

The Apocalypse of the Cross: The Gospel of John and the Beginning of Christian Theology

Fr. John Behr

(Dean of St. Vladimir's Theological Seminary)

In two articles, published some fifty years ago, Ernst Käsemann asserted that “Apocalyptic was the mother of all Christian theology,” and by doing so set off many debates in the following decades. By “apocalyptic” he specifically meant the enthusiasm engendered by the possession of the Spirit as a pledge of the imminent Parousia, “nourished theologically from the tradition of Jewish apocalyptic,” and the sense of a corresponding ambassadorial authority for its mission that this kindled. Käsemann’s thesis is provocative and generated much debate in the following decades. But it is also fairly limited, primarily because he develops his reflections almost exclusively out of the Synoptic Gospels. The decades since Käsemann wrote have seen a real renaissance in scholarship on Second Temple Judaism and Inter-Testamental literature. Although we tend to think of “apocalyptic” primarily in terms of eschatology (an “imminent Parousia”), usually described in nightmarish imagery portraying cataclysmic events, modern study of the phenomenon has made it clear that apocalyptic writings are in fact concerned with much more.

I: The Structure and Framework of Apocalyptic

Apocalyptic writings are concerned with the beginning and the end, and with the realm above and below, and, specifically, draws out correspondences between these dimensions, as do almost all early Christian writings (Adam and Christ; “on earth as it is in heaven” etc.). With regard to the form of apocalyptic writings, John Ashton, building upon Rowland and Collins, defines “apocalypse” in this way:

An apocalypse is a narrative, composed in circumstances of political, religious, or social unrest, in the course of which an angelic being discloses heavenly mysteries, otherwise hidden, to a human seer, either indirectly, by interpreting a dream or vision, or directly, in which case the seer may believe that he has been transported to heaven in order to receive a special revelation.

With this description of the genre, form, and structure of apocalyptic writings, Ashton proceeds to examine the ways in which the Gospels, and the fourth Gospel in particular, though not apocalypses, are yet in fact “profoundly indebted to apocalyptic” in four key aspects: two of which are temporal—two ages (mystery) and two stages (dream or vision)—and two are spatial—insiders/outside (riddle) and above/below (correspondence).

Mystery

The first aspect is that of “mystery,” a word which occurs extensively in apocalyptic writings (in Daniel, in the Qumran scrolls, in the Enochic material), and which is the very heart of apocalypse, dividing time into two ages: what was once a mystery, a hidden secret, has now been revealed. This is, of course, of structural importance for the very self-articulation of Christianity, perhaps nowhere more clearly than the concluding verses to Paul’s letter to the Romans. More specifically, it is the Cross of Christ which constitutes the focal point for the revelation of the mystery and for the turning of the ages.

Two Stages

This first aspect of apocalypse—the revelation of a hidden mystery—leads naturally into the second aspect, that the revelation itself creates two stages: in the first everything is obscure and in shadows, while in the second everything is now revealed. The classic image used to describe this, from Daniel to the Apocalypse, is the book being shut up until the time is ready for it to be opened, to reveal its content, with the specification, in the Apocalypse, that the only one who has the authority to do so is the slain Lamb.

Riddling Discourse and Messianic Secret

When we turn from the proclamation of the gospel, as an apocalyptic revelation of the hidden mystery and the inauguration of a new creation, to the dramatic depiction of the gospel in the narratives of the Gospels, we encounter a further utilization of a key element of apocalyptic, that of riddling discourse (*rätselreden*). While the proclamation of the gospel, as in the concluding doxology of Romans, might seem imply that the mystery is now clearly known to all a common feature of Jewish apocalyptic literature is that the division between the wise and the foolish remains, even when the hidden mystery is revealed. The parabolic sayings of Christ, his riddling discourse,

divides human beings into two groups: the disciples, the insiders, to whom the “mystery” of the kingdom has been given, and outsiders, to whom everything, the whole of created reality, is enigmatic.

Correspondence and Two-Level Drama

The effect of Christ’s riddling discourse and the Messianic Secret, whereby the readers of the Gospel know, and therefore see, more than the disciples within the narrative, is to set up a two-level drama in a framework of correspondence. This is the final element of the apocalyptic genre mentioned above. It is found in most apocalyptic literature, especially clearly in the “Similitudes” of the Enochic material. Although there is some debate about how to translated the Hebrew, Aramaic, and Ethiopic terms, Ashton is probably right to suggest that “correspondence” is the best rendering, not least because it brings out a further element of the riddling discourse of Christ: *παραβολή* literally means a “juxtaposition,” with a consequent “comparison” or “analogy,” so entailing a “correspondence.”

Once we take seriously how an apocalyptic framework is essential to Christianity, as we have discussed above, we are forced to move beyond taking the Gospels as primarily biographies or “lives of Christ.” It is not even enough to speak of the Gospels as “kerygmatic biographies,” as Hengel proposed. Whatever the case is with regard to the Synoptic Gospels, in the case of John, Ashton, whose work (together with Martyn’s) we have largely followed in the above, argues convincingly that “the fourth evangelist conceives his own work as an apocalypse—in reverse, upside down, inside out.” Rather than a human visionary or seer ascending into the heavens to be shown, by an *angelus interprets* who interprets for the mystic what he sees, what is to come, on earth as it is in heaven, in the Gospel of John the Son of Man, known from Daniel (and perhaps Enoch), arrives from the heavens, bringing the heavens down with him, uniting heaven and earth, to show what must be, and so establish the glory of God upon earth, to return to the heavens, promising to send the Holy Spirit, who, as the *angelus interprets*, reminds the disciples of what they saw, but did not in fact see, by showing how the formerly closed book speaks of the slain Lamb who alone opens the book. And, as Ashton points out, “when he returns, exalted (ὕψωθεῖς), to heaven—this is surely John’s most remarkable conceit—he is stretched out on the cross.”

II: Theology in an Apocalyptic Key

Seen as a “reverse, upside down, inside out” apocalypse, the Gospel of John challenges many of our modern theological assumptions, yet, at the same time, intriguingly opens up or clarifies certain aspects of the theological reflections of the Fathers, and even the conciliar statements. There are three aspects in particular to which I would draw attention; the first concerns “salvation history”; the second, the subject of Christ himself; and the third, what it means to establish the glory of God upon the earth.

“Salvation history” or “economy”?

It is clear that over the past couple of centuries theological reflection, both scriptural exegesis and systematic exposition, has worked in a historical key, rather than within an apocalyptic framework, as defined above. The primary horizon has been that of *Heilsgeschichte*, “salvation history,” moving from the narratives of the Old Testament to those of the New Testament, the Gospels as biographies of Jesus followed by the acts of the apostles and their epistles. In this overarching narrative, one begins with God and his act of creation; the falling away of human beings; and then the long, slow, and patient work of God through the messiness of human history, in a gradually unfolding plan, preparing the way for the advent of Christ, the Incarnation of the Word.

Following the apocalyptic way of doing theology, as it is evident in the Gospels and the early Church Fathers, one could argue that the basic understanding of the relationship between Scripture and gospel here is not that of a continuous narrative, a “salvation history.” Rather, to use Irenaeus’ word, the gospel “recapitulates” Scripture, providing a “concise word,” bringing to light, through the Cross, and summarizing what is contained in Scripture in a clear, and therefore new and more powerful, fashion. Understanding the relationship between Scripture and gospel as “recapitulation,” Irenaeus can maintain the newness of the gospel. Irenaeus is able to sketch out a vision of the whole “economy” of God, the beginning and end of which is Jesus Christ himself (the beginning who appears at the end, as he puts it).

The Subject of Christ

Our historical or narrational (*heilsgeschliche*), rather than apocalyptic, framework for doing theology has, I would suggest, changed the very subject of theology. This is shown most directly and strikingly in the fact that in our dogmatic theology (in which, as Käsemann lamented, eschatology/apocalyptic only comes in at the end, rather than the beginning), we invariably begin with the Word of God as the second person of the Trinity, the agent in creation and salvation history, until, through his birth from the Virgin Mary, the Word is incarnate as Jesus Christ. The subject has changed from Jesus Christ to the Word of God. Our tendency to begin with the “Word” of God,

rather than Jesus Christ, who is the Word, stems in large measure from modifications in the approach to theological reflection arising from the systematizing of early theological debates in later centuries. Approaching the Prologue of the Gospel of John and indeed the Gospels in an apocalyptic manner, one suggests a way forward for the impasse in which much twentieth century scholarship found itself, regarding the question of the relation between history and revelation. It is not simply by “seeing” the historical Jesus, “according to the flesh,” that we contemplate the revelation of God, for those who looked on him (and, for that matter, even those who saw the risen Christ) did not truly know him, in his identity as the eternal Son of God. It is, rather, through his Passion, his passage from this world to be enthroned with God in heaven, that, by turning back to the scriptures under the guidance of the Spirit, that we finally see him. As St Ignatius of Antioch put it, “our God, Jesus Christ, is [now] all the more apparent, being in the Father.” The revelation of God in Christ is not subsumed within the horizon of this world, but rather opens for us, apocalyptically, a door into heaven, enabling us to see the glory of God. Yet, paradoxically, as noted above, this glory is now established on earth.

The Glory of God

Finally, then, what is this glory of God established upon earth. The Gospel of John leaves us in no doubt that it is the Crucified Christ, ascended in glory upon the cross as the Lord of glory, revealing to us the glory which he eternally has with the Father. Christ’s word from the cross in the Gospel of John, and only there, takes us one step further in understanding this glory: “it is finished” (Jn. 16:30: *τετέλεσται*). It is in exactly the same perspective that Irenaeus, a few decades later, asserts that “the glory of God is the living human being” (*haer.* 4.20.7). He is not speaking, as we might today, of “living [this] life to the full.” He is speaking, instead, of the martyr, the one living, no longer by the flesh or its breath, but by the Spirit of God, bringing together into unity the flesh and the Spirit.

The very life of God, revealed in Christ, is precisely that of laying down one’s life for the sake of others. It is this divine life to which the handiwork of God, men and women, are called, and in doing so, they become, according to Sts Ignatius and Irenaeus, human beings. Scripture, which opens by announcing the project of God, to make human beings in his image, is only concluded at the cross (which, as we have seen opens the scriptures), with Christ’s word, “it is finished,” witnessed to, in a delightful irony, by none other than Pilate (and, again, only in John): “Behold the human being” (Jn. 19:5). As Christ shows us what it is to be God by the way he dies as a human being, we in turn are the ones who must give the “fiat” to the only work said to be God’s own project, in this way ourselves becoming human beings in the stature of Christ. The four dimensions of apocalypse, above and below, the beginning and the end, are thus brought together by John in the figure of the cross.