

HOW TO “GET A GRIP” ON THE BOOK OF REVELATION

In all Sacred Scripture, God communicates with us in human language, revealing his truth about earthly and spiritual realities. In “apocalyptic” Scripture, God avails himself of a genre particularly appropriate for conveying the mystery of God’s majesty and dominion of history until its end. All Scripture is “prophetic,” and prophets (Moses, David, the other prophets) are qualified by access to God’s secret council (*sôd*). In apocalyptic, this is much more explicit, and the subject matter requires it: it has to do with the consummation of earthly history and the ongoing battle between unseen, heavenly (or preternatural) entities (angels and demons) which is behind our earthly struggles. As with all Scripture, God’s communication is for purposes of our salvation (*Dei Verbum* no. 11). In apocalyptic, the moment is urgent, things are moving forward rapidly, “the time is short” (1 Cor 7:29); there is persecution, and the final trial (*temptatio*) is fast approaching. So there is both an urgent call to conversion and an encouragement to persevere communicated in language most reflective of ultimate realities.

Rev, in short, is God’s communication to us (“revelation”) about “ultimate reality”: our time of trial of earth (the “desert”) and our ability to rely on God’s victory in Christ, the slain and risen Lamb (cf. John 16:33; 1 John 5:4-6).

“Rev is a gift that comes to us from God, through Christ; the extended title of the book indicates this (1:1): ‘Revelation of Jesus Christ which God has given him in order to show his servants the meaning of what must take place soon’. God expresses this through symbolic language, which is the only one able to bring to our level the divine secrets.” (Vanni, *Apocalisse*, 64). “God’s design on history (*progetto sulla storia*), inaccessible and illegible at any creaturely level, is handed, from now on, to Christ. It is he who will open it progressively, gradually revealing its contents, engaging in its realization: God’s project, with all that this comprises —persons, deeds, joys, pains, social and political events— becomes understandable only in the light of Christ.” (*ibid.*, 85).

“Apocalyptic language prefers associations within a sequence of images to a logical progression of thought; it permits individual features and metaphors to stand side by side without connections rather than composing them into a coherent picture; it repeats traditional materials without commentary and then unexpectedly indicates the direction of a new interpretation through striking omissions or additions [e.g., the ‘song of Moses and the Lamb,’ Rev 15:3].” (Koester, *Intro NT II*, 252-253).

With this general idea that Rev is still within “normal revelation” (that is, it is still Sacred Scripture), but carried to its maximum expression of fulfillment for the ‘very End,’ we will understand it better the more we are familiar with the rest of the Bible, especially the “Old Testament,” but also the New and with early Christian biblical interpretation. Here the concept of *rereadings* (*relectures*, see *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, I.C.2; III.A) is paramount. The “song of Moses and the Lamb” indicate the final Exodus (cf. Luke 9:31); the Woman is that of Gen, as is the dragon, their enmity now come to a eschatological head; Babylon is the pagan, even demonic, oppressor, the virgins are the total opposite of idolatrous fornicators, etc. The Sea disappears when all evil and sadness will be gone, and when we are truly seeing God face to face (a journey which begins now), there will be no Temple . . .