vision in terms reminiscent of the Ancient of Days and of his angel in the Book of Daniel (chs. 7 and 10). Christ is confessed as Alpha and Omega (22:13), as is God also (1:8). The implications of this claim are seen in the presentation of Christ as mediator of creation (3:14), as he is of redemption (ch. 5) and of the final kingdom (19:11 ff.). The kingdom which is to come is the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ" (11:15); in the closing vision of the heavenly City God and the Lamb are united as the Lord of the kingdom and the source of its blessedness (see especially 22:1 ff.). The unity of God and his Christ is thus consistently assured.

It is similarly evident that the doctrine of God in the Revelation cannot rightly be taken by itself, but should be viewed in the light of the Christology, soteriology and eschatology presented in the book. This has long been recognized, and it is seen with all clarity in the two-fold vision of chs. 4-5, for ch. 5 is not an independent vision. The two chapters together show us the God of creation as the God of redemption, accomplishing his sovereign and gracious will through the crucified and risen Christ. And the same holds good of the whole work. It is God in Christ who delivers mankind, and it is God in Christ who judges mankind. In the Revelation the concept of God as Father is exclusively reserved to express his relation to Christ. We are therefore inevitably led to perceive that God is revealed in the acts of Christ, and that Christ is the revelation of the Father. As is the Christ, so is the Father, as the Father so the Christ.

In Dodd's view, however, the God and the Christ of Revelation bear little resemblance to the God and Christ of the rest of the New Testament. Is that so? We have already seen how little appreciated is John's presentation of soteriology and eschatology in ch. 5. We are prepared to find that the same may apply elsewhere. Some years ago I received dental treatment at the hands of a dentist who was a mild and kindly Seventh

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Day Adventist. While plying me with the tools of his trade he regaled me with some thoughts on the Book of Revelation, hardly characteristic of his denomination. "Of course, we know", he said, "that all that blood and thunder and lightning in the Book of Revelation was written to scare the wits out of sinners, but I don't agree with that sort of approach to people nowadays". Reclining in his chair and suitably gagged while under attack from the dentist, I was scarcely in a position to comment on his views. Is it not clear, however, that the Revelation was written not to terrify sinners, but to encourage Christians to persist in faith and

win their inheritance? Inasmuch as the book obliges Christians to confess their faith, as well as hold on to it, it has in view the hope that men of all kinds should enter the City of God and not suffer the fate of the City of Antichrist.

In relation to John's presentation of the judgements of God, I have long been convinced that his method of composition has led many of his readers to misunderstand his visions. The three series of messianic judgements, depicted under the imagery of the seals, trumpets and bowls, are intended to portray from three different aspects a single, short period of judgement in history. Many readers, failing to recognize the parallelism, have received the impression that John views the course of history as an apparently endless succession of meaningless and cruel judgements. They have similarly failed to perceive that this brief, but fearful period of history is viewed as a repetition of Israel's experience in Egypt: the Antichrist is another Pharaoh who resists God and oppresses his people, hence he calls down on himself and on those aligned with him judgements like the plagues of Egypt. As in the Book of Exodus, so in the Revelation: the crucial event is not the plagues, but the redemption which opens up the way to the new world.

If the question be asked whether a book can be Christian in which the judgement of God prominently features, comparison must be made with the rest of the writings of the New Testament. It is easy, and tempting, to view the synoptic gospels in a generalised way and assume that Jesus spoke words of love alone and not of judgement; but that is to ignore so much of what Jesus said as to distort what remains.⁴ The Sermon on the Mount begins with beatitudes of the kingdom and concludes with a parable of judgement. That balance of grace and judgement in the proclamation of the kingdom is characteristic of the teaching of Jesus.⁵ It is equally observable in the Fourth Gospel, wherein the cross is viewed in

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terms of judgement, as truly as in the Revelation.⁶ The representations of judgement in the Epistles of the New Testament are too numerous to warrant mention. What of the Revelation? It should be admitted at once that its emphasis on judgement is more intense and prolonged than in any other work in the New Testament. That may have been due less to a divergence between John's theology and that of other New Testament writers than to his situation and the prospect which he believed the Church of his time faced. John contemplated a world giving its allegiance to the Antichrist and declaring war to the death on the Church. This he interpreted as the work of evil powers in an endeavour to make wickedness triumph in the world and so frustrate God's good purpose for it. For the "destroyers of the earth" (11:18), who debased themselves to the likeness of the devil whom they served (22:15), John foresaw annihilating judgement, unless they repented and listened to the eternal gospel (14:6 f.). Accordingly be applied the teaching of the Church's prophetic tradition to the situation as he saw it unfolding. It is significant that where Paul deals with the subject of apostasy under the Antichrist he too adduces elements of the prophetic tradition and speaks of judgement from heaven in unusually severe terms (2 Thess. 2:1-1-7).

⁴ For an example of what happens when the attempt is made to eliminate from the teaching of Jesus all reference to judgement see the book, *The Lord of Thought*, by Lily Dougall, and C. W. Emmet, London 1922. The procedures involved are, in my judgement, unscientific, and the end result remote from the reality which is interpreted.

⁵ See e.g. Mt. 8:11 f; 11:5-24; 12:28-32, 38-42; 13:10-17, 24-30, 47 ff; 18:1-9; 25:1-13, 14-30, 31-46.

⁶ Cf. Jn. 12:31 f. with Rev. 12:10, and Jn. 3:16-21.

G. R. Beasley-Murray, "How Christian is the Book of Revelation?" Robert Banks, ed., *Reconciliation and Hope. New Testament Essays on Atonement and Eschatology Presented to L.L. Morris on his 60th Birthday*. Carlisle: The Paternoster Press, 1974. pp.275-284.

It was the conviction of H. B. Swete that John's work is a revelation of the "severity of God" rendered necessary by the nature of the times, and that it forms a needful complement to the revelation of God in the Gospel and the Epistles.⁷ The corollary of that is the desirability of reading the Revelation in conjunction with the rest of the New Testament, and the remainder of the New Testament along with Revelation, in order to secure a balanced view of the Christian faith. This, of course, is not unusual. The Synoptic Gospels without the Fourth Gospel would be wanting, and the Fourth Gospel without the Synoptics would be misleading. The Epistles require supplementing by the Gospels, and the Gospels by the Epistles if we are to gain a broad understanding of the New Testament revelation. So with regard to the last book of the Bible: if it may be viewed as the crown of Biblical eschatology, it requires to be read in conjunction with the books which preceded it. And they are incomplete without it.

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⁷ *The Apocalypse of St. John*, London 3rd ed. 1909, p.clx.