

THE SWEEP OF PRAISE IN THE APOCALYPSE

By ROLAND POTTER, O.P.

A TOTAL view of Scripture shows that Genesis tells of the emanation of all, of the Fall and the Promise; the apostolic writings speak of Redemptive Incarnation as relevant to all; now there remains the Apocalypse to throw light on the *return* of all, as it now is, and as it will be, fulfilled. Too often the prophecy is inadequately appreciated,¹ precisely because of its apocalyptic character and the difficulty of its imagery. The difficulty of the book is lessened by a triumph of Catholic exegesis;² its inner lessons are indispensable. Despite its utterly judaistic dress and a riot of oriental imagery, it is intensely realist in its deep doctrinal content, which is no less than *Jésus-Christ vu et écouté dans sa gloire*.³ It is a fifth gospel.

‘... Thou wast slain and hast redeemed us to God in the blood out of every tribe and tongue, and people, and nation, and hast made us to our God a kingdom and priests, and we shall reign on earth.’ (Apoc. 5, 9-10, cf. 1, 5.) These words indicate the initial viewpoint of the prophecy; it is that of Redemption that has been accomplished, of a new creation that has come into being. It represents that which has been acquired, and that which has value in eternity as in time. The verses quoted contain the two great traits: first, the Redeemer who repeatedly appears under the metaphor of the Lamb,⁴ and then his Kingdom, for the Redeemer Lamb is King.

The Redeemer has full right to conduct the course of future events—especially the great spiritual events—as God, one with the Father, and also as Man, since his Passion. The Church specially, is the object of his, and the Father’s tender love and attentive providence. The ‘New Song’, the ‘New Name’, and the ‘New Jerusalem’, are all so many aspects of the newly revealed redemp-

1 cf. e.g., Porter in *Hastings Dictionary of the Bible*, iv, 265.

2 *Allo. St Jean. L'Apocalypse*.

3 Bossuet. *Préface sur L'Apoc.* (Ed. Gautier, 1838, t. xxi, p.343). A splendid example of Catholic attitude to the Apocalypse.

4 as much as twenty-nine times. The Lamb’s blood is efficacious on earth, enabling the just to triumph over the wicked as in heaven, where the good are rewarded after the struggles of earth. Cf. 12, 11, & 19, 7-9. He has conquered Satan, and is the prize of those who conquer *with* him. (3, 21.)

tive economy. The spiritual reign of the saints has already begun, from the moment of the Lamb's exaltation; he has made of them kings and priests; they too dominate the world by their intercession. It is a present, this world state, brought about by the Redemption; such is the indisputable lesson of the book; 'the kingdom of this world is become our Lord's and his Christ's . . .' (11, 15). And the Kingship is supreme sovereignty; the Word of God is 'King of Kings and Lord of Lords' (19, 13 & 16), the new creation supposes a conquering advance of the White Horseman, who, if not the triumphant Christ, at least depicts the triumph through the world of the Gospel, borne on by the Apostles and their successors.⁵

The Lamb is Redeemer, and a King all-effective, because very God. The vision of the heavenly court (4, 1 et seq) depicts unending worship given to God, and the supreme '*Kurios*' 'because thou hast created all things, and for thy will they were, and were created' (4, 11); presently the same worship (5, 12) is given to the Redeemer Lamb 'who is worthy to receive power and divinity and wisdom and strength and honour. . .'. And the vision of the heavenly court includes further profound lessons. Thus, in thought pictures characteristic of the Apocalypse, it presents the re-creation effected by the Redeemer Lamb against the background of creation from God enthroned to the Redeemer enthroned. One picture is balanced parallel to another picture to convey the deep truth that Redemption is in its way a new creation, answering to the first creation of the Creator, and restoring his handiwork; it is the lesson of the Johannine Prologue.⁶

Further, the hymn to the Lamb is the homage of *all nature* in its absolute universality, from the highest intellectual beings to lowly material elements.⁷ The correlative of creaturehood is worship of the Creator. Here the whole creation is also shown as joining in praise of the Lamb as God, yes, but especially as Redeemer. It is a striking testimony to the universal repercussions of redemptive Incarnation, to the cosmic sovereignty acquired by our Lord, by a law of Incarnation precisely in virtue of his humiliation. To en-

⁵ Apoc. 6, 1-2; for a defence of this interpretation, cf. *Allo in loco*.

⁶ for St John's use of symbol, picture, etc. Cf. *Allo*, p. LXXI.

⁷ The *numbers* are intended, thus 4 is the number of nature (with its four constituents, heaven, earth, hell, sea; or four quarters, N.S.E.W.), when it sings the praises of the Creator and Redeemer. Further, *every* number in this context is significant; thus 7 is reserved to the Lord Incarnate, who repairs and completes the work of creation and dispenses his sevenfold gifts of the Spirit, etc. Cf. *Allo*. on 5, 13-14 and elsewhere.

force this lesson, there is the clear parallel of Philippians 2, 10 (cf. St Thomas III, 49, 6), with the truth that 'every knee should bow of the things that are in heaven, on earth and under the earth', and confess that our Lord is '*Kurios*'. The apocalypse has the same doctrine of the further extension of the effects of Incarnation as can be noted in the later 'cosmological' texts of St Paul.

The Seer of the Apocalypse is eminently a consoler, his book an epic of hope in the full theological sense; he wrote to comfort the faithful in dark days of persecution and stress, in the first century, and at all times. With this in mind, it is easier to see the synthetic build of the book. The initial viewpoint of redemption acquired and Kingdom established has been noted; but the core of the prophecy is a vivid grasp of the present dispensation in the redemptive economy, and of its future outcome; and the splendour of that outcome is such that to mention it is a consolation, to describe it in the word of Apocalypse, a joyful strengthening.

The first trait is that the whole course of the future, all the potentialities of grace and nature are in the hands of the Redeemer, reflecting Old Testament truth, the children of Israel in the hands of God, borne on until the coming of the Messias. Peering further into God's purposes present and future, St John describes the world's (more outward) course from the Ascension of the Lord to the last judgment: all this in large symbolic and timeless traits (Chaps. 8-11). Then by a notable characteristic of style, he takes up the theme again, handling it and presenting it afresh, and developing it on various planes, gazing at time and eternity advancing by concentric⁸ thought-patterns, and merging time into eternity, as an ocean of waves fades into the horizon. Thus there is a passage from the plane of the contemporary enemy persecuting Rome, to that of universal history, wherein the hostile power is personified by the Beasts, and then again to a yet deeper plane, to the *Jeux de l'enfer et du ciel*, or supernatural history of the conflict between God and Satan in its various phases (14, 6-20, 10), culminating in the general judgment and the future life, blessed or damned (20, 11-21). All of which is a tale of spiritual warfare; the second half of Apocalypse in particular, tells

⁸ This important characteristic of style, when grasped, simplifies the understanding of the book. Cf. *Allo* pp. LXXVIII seq. especially LXXXV. It is a feature of Joannine style, and capital evidence for the identity of authorship of the Apocalypse, the Joannine Epistles, and the fourth Gospel.

of the struggle which characterises the Kingdom as now established, until its final triumph in heaven. The reality depicted is the Church with its struggles on earth, yet already peopling heaven with its children. The lesson conveyed is of the desperate reality of the warfare between the protagonists⁹ of this kingdom of God and Kingdom of Satan.

The period covered by the vision of Apocalypse extends from the birth of the Redeemer to the General Judgment and eternity. Almost co-extensive with the Kingdom's earthly duration is the reign of Antichrist, which is a continuous historic reality, dogging the footsteps of the Gospel, until the final overthrow of Satan. Antichrist is a collectivity, the powers of evil warring against the Messiah and his kingdom through the ages.

St John elsewhere *interprets* an old tradition familiar to his readers; Antichrist is the generality of those who deny that Jesus is the Christ (I Jn. 2, 18-22; 4, 3), the heretics and apostates already accomplishing in the world the mystery of iniquity.

The struggles of the Kingdom and the temporal unleashing of Satanic powers are the facts 'whereby we know that it is the last hour' (I Jn. 2, 18). This is in substance one of the most profound lessons of the Apocalypse; the human race and the entire cosmos has attained and *is* in the 'fullness of time', on the threshold of eternity. Such is the present economy of Incarnation, a crucifixional era for body as for soul and for the whole of creation; but also a resurrectional era with a clear foretaste of eternity. And the reason is that the era introduced by the Incarnation is the Kingdom of God, and that Kingdom knows two phases, corresponding to grace and glory respectively; and grace and glory are substantially one, permitting, as it were, a homogeneous passage of souls from a state of this world tension and warfare to a state of actualised beatitude, which is theirs even now, in hope, because their citizenship is in heaven (Phil. 3, 20). And if the dazzling images and symbols of the Apocalypse seem equally applicable to the

⁹ In the imagery of the book there are the *Lamb*, enthroned with God, or on earth reigning in Sion (14 & 17); the *Dragon*, leader of the anti-kingdom; the *Woman* (12) who is the Church of Old and New Law, and, as representing the chosen race, Mother of the Christ; towards the end the *Woman* becomes the *City* (as in 4, Esdras 13), for the New Jerusalem is depicted both as city and as person, being the bride of the Lamb (21, 2, cf. 19, 7, & 22, 17); the *Beasts* are the visible, temporal agents of the *Dragon* (13-20); *Babylon* (17), like Jerusalem, is imagined as a *Woman* and *City*, but only depicted in the first guise; it is pagan Rome, the great enemy of the Church at the time, the first Incarnation of the *Beast's* power. Jerusalem is Bride of the Lamb, Babylon abandoned to the kings of earth, vassal of the *Beast*.

Heavenly Jerusalem and to the Church on earth, it is because the underlying reality is the same.

The ultimate lesson of the Apocalypse is of triumph. St John does not only gaze upon the era inaugurated by the Redeemer Lamb; his vision terminates in the consummation to come and the glory of the saints. The prophecy draws to a close with an intensification of its *leitmotiv* . . . 'and he showed me the Holy City of Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God, having the glory of God, and the light thereof was like to precious stone . . . and the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and in them the twelve names of the Apostles of the Lamb . . .' (21, 10). The last chapters of the prophecy are a larger and even vaster synthesis of all that had gone before. The Church triumphant appears, transcendent, eternally freed from all shadow and strife. The new creation which came of grace finds its consummation, and there is a cosmic renewal, in words which re-echo and confirm Isaias, 'a new heaven and a new earth' (21, 1. cf. Isaias 65, 17; 66, 22), to harmonise with the radiant glory of those who will see God's face and have his name on their foreheads, and where night shall be no more; and they shall not need the light of the lamp because the Lord God shall enlighten them, and they shall reign for ever and ever (22, 5).

And the accomplishment of all shall be *from above*, for there is at work here the profound law of Incarnation which tells that the initiative of all that is wrought in grace as in nature, comes of God's condescending goodness (cf. St Thomas III, 24, 1 ad 1). The law as has been seen works itself out in the Old Dispensation where God has compassion on his creatures, tenderly intervenes from above, and promises a Redeemer, and shepherds and guides his people for the Messiah to come. It is patent in the Incarnation and in the daily life of the Church, for grace and the power of the Holy Ghost are from heaven 'and without me ye can do nothing'. It is patent too in the vision of consummation of the Apocalypse, the vision of a 'New Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God. . .'. Thus fittingly the last book of Scripture bears out and confirms for all ages an essential truth on God's dealings with creatures. The sweeping vision ranges over time and eternity; the history of Jerusalem in this world, as in the next, forms one synthetic whole. St John sees the entire divine plan of the ages, unrolling itself through time, extending to eternity. The Apoca-

lypse often gives *completing* scenes in the great drama of God and creatures from creation to consummation. Thus in the Prologue of St John, our Lord as pre-existent is called *Logos*, in virtue of his cosmological rôle in the creation of all; this same *Logos* becomes flesh and is the subject of the whole Gospel. In the Apocalypse, our Lord is *Logos* because of his eschatological rôle as divine avenger and protagonist in the struggle against the enemies of the Kingdom. This is particularly clear in chap. 19, where the stage is set for universal history, and the subject is the totality of our Lord's triumphs, up to and including the Parousia. 'With the armies that are in heaven', he is the triumphant victor who makes an end of iniquity and of Satan the '*caput omnium malorum*'. Thus the Risen Word of God vindicates God's goodness and is agent for the restoration of the divine plan for the universe, as he had been for its first founding. At the term is a promise of a new creation, 'Behold I make all things new' (21, 5. Cf. 2 Cor. 5, 17). As in the Prologue, the background is creation, and the truth conveyed to our minds is that the Redemption has restored and more than bettered God's first plan for the happiness of mankind and the destiny of all creation.

Fittingly the last book of Scripture closes on a sublime note of restoration and universal cosmic reintegration, in part actualised, for the rest, yet to come. 'Come, Lord Jesus.'



DAVID

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DAVID was a man after God's own heart.¹ The saying is founded on certain qualities in the psalmist, prophet, king, conqueror, which mark him out as distinct from all the other saints and heroes of either Testament. Among these qualities was this: that he was, if not an 'ordinary' man, a norm among men. He was extraordinary only by not being in the striking mode of most holy men, extraordinary. He worked no miracles like Moses, suffered no crushing humiliation like Job, saw no vision like Isaias, had not to hope against hope like Abraham. He was, to ordinary men, an ordinary man, and his

¹ 1 Kings 13, 14. We omit other references from 1 Kings 16 to 3 Kings 1.