

Volume VII Number 1

Spring 1984

KING'S

Theological Review

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DISCUSSION

REGARDING THE APOCALYPSE

ULRICH SIMON

'The obscene, sadistic fantasy of *Revelation* 6-20.' Thus my former colleague John Austin Baker in the *King's Theological Review*.¹ It is a remarkable statement from one who is now the Bishop of Salisbury. If known in Catholic and Orthodox circles it would be sufficient to demolish ecumenical hopes.

But what of the truth of this evaluation? After all my friend John Baker is a Biblical scholar, who even in the context of the nuclear debate, can hardly deviate from sound principles of exegesis. For example, he cannot wish to divorce the Apocalypse of John from the 'little' apocalypses, first in Mark 13 and then in Matthew 25-26. I have examined all this material in *The End is not Yet* of 1964. Then it was generally acknowledged that Jesus adhered firmly to an eschatological conception of the Kingdom of God. One did not have to follow Schweitzer and Weiss in their radical critique to place the Christ of the Gospels within the apocalyptic expectation. In the light of Qumran, especially of the War between the children of Light and Darkness, it almost seemed then that the Jesus of the Liberals had never existed and would never exist again.

Nevertheless it must be acknowledged that there always has been an 'educated' dislike of, and opposition to, the apocalyptic trend. After 70 A.D. and even more so after 135 A.D., the Jews in their official deliberations concluded that they owed their disasters to apocalyptic expectations and that the future of Judaism must be free from them. They did not always succeed, but on the whole Torah ousted *Chazon* (=vision). The Church, too, in her second and third generation had a powerful wing which would have excluded the Apocalypse. This interesting history of pro and contra has never ceased.

But I am not now concerned with the history of the book but with the question: Is *Revelation* 6-20 'obscene and sadistic'? Is this a 'fantasy'? The easy way out would be something like this: all human discourse is ambiguous, depending on who says what to whom and in what circumstances. Thus with the Apocalypse and its vocabulary: The Lamb opens the seals, noise of thunder, four beasts, a white horse, a bow, a crown, a red horse, a black horse, a pale horse . . . The Great Day has dawned. Now this is obviously the kind of poetry which cannot be associated with diocesan reports or minutes, committee procedures or computer abstracts. We are in a different world. But should it be evaluated as 'obscene, sadistic fantasy'? If so, Dante, Milton, Botticelli, Blake, Mozart, Verdi and many others must also be written off, for there is a *tradition* of apocalyptic fear and trembling.

True, there are some theologians who discount and even despise the 'constraints' of history and of culture. They are not impressed by the permanent witness given to mankind in poetry, painting, and music. Others, like myself, regard this well-spring of Christian creativeness as one energy of the Holy Spirit, the most available gift of the divine Presence.

Be that as it may, what is it that makes a Bishop label apocalyptic as 'obscene and sadistic' when others (perhaps bishops in prison!) cherish *Revelation* chs. 6 ff. as 'pure and manifest and appropriate' on the one hand, and 'gentle and tender and consoling' on the other? I have perhaps already indicated the dividing line, which is, after all, not so remote from the 'constraints of history'. Or shall I call it 'existential'? To be sure, *Revelation* is written by martyrs for martyrs at a time of martyrdom, but it is not therefore confined to that scope. All human beings who long for justice, yearn for Christ the Victor, loathe the enemy, such as falsehood and all the devilish horrors of a perverted 'civilisation', take their stand with those in white robes, baptized into the *militia Dei*, enduring the mental strife as well as the physical privations implied by the imitation of Christ.

Certainly the fervour of the apocalyptic expectation is strongest among those who have every reason to cry 'How long, Lord!'. They cannot be accused of vindictiveness by our liberal friends. In the hands of the Gestapo, forced into the Gulag, attacked by Amin thugs etc., one simply longs for 'the end'. But the Apocalypse chapters under review are mostly supportive of the Victory of Truth and the defeat of Antichrist. The Wrath of the Lamb is the marvellously paradoxical expression which serves here, and again one thinks of the iconography and the liturgy of the Lamb of God. I know of no passages in Scripture which have been and are more comforting than the readings for All Saints Day. Moreover Christians believe that these innumerable saints have not only overcome in death but that they are blessed, 'rest from their labours', are alive eternally. The marriage of the Lamb leads to the celestial banquet and the final acclamation of God as God. All this is spelt out not only in the text but also in the great commentaries, some of the last 40 years alone. I cannot believe that the Bishop of Salisbury has forgotten A. M. Farrer among so many others of distinction, who did not regard the Day of Wrath, the Fall of Babylon, the Songs of Triumph, the messianic kingdom, the eschatological combat, the new Jerusalem as spurious and unacceptable elements in Christian belief.

But, it may be said, the argument is about nuclear arms and all this stuff, Biblical and exegetical, is out of date. There is certainly a polarisation, as strong as ever, between those who repudiate the cosmic dream and the eschatological dimension, and those who do not. I heard Rabbi Hertzberg a few weeks ago who as a leader of American Jews openly lectured against Messianism and the Zionist dream. He pleaded for educational norms, tangible aims, institutional health. On the other hand the former Marxist Ernst Bloch, whose *Prinzip Hoffnung* has just been translated into English, and to whom Moltmann owes so much of his theology, pleads that a non-Utopian religion is nothing at all, and that Jesus opened the gates to the great dream. One may remember that the liberation of the Blacks in the USA started as Martin Luther King's Dream, and this dream has always been strongly entrenched in the Apocalypse. Its comfort has been other-worldly, but its action has been here and now.

The debate is not really about nuclear weapons, but about Christ and Antichrist, about truth and lies. The cosmic dimension in this struggle cannot be left out and only the apocalyptic can provide the imagery, whereas the philosophical (as in *Hebrews*) yields the rational structure. Does not the canon of Scripture demand that nothing is to be read in

isolation? Indeed if some NT scholars are to be heeded the Apocalypse is not to be separated from the corpus of Johannine writings.

1. John Austin Baker, 'Theology and Nuclear Weapons', *King's Theological Review* 6 (1983), p. 2.

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