

Paul B. Decock

---

# THE TRANSFORMATIVE POTENTIAL OF THE APOCALYPSE OF JOHN<sup>1</sup>

## ABSTRACT

The transformative power of the Apocalypse of John is not situated in its prophetic predictions in the sense of information about the future but in its offer of divine wisdom by means of the symbolic scenes. The four types of symbols drawn by Gregory Baum from sociological traditions help to understand the transformative power of the symbols through which the possibility is offered to the hearers to see themselves and the world in new ways, to be able to discern between the ways of Babylon and the ways of Jerusalem. The transformation in view is not merely an individual and temporary one, but a cosmic, social and divine-human one in which perseverance in doing the works of Jesus to the end and holding on to the witness to/of Jesus (Rev 2:26; 12:17) play a crucial role.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Reading the Apocalypse as a transformative experience does justice to the function of the literary genre apocalypse as this has been expressed in the addition to the definition of 'apocalypse' in *Semeia* 14:

Intended to interpret present, earthly circumstances in the light of the supernatural world and of the future, and to influence both the understanding and the behavior of the audience by means of divine authority (Collins 1986:7).

---

1 An earlier version of this paper was published in *Prophecy, Wisdom and the Spirit in the Johannine Literature*, edited by B. Decharneau and F. Nobilio, Éditions Modulaires Européennes – EME, (2011); the courtesy of the publishers and the editors is hereby acknowledged.

Paul B. Decock, University of KwaZulu-Natal/St. Joseph's Theological Institute.  
E-mail: [decock@sjti.ac.za](mailto:decock@sjti.ac.za)



*Acta Theologica*  
2011 Suppl 15: 183-199  
ISSN 1015-8758  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.4314/actat.v31i1S.11>  
© UV/UFS  
<<http://www.uovs.ac.za/ActaTheologica>>

SUN MØDIA  
BLOEMFONTEIN

Indeed, the Apocalypse intends to *interpret* the experience of the hearers and *influence* their *understanding* and *behaviour*. In other words, it is not merely a question of information but of spiritual insight and of wisdom.<sup>2</sup> In line with this, the definition of the genre points out that the interpretation of experience is done *in light of the supernatural world and of the future* and appeals to *divine authority*. It will therefore be important to explore the aspects of higher or divine wisdom in the Apocalypse and the ways in which the gift of divine wisdom is communicated and received by the hearers. The obvious fact that the Apocalypse makes abundant use of symbolism invites us to explore how symbols function in the process of shaping the lives of communities. In fact, it will be important to consider that the transformative power of faith is not situated in the *doctrines* but in the *symbols alive in the imagination*.<sup>3</sup>

The focus in this paper will not be on the kind of momentary experience of the author of the Apocalypse which 'inspired' this book,<sup>4</sup> but on the kind of transformation the work is aiming at.<sup>5</sup> The paper will first consider how the apocalyptic literature and the Apocalypse have integrated wisdom elements and tend to present their insights as higher or divinely revealed wisdom. Secondly, we will look at the symbolic character of the divine communication and at the ways symbolism functions in human understanding and life using the four aspects of the symbol proposed in Gregory Baum's (1975:238-265) theological reading of the sociological and psychological literature. Thirdly,

---

2 Waaijman (2002:521-522), referring to Aristotle, states: "Just as in the case of scientific knowledge, spiritual insight is the first and the last. But unlike scientific knowledge, the highest principle is not discovered by abstraction from concrete things; rather concrete experience is transformed in the direction of the end (the good, virtue, happiness) that is transformative principle of this transformation."

3 This is emphasized by Gregory Baum: "Unless doctrines are derived from symbols alive in the imagination and lead back to them as the primary structure of faith, they disguise the meaning of religion and become obstacles to the truth" (1975:245).

4 The texts are very vague about what exactly it involved: 1:10-12: "I was in the spirit ... and I heard ... I saw"; 4:1-2 involves a vision of the opening of a door into heaven and an invitation to ascend upon which John experiences a prophetic trance (Aune 1997:83 and 283). DiTommaso (2007:263-265) briefly discusses the recent literature on visionary experiences. From a literary point of view, it is important to see how "in the spirit" is repeated twice more in order to introduce the two climactic visions of Babylon (17:3) and Jerusalem (21:10). In these three cases the invitation to 'come' leads to a prophetic trance.

5 David Barr (1984) has emphasized the rhetorical aim of the Apocalypse; it does not aim merely at providing information but at the transformation of the readers by means of the symbolic universe which it evokes. See also his lecture of January 28, 2000 (Barr 2000). This is also the approach of A Y Collins (1984). We can think of this transformation as involving consolation (see DiTommaso 2007:252-254) or challenge (often not sufficiently recognized).

we will consider how the divine communication leads to higher wisdom in the sense of the ability to discern between truth and deception, a discernment which needs to be realized in a way of life, more particularly by “continuing to do the works of Christ to the end” (2:26). Finally, the goal of the transformation process will be explored as the full realization of creation, as the establishment of the human city free from oppression, and as the celebration of the covenant relationship between the Lamb and his Bride.

## 2. THE APOCALYPSE AS A GIFT OF WISDOM IN THE FACE OF THE RIDDLES AND CHALLENGES OF LIFE

### 2.1 Apocalyptic literature, and the Apocalypse of John, and wisdom literature

Wisdom literature and apocalyptic texts have often been seen as two very different kinds of literature, not only from the point of view of genres used but also from the point of view of outlook on life.<sup>6</sup> However the keywords for the relationship between wisdom, prophecy and apocalyptic in more recent studies are now “‘rapprochement,” “interconnectedness,” and even “fusion” (DiTommaso 2007:381). Von Rad is usually remembered as one of the first scholars who claimed that the Apocalypses had their origin in the wisdom tradition. Later studies have pointed more in the direction of one particular kind of wisdom as the source of apocalypticism, i.e., mantic wisdom, which can be seen for instance in the Book of Daniel, rather than to the writings of Proverbs and Sirach (see Rowland 1982:203-204). However, a number of scholars have also indicated similarities between apocalyptic texts and the so called critical wisdom texts, Ecclesiastes and Job. According to Rowland (1982:207),

---

6 Jesus was seen as either influenced by apocalyptic tradition or by wisdom traditions; the Q source was seen as either shaped by apocalyptic traditions or by wisdom traditions; there has been a similar discussion about some of the Pauline texts; Johnson (1989) in a study on Romans 9-11 proposed that wisdom and apocalypticism in their ideal forms be placed on two extremes of a continuum with regard to immanence and transcendence (1989:70); for the ideal sage meaning is found in the present life, while for the ideal seer meaning is found in the future order and the future divine activity; for the ideal sage wisdom is open to everyone who searches, while for the ideal seer wisdom is given. The actual texts finds themselves somewhere between these extreme points on the continuum (see the survey in Decock (1999:17-19); for a more comprehensive and up to date overview of recent studies on the relationship between apocalyptic texts and the wisdom tradition, see DiTommaso (2007:374-384)).

The whole structure of the Book of Job offers an embryonic form of the later apocalypses. ... Thus in both Job and in certain apocalypses questions regarding man and his lot arise from the observation of the world. In both cases the final answers to the question only come as the result of divine revelation. ... In a sense one can argue that apocalyptic is an attempt to solve the problem of the dire scepticism which we find in Ecclesiastes.

Henze (2008), from his side, has explored the similarities between 2 Baruch and Ecclesiastes. He points to the strong advice in both to remember our creator before the end comes, and that it is the end of one's life which is decisive not its beginning or the present (Henze 2008:37-42):

Remember your creator in the days of your youth, before the days of trouble come, and the years draw near when you will say, "I have no pleasure in them"; before the sun and the light and the moon and the stars are darkened and the clouds return with the rain; ... before the silver cord is snapped, and the golden bowl is broken, and the pitcher is broken at the fountain, and the wheel broken at the cistern, and the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the breath returns to God who gave it (Qoh 12:1,2,6,7).

Henze (2008:42) compares this text with 2 Baruch 85:9-11, where the old age of the world rather than the old age of an individual is in view:

So, before judgment will claim its own and truth what is rightfully hers, let us prepare ourselves that we may possess and not be possessed, hope and not be ashamed, rest with our fathers and not be tormented by those who hate us. For the youthfulness of [this] world has passed away, the vigour of creation has been consumed for some time. Little is missing until the Advent of the times, until they will have passed by. The pitcher is near to the fountain, the ship to the harbour, the course of the journey to the city, and life to [its] consummation. Once again prepare yourselves, so that, after you have travelled and disembarked from the ship, you will find rest and not be consumed, once you have arrived (2 *Baruch* 89:9-11).

It would seem that apocalypticism developed as a worldview within which formerly discrete traditions were brought together and re-interpreted, particularly the wisdom traditions and the prophetic traditions. This development was probably influenced by currents in the surrounding cultures of late antiquity (Persian, Hellenistic, Zoroastrian) in which the search for "higher wisdom through revelation" played an important role (see the survey in Decock (1999:15-17)). Against this background we can understand the idea of two contrasting and competing forms of wisdom: earthly wisdom against the wisdom from above (James 3:13-18) or the wisdom of this world

against God's wisdom, which appears as foolishness to the world (1 Cor 1:18-2:16). In the Apocalypse this contrast is developed by means of the typically sapiential tradition of the contrast between seduction by the loose woman and faithfulness to the wife of one's youth.<sup>7</sup> Although the image of the two ways is not used here, it is nevertheless appropriate and enlightening to relate the image of the two women to the two ways tradition.<sup>8</sup> Rossing (1999:56-59) points to two further examples of wisdom forms used in the Apocalypse, the seven macarisms<sup>9</sup> and the vice lists.<sup>10</sup>

The concern to lead the readers to this higher wisdom is of crucial importance in the Apocalypse. The word σοφία occurs four times: once as a divine quality attributed to God in an act of praise (7:12); once as granted by God to the Lamb (5:12); finally, in 13:18 and 17:9 the readers are challenged to acquire or use this divine gift in order to understand the symbolic meaning of certain elements in the text: the number 666; the seven heads and the ten horns. It is a question of understanding the ultimate meaning of what is really going on in the world. The "true wisdom" in the Apocalypse is revealed in the form of visionary scenes: the evil powers will wage war against the Lamb but they will be conquered by the Lamb, and those who are called chosen and faithful will share in that victory (17:14). However, these scenes do not give "a blueprint for the end of the age" (Barr 2000:3). Rather, they provide the "lenses through which" the hearers can look at their situation.<sup>11</sup>

7 Rossing (1999:41-53) points to Prov 1-9; Sir 15:2-6; 51:13-30; Philo, *Sacri*. 20-26; 4Q184; 4Q185;

8 "While the word 'way' ... is not used in Revelation's city visions, this absence does not rule out the use of this two-choice tradition. The either/or structure could be established by contrasting feminine figures. ... The 'basic binary form' of Virtue/Vice or Wisdom/Evil Woman offered imagery that could be elaborated in several different directions – with or without the women, and with or without the ways – while still making the same ethical appeal to the audience to choose between two alternatives" (Rossing 1999:53).

9 Giesen (1997:66) is not satisfied with the alternative between a cultic or a sapiential origin of the macarisms; he sees them as congratulatory formulae which proclaim already present happiness but at the same time have a parenetic function in that they call upon the hearers to maintain the required disposition.

10 Rev 9:21; 21:8,27; 22:15; compare with Wis 14:25-26. "Such lists are especially prevalent in Christian 'two-ways' literature such as *Didache*, *Barnabas*, and related New Testament texts: Did 5:1-2; Barn 2:2-3; 18-20; Matt 15:19; Rom 1:29-30; Gal 5:19-21; 1 Tim 1:9-10." (Rossing 1999:58).

11 Barr (2000) uses a narrative approach to explain this: "... a narrative approach to Revelation has no interest in the future. ... Rather it is about an alternative world, one in which all the elements of this world are taken up, shuffled, and made to mean something entirely different than they meant before" (2000:9). "What they [apocalyptic stories] reveal is a new way of looking at life and history, a way that shows God in control and the believer on the side of truth and justice – and ultimate

## 2.2 Apocalyptic literature as “crisis” literature and the wisdom tradition

There is a wide spread view that in one way or another apocalyptic literature is ‘crisis’ literature (see DiTommaso 2007:251-263). In the case of the Apocalypse, it can be seen as a crisis provoked by the author who insists that loyalty to Christ cannot go together with loyalty to the Empire (Collins 1984:77). While Romans 13:1-7 presents the civil authorities as instituted by God and as God’s servants, the Apocalypse presents the Empire as allies of the Dragon (12:18-13:18).<sup>12</sup> The call for wisdom to understand the true nature of the Empire in Revelation 13:18 and 17:9 indicates a crucial issue for the Apocalypse as some – or many – in the churches have not recognized the power of the Dragon behind these political powers. What the churches need is to recognize that the claims of the Empire to be the agent of the gods in the establishment of peace and well being is in fact seduction by the false prophet.<sup>13</sup> The killing of Jesus and many founding members by the Roman authorities is a sign that the Empire is the enemy of God and that this killing is therefore likely to continue (2:10; 6:11; 11:7-10). John represents true prophecy according to which Christ, as the origin of God’s creation (3:14), is the one who brings peace and well being to the universe, while those who fail to do the works of Christ are those who destroy the earth (11:18; 19:2). The Apocalypse evokes a cosmic perspective, which reveals where true power lies and from where true peace and well being can be expected. It is a question of seeing this world as God’s creation (4:11; 10:6) and Christ as “the origin [or beginning] of this creation” (3:14). The completion of salvation for this world will be the fulfilment of God’s covenant by the “marriage” of the Lamb with his bride (19:7-8; 21:2-4) in the ‘new heaven and a new earth’ (21:1, 5). Not the Roman Empire but Christ and those who follow him are the agents of God who protect and develop the well being of creation. The Apocalypse views

---

victory” (2000:7). Similarly, Baum, from a theological point of view and focussing on the function of symbols states: “Since symbols are not *that which* but *that through which* [God’s revelation comes to us], what counts in the first place is that the imagination be structured by them” (1975:244).

- 12 According to Aune (1998:779), “The beast from the sea, probably representing the Roman empire rather than an individual ruler, is modelled after the ‘tyrannical ruler,’ while the beast from the land functions as the agent of the first beast and seems to represent the *commune Asiae*, i.e., the *Koinon* of Asia (the native political organization, which facilitated the policies of Rome), and is largely patterned after the ‘false seductive prophet.’”
- 13 The “divine” claims of the Empire can be seen in a variety of forms: for instance, the presentation of the city of Rome as the goddess Roma; sculptures representing Augustus in the likeness of Neptune; literary works associating the birth of Augustus with the return of the golden age and the intervention of the gods.

the Roman Empire as an agent of the forces of chaos, which pose the real threat to creation. Babylon is a symbol of that destructive sinfulness in the world and it characterizes the Roman Empire and anyone similarly involved in destructive behaviour.<sup>14</sup> Human righteousness, after the model of the works of the Christ, on the other hand, is a crucial key to the well being of the earth.<sup>15</sup>

### 2.3 Apocalyptic literature, mystical experience, and transformation<sup>16</sup>

Hengel (1974:1,253) saw apocalyptic literature as a pendant to Hellenistic mysticism and the mystery religions as they looked for a higher wisdom, not merely based on empirical observation and the ancient Scriptures.<sup>17</sup> Stone's (1990:16-18, 30-33; 1991:31) comments on the transformation or conversion experience of Ezra in Vision 4 of 4 Ezra are very relevant as they show how the theme of transformation and conversion could take a central position in an apocalypse.<sup>18</sup> Stroumsa (1996) also points in the direction of transformation when he argues that Christian mysticism abandoned the esotericism of Jewish apocalyptic texts for exotericism, which he sees as a shift from secrets that *should not* be revealed to secrets that *cannot* be expressed in words. Therefore, only an ethically transformed person, an interior person, can penetrate the divine mysteries. This prerequisite for understanding may not be very explicit in the Apocalypse but it is implied in the ethical requirements expressed in the macarisms, in the vice lists and in the theme of the two women/cities. In other words, understanding and a transformed life go hand in hand.<sup>19</sup>

---

14 For some examples of how sin affects nature, see 1 En 80:2-8; 100:10-13.

15 The link between righteousness and the well-being of the earth is regularly expressed in biblical texts (for instance, Hos: 18-20). Urbach, (1979:487-491) discusses the rabbinical insights into the dependence of the world on human righteousness; for instance, the rabbis read Prov 10:25 as "The righteous is the foundation of the world". See also Patai 1967:155-156, and his concluding chapter.

16 For a brief survey, see Decock (1999:12-15); more recently, DiTommaso (2007:398-407).

17 We need not enter here into the debate whether Gnosticism, Christian mysticism and Merkevah mysticism all had some roots in apocalypticism.

18 Ezra consoles the lamenting woman with the same teachings with which the angel was trying to console him; we witness here an experience in which the external teachings are internalized while Ezra's pain is externalized in the woman but who is then transformed into the heavenly Jerusalem. The theme of transformation has also been studied by McEwan Humphrey (1995); besides the Apocalypse and 4 Ezra she also examined *Joseph and Aseneth* and the *Shepherd of Hermas*.

19 In 2 Peter 1:8-9 the prerequisite of progress in virtue for knowledge is clearly stated: "For if these things [growth in virtue as described in the step by step progress

For Vanni (1998) the author of the Apocalypse aims to express his experience of God, of the Lamb and of the design of God in a specific literary form. In order to interpret such a mystical text it is important to pay attention to the ways in which both the liturgical context and the symbolic language aim at communicating something beyond the conceptual level, the transcendent experience which the author himself has experienced. The “strangeness” of the language of the Apocalypse is the result of the struggle with the limitations of language and human comprehension so common in all mystical writings. Gregory Baum (1975) explains this by arguing that the core experience of faith is not situated in the intelligence but in the imagination; in other words, the conceptual level is secondary to the symbolic level and will always have to remain subordinate to the symbolic level.<sup>20</sup> To this we now turn.

### 3. SYMBOLISM AND THE IMAGINATION AS THE PLACE OF ENCOUNTER WITH THE DIVINE WISDOM<sup>21</sup>

In the letters (chapters 2-3) the seven churches are challenged or encouraged so that they will conquer and be able to share in the salvation which is evoked in the images of Jerusalem, and by implication escape the fate of Babylon. While they are confronted with “what must soon take place” (1:1; 22:6), the challenge is, as it were, two pronged: to persevere to do the works of Christ (2:26) and to hope and pray for the coming of the Bridegroom (22:17, 20). At this point we need to explore how the symbolism of the Apocalypse shapes the vision and hope of the churches and empowers them to act. For this the work of Gregory Baum (1975:238-265) offers stimulating perspectives.<sup>22</sup>

---

through the eight virtues presented in verses 5-7] are yours and are increasing among you, they keep you from being ineffective and unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. For anyone who lacks these things is nearsighted and blind, and is forgetful of the cleansing of past sins.”

- 20 Baum stresses the primacy of the symbolic and the doctrinal or conceptual as secondary and derived. He contrasts the objectivist approach with the symbolic approach: “The objectivist approach regards revelation as primarily cognitive and the Christian religion as a system of truths, while the symbolic approach understands revelation in symbolic terms (the word is here used in its strong sense) and the Christian religion as a set of symbols, which people assimilate and celebrate, and out of which they define their lives and create their world” (1975:252).
- 21 It is not our aim here to explore how the authors of the apocalypses received this divine wisdom (on this, see the work of Himmelfarb 1986; 1991; 1995).
- 22 Gregory Baum, a Roman Catholic theologian, who was active during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Canada, spent some years in the early 70’s focussing on the study of sociology and its possible contributions to theology and the understanding



Gregory Baum's discussion of four types of symbols sheds further light on the way symbols are able to shape and transform *the imagination of people and societies*.<sup>23</sup>

To the first type of symbol (s 1) belong objects, stories, songs, texts, ... which have symbolic value because they remind us of events in our lives and evoke the emotions connected with these events (1975:238-240).

The second type of symbol (s 2), drawn from the thought of Sigmund Freud,

signifies a story or an event of any kind that reveals the hidden depth, in the encounter with which we undergo transformation (1975:240).

The symbol in this sense is no longer external to the person considering it.

It mediates an encounter between a person and his or her unconscious life; in this the symbol can never be replaced by a concept or idea. ... it is the proper and unique mode in which the hidden structure of reality can be disclosed to the human mind (1975:240).

Religious teachings, like the kingdom of God, are such symbols which are understood to reveal the deeper truth about human life: they reveal "the truth about a reality partially present in human history and urging it forward as principle of transformation" (1975:241).

The third type of symbol (s 3) is taken from the young Hegel for whom symbols "are the structures of the imagination that affect the way in which people perceive the given and respond to it". According to Hegel "... certain religious symbols induced alienation in the lives of people and created an oppressive, exploitative society" (1975:241). In other words, the ways in which we experience and interact with "reality" is partly shaped by the particular symbolic structure of our imagination.<sup>24</sup>

---

of the mission of the church. The fruits of these years were published in 1975; chapter 11, of that work focuses on symbolism. He found it striking that several sociologists understood religion in terms of systems of symbols and that they had opened stimulating perspectives on the ways in which symbols function in human life. On the academic career of Baum, see McKenna (1998).

23 Barr (2000:7) also situates the transformation in the imagination when he writes: "First, apocalyptic stories generally are designed to shape the imagination of the hearer, to allow one to view one's historical situation in a new way, and so allow one to act in a new way." Barr rejects the view which would attribute the transforming effect of the Apocalypse in the prophetic *information* about the future; it is the *experience of entering into the narrative* which is transformative. He compares this to the effects of myth and ritual, "as a kind of mythic therapy" (2000:8).

24 "While classical philosophy placed the objective basis of truth in the outer world of things and Kantian idealism rooted objectivity in the categories of the mind

The patterns governing the imagination make people select what they regard as significant aspects of life, combine them into meaningful wholes of one sort or another, connect them with values, and relate them to a vision of the future (1975:242).

In this context Baum recalls the saying of Ricoeur that symbols “are not *that which* but *that through which*” (p. 243).

The fourth type of symbol (s 4) is the reflection of society in the mind. In that sense we speak of people being *socialized* into the social institutions of their society: “the social structures ..., the political institutions ..., the processes of production and the economic system”(p. 247). The symbols may be an attempt to justify unjust structures (Marx) or (according to Durkheim) may be “an authentic reflection of the social matrix of life” (p. 247). In any case, there is a dialectical relationship between the consciousness or symbolic world of the individuals and the symbolic world expressed in the structures, customs and history of society.<sup>25</sup> Therefore, while people may uncritically accept the symbol system they may also resist and end up being able to reshape society and its imagination.<sup>26</sup>

These four types of symbols enable us to turn to the symbols or symbolic scenes in the Apocalypse and to assess their transformative potential, for the original hearers but also for present day readers of the text. If we take briefly the example of the scene of the Woman and the Dragon (Rev 12:1-17) this symbolic narrative (s 1) could become a symbol revealing the ultimate dimensions of the human experience of the hearers (s 2). It evokes the threats to life which seem overwhelming but the narrative shows how the destructive forces are repeatedly (three times) frustrated; this already anticipates the final defeat of the Dragon. The reference to the throne of God (evoking particularly chapters 4 and 5) opens a view on the transcendent dimension of their situation and the reference to Genesis 3 (the serpent, and the loss of paradise) points forward to the return of paradise. These symbols are that

---

shared by all men, the sociological perspective recognizes objectivity in neither of these. For the world-which-confronts-us and the world-which-we-are enter into a dialectical relationship and keep on affecting on another. The symbols in the imagination (s 3) represent one side of this dialectic, namely the part the mind plays in creating the world” (1975:243).

25 “For if we begin with individual persons [Weber], then we must realize that their minds have been historically constituted by participation in their social history; and if we begin with society [Marx; Durkheim] we must realize that this society is not a given but has been produced by people acting in common” (Baum 1975:248).

26 “Karl Mannheim has shown that while society provides the common symbolic coordinates for perceiving the world, it is possible within this context to follow ideological symbols that protect the inherited order or to identify with utopian symbols that summon people to social change” (Baum 1975:248).

*through which* the revealed wisdom about the hearers' true situation can be found. The symbol (s 2) reveals the dangers "of the present existence and the graciousness situated at its core as a pull forward toward a more human future" (Baum 1975:241). The new self-understanding through symbol (s 2) can also become the symbolic structure through which the hearers are guided to understand their experience in a new way and reconfigure it through their commitment and action (s 3). The concluding verse of the scene evokes an image of those conquering the Dragon: "those who keep the commandments and hold on to the witness of/to Jesus" (verse 17). Right action is the root of right understanding.<sup>27</sup>

A consideration of the fourth type of symbol (s 4), that symbol is the reflection of society in the mind, is most stimulating for an understanding of the Apocalypse. In fact, the Apocalypse is attempting to unmask the symbolic world of the Roman Empire. The Apocalypse shows how this symbol system is promoted by the False Prophet or the Beast from the land (13:11-18). While the False Prophet endorses the system and acts in an ideological way towards the imperial set up, the Apocalypse questions and opposes the imperial set up and its symbolic world adopting a utopian stance (see Mannheim). The Apocalypse stands in a long tradition of questioning and opposing foreign rulers: most recently the Romans, and further back in history the Greeks, the Persians, the Babylonians, Egyptians and Phoenicians, ...<sup>28</sup> This alternative symbolic world is meant to be "realized," "materialized," lived out socially in the churches as alternative forms of societies. It will be fully vindicated in the New Jerusalem, while the fall of the Dragon (Rev 12:9) and the fall of Babylon reveal the hopeless illusion of the Empire and the Dragon.

This appropriation of the symbolic world of the Apocalypse is the fruit of the Spirit in the believers, and that is the reason for the repeated exhortation: "Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches" (2:7,11,17,29; 3:6,13,22). It is significant that Vanni (1998) in drawing attention to the mystical dimension of the Apocalypse stresses the liturgical context (the importance of ritual) and the symbolic language.

---

27 Waaijman (2002:709) quotes a number of statements from the Jewish and Christian tradition: For instance from Origen: "The word of God is not pondered 'with phrases but by fulfilling it after having grasped it.'" Rabbi Eleazar (in *Avot*) "regards orthopraxis as the root and mystical wisdom as the branches."

28 Pay attention, for instance, to the tradition of identifying these powers as monsters of chaos: Ezek 29:3-5; 32:2-8; Isa 27:1; Dan 7; the last text is re-interpreted and applied to the Beast in Rev 13:2.

#### 4. TRANSFORMATION, DISCERNMENT, AND THE THEME OF “TWO WAYS”

The whole point of the presentation of Babylon and Jerusalem is, on the one hand, to discredit Babylon and turn the readers away from it while, on the other hand, attracting the readers to Jerusalem by exalting it. The symbolic world of the Apocalypse is meant as the means *through which* the readers learn to look at their context and by which they develop the ability to “discern” between good and evil (Heb 5:14), or between the way which leads to life (Jerusalem) and the way which leads to death (Babylon). In other words, the symbolic world is meant to shape or reshape their value judgments. The ability to distinguish between good and evil, or between different ways, was seen as the fruit of a mature person (see Heb 5:13-14). It was seen as the fruit of wisdom.

Laporte (1975:132) refers to Philo, *QG* 4,158:

When the soul of the virtuous man (Isaac) becomes filled with the contemplation of wisdom, which like the day and the sun, illumines the whole reason and the mind, then it begins to give birth to opposites in the separation and distinction and discrimination between holy and profane.<sup>29</sup>

For the Apocalypse too, the ability to discern correctly is the fruit of the appropriation of the symbolic world. The vilification of the goddess Roma in 17:1-19:10 is meant to lead to the recognition of her true nature as finite and evil in spite of her greatness, power and wealth (18:10,16,19) and her claims to eternity (18:7). The glorification of Jerusalem is meant to move the readers to recognize the wonderful future opened up by the victory of the Lamb. The challenge is to be able to discern between what is genuine and what is only appearance. See for example 2:9, where Christ says to the church in Smyrna, “I know your affliction and your poverty, but you are rich.” A similar contrast is found in 3:17: “For you say, ‘I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing.’ You do not realize that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind and naked.” This last text reminds us of the vain boast of Babylon: “Since in her heart she says, ‘I rule as queen, I am no widow, and I will never see grief,’ therefore her plagues will come in a single day. The contrast between appearance and reality is dramatically expressed in the exclamations of the three groups of shocked spectators who lament the destruction “in one hour” of the mighty, wealthy, glorious city (18:10, 16, 18-19). True wisdom enables people to discern what

---

<sup>29</sup> Laporte (1975:132-134), points out that Philo took the method of couples of opposites from the biblical Wisdom tradition and he gives Ecclesiasticus 33:14-15 as an example. “In Philo, this method is not merely a device of presentation, but a true dialectic, i.e., a method of reasoning” (1975:132).

is genuine and therefore truly lasting.<sup>30</sup> Part of the process of discernment is the “testing,” as we find it in 2:2. While the church of Ephesus was able to test correctly (2:2), the church of Laodicea is challenged to buy from Christ salve to anoint their eyes so that they may see (3:18).<sup>31</sup>

The image of the two ways and related images not only focus on two different outcomes, but is more comprehensive; the different aspects are clearly expressed in a text from *The Testament of Asher* 1:3-4:

God has granted two ways to the sons of men, two mind-sets, two lines of action, two models, and two goals. Accordingly, everything is in pairs, the one over against the other.

It will be important to focus also on “the two lines of action” since the Apocalypse challenges the churches with regard to their works: the first, fourth, fifth, sixth and seventh letter open with the expression, “I know your works”; the works also appear in the letters in 2:5,6,19,23,26; 3:2; finally, the theme of judgment according to their works is expressed in 2:23; 14:13; 18:6; 20:12,13; 22:12. The insistence on the works indicates very clearly that the symbolic world which John has displayed before the readers must be embodied and become real in concrete human living and in a human society. The ethical response to the challenge of the symbolic world is both personal and social.

## 5. THE ULTIMATE GOAL OF THE SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE

The spiritual experience into which the Apocalypse intends to initiate the readers is not simply a temporary vision or ascent, but rather a journey towards a goal or even better a transformation into a goal. We can recognize at least three aspects to that goal: it is presented as the full realization of God’s creation (the conquest of the forces of Chaos), as the establishment on earth of the righteous city Jerusalem, and as the celebration of the full covenant relationship with God. These aspects make it clear that the transformation is not merely envisaging isolated individuals, but that all persons become part of a cosmic, communitarian, and divine venture.

With regard to the *cosmic* aspect, the full realization of creation, this dimension is evoked in various ways. First of all, the climax of the action in the Apocalypse is the new heaven and the new earth, as God will make all

---

30 In his masterful introduction to the study of spirituality, Waaijman (2002:483-515) devotes a whole chapter to discernment.

31 God is testing people: 2:10; 3:10; Paul, 1 Thess 5:21, uses another verb: δοκιμάζετε.

things new (21:1,5), after the primeval forces of chaos have been conquered (20:10,14). Early on in the book we are reminded that God is the creator (4:11); nothing will be able to prevent the realization of the divine promises because God is the creator of heaven, earth and sea (10:6); God the creator of all is to be feared and worshiped (14:7). The description of Jerusalem also evokes aspects of paradise by means of the river of the water of life (22:1-2), while in 2:7 those who conquer are promised that they will have “permission to eat from the tree of life that is in the paradise of God.” Furthermore, the focus on the “works” of the members of the churches is not merely an interest in ethical requirements but these are seen as the means by which God’s works are “coming down” onto the earth and are embodied in human works. While those who do the works of Jesus contribute to the realization of creation, those who do the works of Babylon are those who destroy creation (11:18; 19:2).<sup>32</sup> This descending movement is most remarkable and corresponds to the view of Jerusalem as coming down out of heaven from God (21:10) and even to the Logos who “became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:14, compare with Rev 21:3).

With regard to the *communitarian* dimension of the spiritual transformation, it is significant that the future human society is presented as a city, fully devoted to the Lamb as to her bridegroom (21:2), free from evil (21:8,27; 22:15), free from suffering and death (21:4).

With regard to the transformation as leading into a *divine* venture, it is certainly striking that the covenant between God and God’s people is seen as a vibrant bond: God “will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples” (21:3); “God is its light and its lamp is the Lamb” (21:23). The image of the marriage of the Lamb with the city as bride adds emotional intensity to this relationship (19:7, 9; 21:2, 9; 22:17).

## 6. CONCLUSION

The Apocalypse is therefore not merely a report of visions for the sake of information in the sense of predictions about the future but a book which aims to stir up the readers to open themselves to higher wisdom and to the process of transformation.<sup>33</sup> John’s temporary experience of vision communicated in the literary work becomes an ever available source of enlightenment and transformation for the readers and hearers. This ongoing process, as opposed

---

32 For fuller discussion, see Decock (2007:49-63).

33 This rhetorical aim to touch and inspire the hearers can clearly be seen in the carefully worked out literary structure of the Apocalypse as well as in the repeated irruption of the prayer of praise into the narrative which reaches a climax in the prayer of urgent longing (22:17-20).

to a “once off spiritual excitement,” is presented in the Apocalypse as having cosmic, communitarian and divine-human dimensions. Paul’s enigmatic formulation in 1 Corinthians 15:28, “so that God may be all in all”, finds a vivid illustration in the Apocalypse of John.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

AUNE, D.E.

1997. *Revelation 1-5*. Dallas: Word (WBC 52A).

1998. *Revelation 6-16*. Dallas: Word (WBC 52B).

BARR, D.L.

1984. The Apocalypse as a symbolic transformation of the world: a literary analysis. *Interpretation* 38:39-50.

2000. Transforming the imagination: John’s Apocalypse as story. [Online] Retrieved from: <http://www.wright.edu/~david.barr/Imagination.htm> [June 6, 2002].

BAUM, G.

1975. *Religion and alienation: a theological reading of sociology*. New York: Paulist Press.

COLLINS, A.Y.

1984. *Crisis and catharsis: the power of the Apocalypse*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press.

1986. “Introduction” *Semeia: An Experimental Journal for Biblical Criticism* 36:1-11.

DECOCK, P.B.

1999. Some issues in apocalyptic in the exegetical literature of the last ten years. *Neotestamentica* 33:1-34.

2007. The works of God, of Christ, and of the faithful in the Apocalypse of John. *Neotestamentica* 41:37-65.

DiTOMMASO, L.

2007. Apocalypses and Apocalypticism in Antiquity (Part I and Part II). *Currents in Biblical Research* 5:235-286, 366-432.

DUFF, P.B.

2001. *Who rides the Beast? Prophetic rivalry and the rhetoric of crisis in the churches of the Apocalypse*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

GIESEN, H.

1997. *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*. Regensburg: Verlag Friedrich Pustet (Regensburger Neues Testament).

HENZE, M.

2008. Qoheleth and the Syriac Apocalypse of Baruch. *Vetus Testamentum* 58:28-43.

## HIMMELFARB, M.

1986. The experience of the visionary and genre in the Ascension of Isaiah and the Apocalypse of Paul. *Semeia* 36:97-111.

1991. Revelation and rapture: the transformation of the visionary in the ascent apocalypses. In J. J. Collins & J. H. Charlesworth (eds.), *Mysteries and revelations: apocalyptic studies since the Uppsala Colloquium* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press), pp. 79-90.

1995. The practice of ascent in the ancient mediterranean world. In J. J. Collins & M. Fishbane (eds.), *Death, ecstasy, and other worldly journeys* (New York: State University of New York Press), pp. 123-137.

## JOHNSON, E.E.

1989. *The function and purpose of Apocalyptic and Wisdom traditions in Romans 9-11*. Atlanta: Scholars Press (SBL Dissertation Series 109).

## LAPORTE, J.

1975. Philo in the tradition of biblical wisdom literature. In R. L. Wilken (ed.), *Aspects of wisdom in Judaism and Early Christianity* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press), pp. 103-141.

## MCEWAN HUMPHREY, E.

1995. *The lady and the cities: transformation and apocalyptic identity in Joseph and Aseneth, 4 Ezra, the Apocalypse and the Shepherd of Hermas*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press.

## MCKENNA, R.

1998. The transformative mission of the church in the thought of Gregory Baum. *Theological Studies* 59:608-635.

## PATAI, R.

1967. *Man and Temple in Ancient Jewish Myth and Ritual*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., New York: KTAV.

## ROSSING, B. R.

1999. *The choice between two cities: whore, bride and empire in the Apocalypse*. Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: Trinity Press International (Harvard Theological Studies).

## ROWLAND, C.

1982. *The open heaven: a study of Apocalyptic in Judaism and Early Christianity*. London: SPCK.

## STONE, M.E.

1990. *Fourth Ezra: a commentary on the Fourth Book of Ezra*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press [Hermeneia].

1991. On reading an Apocalypse. In J. J. Collins & J.H. Charlesworth (eds.), *Mysteries and revelations: apocalyptic studies since the Uppsala Colloquium* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press), pp. 65-78.



STROUMSA, G. G.

1996. *Hidden wisdom: esoteric traditions and the roots of Christian mysticism*. Leiden: Brill (Studies in the History of Religions 70).

URBACH, E. E.

1979. *The sages: their concepts and beliefs* (Transl. from Hebrew by I. Abrahams). Jerusalem: Magnes.

VANNI, U.

1998. Linguaggio, simboli ed esperienza mistica nel libro dell' Apocalisse I & II. *Gregorianum* 79:5-28, 473-501.

WAAIJMAN, K.

2002. *Spirituality: forms, foundations, methods*. Leuven: Peeters (Studies in Spirituality Supplement 8).

*Keywords*

*Trefwoorde*

Revelation of John

Die Openbaring van Johannes

Transformation

Transformasie

Wisdom

Wysheid

Symbols

Simbole

Spirituality

Spiritualiteit