

## APOCALYPSE (2)<sup>1</sup> THE BOOK OF THE APOCALYPSE TO JOHN

“The Revelation to John”, as a book, has a clear structure. It has a clearly defined beginning and end, as last week we have seen.<sup>2</sup> John’s spiritual experiences, his visions told in this book, are the result of “being in the Spirit”. This happened to him four times.

### “In the Spirit”

John first was “in the Spirit” on the Lord’s Day, the day of the Sunday Eucharist, hearing behind him a loud voice. Turning to see the voice speaking to him, in his first vision he perceives “seven golden lampstands, and in the midst of the lampstands one like a son of man” (1:10-13). In the liturgical setting of the seven burning candles Christ who rose from the dead appears to him as “One like a Son of Man”, identifying himself as “the first and the last, and the living one; I died, and behold, I am alive for evermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades” (1:17-18). Having already been told to write to the seven churches, he then writes the words spoken to him, addressed to the angel of the church in Ephesus, in Smyrna, in Pergamum, in Thyatira, in Sardis, in Philadelphia and in Laodicea – seven churches in Asia Minor.

Later, maybe much later (as an “after this” indicates), John sees in heaven an open door (4:1). Perceiving this, he hears the voice which had already spoken to him, and is challenged to “Come up hither, and I will show you....” what is to take place “after this”. This is his second vision, beginning with what we will call the “First Throne Vision”. At once being “in the Spirit”, in heaven John sees a throne and one seated on the throne: a center of power and of movement, of various beings and of continuous glorification (4:2ff). But who is worthy to open the scroll in the right hand of him who is seated on the throne, or to look in it? No one is found to be worthy, neither in heaven nor on earth or under the earth (5:1ff). But now John is led to perceive “a Lamb standing” in the midst of the throne and its beings, “as if sacrificed” (5:5-6). This Lamb, quintessence of temple worship and sacrifice whom John the Baptist, personified in Jesus, had seen coming to him (Jn 1:29), indeed is able to open the scroll and break its seals. Now the apocalyptic process begins to unfold: by the opening of seven seals, the blowing of seven trumpets (but the sounding of seven thunders is sealed) and the pouring out of the seven bowls full of the wrath of God.

Twice more John is called with the words: “Come, I will show you...” by one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls. The first time he is “carried away in the Spirit” into a wilderness, to be shown the woman arrayed in purple and scarlet, Babylon the great – her doom and the doom of those over whom she had dominion (17:3ff); this happens between two Throne Visions. The second time he is called after the last Throne Vision, in the Final Vision, once more to be “carried away in the Spirit” unto a high mountain, to be shown “The Bride, the wife of the Lamb” – the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven, from God (21:9ff). Both times, it seems, it needs an extra effort of spirit for him to perceive the results of the apocalyptic process in the destinies of these two “women”, so much each other’s opposite.

### The Structure of the Book

Let’s have a look at the two pages “The Revelation to John – Structure” which has been added here.<sup>3</sup>

The Introduction of the “Apocalypse to John” is mirrored by the Conclusion; the Opening Vision following the Introduction is mirrored by the Final Vision preceding the Conclusion. Thus the “First Vision”, of One like a Son of Man in the midst of his congregations, is mirrored by the “Final Vision” of the new heaven and the new earth, of the “dwelling of God with human beings” in the shape of the New Jerusalem, in which both God and his Son (“the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb”, 21:22) are both temple and light and lamp.

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<sup>1</sup> After a presentation in the Boston Christian Community congregation, July 22, 2007. Edited by Muriel Morris.

<sup>2</sup> See the remarks on the Introduction in “Apocalypse (1) The Writer – In Heaven an Open Door”, July 15, 2007.

<sup>3</sup> Two separate pages “The Revelation to John – Structure”, added to this “Apocalypse (2).”

In six “Throne Visions”, subsequently the process of apocalypse evolves with the help of seals, trumpets (as well as thunders) and bowls of wrath, the Interlude between the fifth and the sixth of these visions describing the doom of the scarlet woman. This interlude originates in the temple (seen first in the third Throne Vision and then again in the Fifth), and seals the doom of this city with the words “It is done” (16:17). – Remarkably, in the Final Vision once more an “It is done” is spoken (21:6), before John is shown the Bride, the wife of the Lamb.

The first Throne Vision has in its center the One sitting on the throne as well as the Lamb, with its seven horns and seven eyes “which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth” (5:6). The Lamb has a clear connection to people on earth – and that’s what this vision is about – to what happens to the earth and to people, when the seals are opened.

“After this”, in the second Throne Vision, first the focus is on human beings, on those “who have come out of the great tribulation, have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb” (7:14). They have become part of this process, their prayers mingling with the incense at the golden altar (8:4), and when the fire of the altar is thrown down on the earth, the trumpets signal the beginning of a stronger impact on the earth and into the cosmos. The region under the earth is opened, the abyss (9:1), calling up forces of destruction, which do not deter people from going on with their business as usual, even after the sixth trumpet has sounded. Witnesses standing before the Lord of the earth will be killed by the beast from the bottomless pit, but they will be taken up into heaven. A great earthquake signals the importance of this moment.

With the seventh trumpet the third Throne Vision begins, stating that now “the kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Lamb”, who “has taken his great power and begun to reign” (11:15-17). When the temple in heaven has been opened, in a quick sequence the forces of adversary show themselves (ch.12 & 13): the dragon to endanger the child and his heavenly woman (even on earth), the beast from the sea all mankind, the beast from the earth empowering that beast by using its image, its mark and the number of its name (666).

In the fourth Throne Vision the Lamb is seen on Mount Zion, the “holy hill” of Ps 2:6 (on which the Lord did set his king), with the 144,000 who, as it were accompanied by a voice from heaven, sing a new song before the throne and its beings (14:1ff). In various ways, angels are preparing “for the hour of judgment of him who made heaven and earth, the sea and the fountains of water”, as blessings are promised to those who die in the Lord. Seated on a white cloud, One like a son of man then begins the harvest of the earth (14:14ff).

The fifth Throne Vision shows another group of people singing another song, the Song of Moses (“the servant of God”) and the song of the Lamb, before the sea of glass before the throne (4:6), now mingled with fire (15:2). When now the temple (“of the tent of witness”) in heaven is opened, the seven angels with the seven plagues come forward, to receive the seven golden bowls full of the wrath of God. After the sixth bowl has been poured out, the dragon, the beast and the false prophet send out their demonic emissaries to assemble the kings of the whole world for the (last) battle at Armageddon – now that the cleansing of the earthly cosmos had progressed to the throne of the beast and its kingdom.

In the Interlude, when the seventh bowl has been poured out (into the air), out of the temple, from the throne, an “It is done” sounds (16:17) – the activity coming from the throne including an earthquake, great “as had never been since human beings were on the earth”, the great city splitting into three parts. Then one of those seven angels carries John away “in the Spirit” (17::3), to show him the judgment of the woman sitting on a scarlet beast. To John, marveling, the angel explains what he sees. He witnesses the announcement of the fall of “Babylon the great” as well as the anguish of those who benefited from her: kings of the earth, merchants and sailors – the song of a mighty angel putting all this in perspective.

The sixth Throne Vision, with a double “Hallelujah” by the voice of a great multitude, focuses attention on God sitting on the throne and the beings at the throne, who join in praise with their own “Hallelujah”, once more the voice of a great multitude with a last “Hallelujah” announcing the coming marriage of the Lamb, confirmed by the fourth beatitude (19:9). Heaven having been seen opened, in six visions John sees the last stages of trial and triumph and judgment unfolding: from the Rider on the White Horse to the battle in which the beast and the false prophet are captured, to the chaining of the dragon for a thousand years and to the thrones of those judging people for the first resurrection, to the annihilation of the armies of the Deceiver and to the Great White Throne and the judging of the dead.

With the Last Vision, now that apocalyptic last battles have been fought, the many “nasty” and “uncomfortable” parts of the apocalyptic process have come to an end. In a new heaven and a new earth, presented in the picture of the “Wife of the Lamb”, the holy city, New Jerusalem, has come down out of heaven, from God. “It is done” once more sounds from the throne (21:6), from Him who is Alpha and Omega, beginning and end. And once more one of the seven angels of the bowls of wrath carries John away “in the Spirit”, to show him this city in which the Lamb will dwell with the Lord God Almighty: temple and lamp for the light of God. Here, the Tree of Life has its place on either side of the river flowing through the city, its wall measured after a man’s measure, that is, an angel’s.

As already mentioned, the Conclusion in many ways mirrors the Introduction to the book (also see “The Writer”, according to Note 2 here).

Let’s now look some more at **the “apocalyptic process” in those visions.**

[1<sup>st</sup> Throne Vision, 4:1-7:8] The first four of the seven seals, opened one after the other, have a terrestrial impact, with consequences for the earth and its inhabitants. The fifth seal is rather “earthly”, in the picture of souls cowering under the altar who have not come to terms with their destiny on earth; but they are given white robes and told to “rest a little longer” (6:11). With the sixth seal, sun, moon and stars become more active – and on earth people sense where the wrath they endure is coming from: originating from the One sitting on the throne and from the Lamb (6:16). The servants of God are to be sealed upon their foreheads, to the number of 144,000 – twelve times twelve thousand (7:1ff), before with the opening of the seventh seal “the earth or the sea or the trees” will be harmed further (7:3).

[2<sup>nd</sup> Throne Vision, 7:9-11:14] Earlier, the picture of the “slain” souls “under the altar” (in the fifth seal) called up the image of the “outer” altar, the altar of sacrifice in the Jerusalem Temple. Now, when the great multitude is standing before the throne and before the Lamb, with the “golden altar” we are brought into the Temple proper with its “inner altar” on which fragrant incense is burnt (8:1ff). With the seventh seal, this inner temple room is opened, and fire from the altar thrown on the earth. The trumpets blow destruction upon the earth, the sea, the waters, and on sun, moon and stars, involving a third of everything. With the fifth trumpet, a star falling from heaven opens the bottomless pit on earth, and in the smoke rising from the shaft the first woe descends on earth, bringing torture but not death (9:1ff). After the sixth trumpet and its death and wounding (and people not changing heart and mind), which is the beginning of the second woe, John plays a part in the sealing of the thunders (10:1ff). He is told to eat the scroll which the angel had brought down (wrapped as he was in a cloud, with a rainbow over his head, having a face like the sun), as well as to measure “the temple of God” and the altar and those who worship there. But even the two witnesses (the “two olive trees” and the “two lampstands”) do not make any difference to those of “the city where their Lord was crucified” (11:8).

[3<sup>rd</sup> Throne Vision, 11:15-13:18] The forces of the kingdom of God, of the heavens (as the Gospels might say) now make themselves felt both in the heavens and on earth, in the “kingdom of the world” – and “the temple in heaven is opened” (11:19). After a cosmic woman, heavy with child, has been threatened by a dragon rampant in heaven and has moved to the earth (while her child is caught up to God and to his throne), the dragon and his angels are brought down to earth by Michael and his angels – there to pursue the woman who is helped by the earth, and to make war on the rest of her offspring (!). A beast rising out of the sea (one of its heads having a mortal wound which was healed) receives power and throne and authority from the dragon (13:1ff), blaspheming God and conquering Christians, on earth enslaving all those “whose name has not been written before the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb that was slain”. The other beast rising up from the sea, supporting the first beast mightily, enforces its reign with fire and signs (13:11ff); a (living and speaking) image of the first beast brings death and causes all people to be marked on the right hand or forehead – with the beast’s name or the number of his name (the number 666) which allows one to exist economically on earth. Before the second beast appears, the first call for endurance is heard (13:10). In this vision, adversary forces appear also in heaven and on earth, whereas human beings allied with the world’s progress are seen to have a connection with the Lamb already from before its beginning – the first beast appearing “wounded” but “healed”.

[4<sup>th</sup> Throne Vision, 14:1-20] On “Mount Zion”, the hill of kings, the Lamb takes center stage with the 144,000 who are free of the shackles of the earth, initiating a new song, the background for an apocalyptic process now brought forward by various angels with visions of the Eternal Gospel of the

Creator, of the Announcement of the coming fall of the city of impure passion, and of the coming torment of those joined to the beast. A second call for endurance (14:12) is followed by the beatitude for those who die in the Lord from now on. One like a son of man, sitting on a white cloud, on the word of an angel initiates the harvest of the earth as it is “fully ripe”, whereas an angel begins gathering in the vintage of the earth, “for its grapes are ripe”. From this vintage of the earth, thrown into the great wine press of the wrath of God and trodden “outside the city”, blood flows high and wide. – In this vision the two manifestations of the Christ who is always Coming have come together: the Lamb in the midst of his people on the way to the New City, and the One like a Son of Man setting the stage for final decisions and separation.

[5<sup>th</sup> Throne Vision, 15:1-16:17] Before the sea of glass, now mingled with fire, once more a song is begun, which is the song of Moses, the servant of God, and of the Lamb, advancing the theme of the first angel in the preceding vision, as God’s judgments now “have been revealed” (15:3-4). Those who sing it, who have conquered the beast and its image and the number of its name, stand in strong contrast to those whom the preceding vision’s third angel has warned. The opening of the temple, the “tent of witness” brings forth the seven angels with the seven plagues, who receive the bowls of wrath from one of the four beings around the throne. The first six bowls having being poured out, the cleansing of the cosmos having come to include the throne and the kingdom of the beast, the forces of adversary issue out of their mouths three foul spirits, demonic spirits performing signs to assemble the kings of the earth for the last battle. Already, after he has poured out this (third) bowl, the angel of the waters had as it were endorsed God’s judgment, the altar crying out its affirmation (16:4-7). Like an erratic block in this landscape of (coming) doom, the third beatitude is spoken, warning: “I am coming like a thief”, urging all to be awake and not to be naked and exposed by losing one’s garments.

[The Interlude, 16:17-18:24] Interlude as well as Final Vision originate in the Throne, the Interlude once more in the temple, whereas beginning the Final Vision, a new heaven and earth with the holy city ask for all attention. Both times one of the seven angels with the bowls carries John away “in the Spirit”, to show him two very different pictures of spiritual womanhood: the one doomed and the one that will furnish the new abode for humanity. In this interlude, detailed explanations of the apocalyptic realities of doom are given to John, who “marveled greatly” (17:6f). Here also, the final picture of the victorious Rider on the White Horse and his armies (19:11ff) is prepared – of him who is the Lamb accompanied by those with him who are called, chosen and faithful (17:14). The fall of “Babylon the great” having been announced by an angel and a “last call” having gone out to “my people” (18:4ff), the fall of the mighty city is described from the view of those who wallowed in her: the kings of the earth, merchants and sailors. A mighty angel speaks the eulogy, throwing a great millstone into the sea as the sign of Babylon’s ruin.

[6<sup>th</sup> Throne Vision, 19:1-20:15] A continuous “Hallelujah” encompasses the throne, cried by the voice of a great multitude in heaven, the beings at the throne, the same voice as before but stronger, like many waters and the sound of mighty thunderpeals: “Hallelujah, for the Lord our God the Almighty reigns”. Yet, even after what has happened since “he has begun to reign” (11:17), this implementation is due, now that the marriage of the Lamb has come, his Bride having made herself ready. The fourth beatitude blesses those invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb, and John, falling down to worship the angel speaking to him, is rebuffed – as happens once more (19:9f and 22:8f). Before his eyes, heaven opened, the Rider on the White Horse appears with his armies, and pictures from the last visions recur while beginning to be fulfilled. In five visions John first sees the beast and the false prophet being captured and thrown into the lake which burns with sulphur, those following them slain by the sword issuing from the mouth of the Rider. Then the dragon is bound for a thousand years in the closed bottomless pit, and thrones are seen for those who will judge souls who either will only come to life after those thousand years, or will reign with Christ all that time: the first resurrection (the fifth beatitude highlighting this). After the thousand years and after the final battle, Satan the Devil the Deceiver is thrown into that burning lake. Before a great white throne, and before him from whose presence earth and sky fled away, the dead are judged “according to the books”, Death and Hades being thrown in the lake of fire as well – the second death.

[Last Vision, 21:1-22:7] Now that all forces of adversary have been overcome, a new heaven and a new earth can come into being, with the new abode of humanity, the city which the Lamb has wedded, its inhabitants to be “with God”, with the Lamb their temple and light and lamp. Then one out of the seven angels with the bowls, carrying John away “in the Spirit” to show him this other picture of spiritual female

humanity, measures for him city and gates and walls. Indeed, for the walls of the city human measure, that is, angelic measure is used (21:7). On its gates the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb appear, its measurements have the number same as those who first gathered around the Lamb, in its foundations the colors of precious stones shimmer; its gates and streets are made of pearls and gold. The city knows the light of the "God within", without night and needing sun nor moon. Its gates shall never be closed but only those may enter who are written in the Lamb's book of life. Outside, in the realm of second death, have to stay those who "practice abomination or falsehood" in various forms. Through the city, springing from the throne of God and of the Lamb, flows the river of the water of life, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit on either side. At the throne of God and of the Lamb, his servants will worship him, seeing his face, his name on their foreheads, "reigning for ever and ever". – The vision comes to an end with words of the angel to John, confirming his sending, with the affirmation "Behold, I am coming soon" and a blessing of those who keep the words of the prophecy of this book (the sixth beatitude).

We recognize that the apocalyptic process, made visible by the structure of the book, is in its core carried by the manifestations of Christ and the promise that he "is coming soon". This, we will study next Sunday.