

ARTICLE

The Lamb and His Bride:

The Mystery of the Church in the Book of Revelation

Introduction

While church-materials are to be found scattered throughout the Book of Revelation, there are arguably key moments during which its author John occupies himself, more extensively than in others, either with his churches or with the notion of “church” as such. These are found at the beginning (chs. 2-3, seven churches as lampstands), middle (ch. 12, woman and dragon) and end (ch. 21, bride-wife-New Jerusalem) of his work. The Church is seen as belonging to Jesus Christ (I.); she is redeemed by His blood (II.), and professes His name (III.); her persecution in this world (IV.) leads to her ultimate triumph (V.).

John's work is addressed to “the seven churches that are in Asia” (1:4). Seven is a symbolic number and signifies totality: his message is addressed to the universal Church. At the same time the Church is the center of interest of the book. Its opening chapters (chs. 1-3) are intimately concerned with the communities known to the seer, the Christians of Asia for whom he writes; after that he goes on to consider the Church and Israel and the Church and Rome. But always, for him, the Church means Christians, those loved by Christ who has redeemed them by His blood (1:5f).

I. The Church of Jesus Christ

The Church in the Apocalypse is the Church of Jesus Christ; everywhere Christ appears in His relation to the Church, with which He is finally united as with His Bride. A creedal formula is contained in 1:5: “Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.”, and in 1:17f: “I am the first and the last, and the living one. I was dead, and see, I am alive forever and ever; and I have the keys of Death and of Hades.” He is the “Son of God” (2:18), the “Anointed One/Messiah” (11:15; 12:10), the Son of David of the end-times (3:7), the victorious Lamb worthy to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing (5:6.12).

He is, therefore, the messianic Ruler, who won the victory through His suffering and death, and who now possesses all dignity. He is the One who will come to render an ultimate judgment: “Look! He is coming with the clouds; every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and on his account all the tribes of the earth will wail. So it is to be, Amen.” (1:7) “Then I looked, and there

was a white cloud, and seated on the cloud was one like the Son of Man, with a golden crown on his head, and a sharp sickle in his hand!" (14:14; see also 19:11ff). The advent of the divine Lamb-Lion is imminent: "The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place" 1:1; "Repent then. If not, I will come to you soon and make war against them with the sword of my mouth" (2:16); "If you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come to you" (3:3).

II. The Redeemed Church

The Church is Christ's possession. His claim is founded on His expiatory death: "These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb" (7:14); "To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen" (1:5f.). "You were slaughtered and by Your blood you ransomed for God saints from every tribe and language and people and nation; you have made them to be a kingdom and priests serving our God, and they will reign on earth" (5:9f.).

Jesus is the Lord who dwells in the center of His Church: "And in the midst of the lampstands I saw one like the Son of Man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash across his chest. His head and his hair were white as white wool, white as snow; his eyes were like a flame of fire, his feet were like burnished bronze, refined as in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of many waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, and from his mouth came a sharp, two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining with full force" (1:13-16).

Again, the seven churches stand for the universal Church:¹ "For you were slaughtered and by your blood you ransomed for God saints from every tribe and language and people and nation" (5:9). She becomes the New Israel: "And I heard the number of those who were sealed, one hundred forty-four thousand, sealed out of every tribe of the people of Israel." (7:4; see also 7:9.13ff; 21:2f; 2:9; 3:9), increasing in number and at a future time preserved from all evil by the seal of God (7:4-8).

Christ Himself orders the prophet of Patmos, His "servant", 1:1, to communicate with the Church: "Write in a book what you see and send it to the seven churches, to Ephesus, to Smyrna, to Pergamum, to Thyatira, to Sardis, to Philadelphia, and to Laodicea. Now write what you have seen, what is, and

¹ Cf. BAUCKHAM, *Theology* 114.

what is to take place after this" (1:11.19). The Church is to listen in judgment and promise to the voice of the Spirit. At the end of the Apocalypse we hear the voices of Christ, the seer, the bride and the Spirit again (22:6-21).

The prologue of Revelation (ch. 1) concludes with a covering letter addressed to seven individual Christian communities in Asia Minor. These seven are a symbol of fullness, and stand for the entire church in Asia, and eventually for all Christian communities anywhere in the world: all of them will in their own time and in their own way stand in need of the reproof, the correction, the consolation and the encouragement offered here. John has made the most intricate use of topical references, but these are only the setting for the message, which is intended to be taken to heart by all to whom it applies, including any subsequent readers of this covering letter. The Christian communities are laboring under the most crushing of difficulties.²

This one and universal Church subsists in many local communities (chs. 2-3).³ The Having the good of His disciples very much at heart, the Son of Man who walks among the lampstands, the churches, and holds in His hands the stars, the angel guardians or representatives of the churches (1:12-20). The biblical term *ekklesia* seems to point those local communities, not to the universal Church (1:4.11.20; 2:1; etc.), which is depicted as 'bride' (19:7; 21:9).⁴ The text also implies that in both her earthly stage and her heavenly stage the Church is the chosen people of God (18:4).

"John's book can still speak to us because it was addressed originally to real flesh and blood communities of Asia Minor struggling, succeeding and often failing to live the ideals of the Christian life. His picture of the early Church is a welcome warning against the temptations of Christians of every age to idealise the early Church, its survival and its success in passing on the Christian message. The seven letters, symbols of the universal Church and its response, show how aware John is of the variety of responses which people make to the Gospel in every age. [...] John holds out no prospect for peace and justice on earth before God's triumph. Until then life will be a constant struggle with the two beasts, the instruments of Satan. Persecution and martyrdom are key aspects of the Christian life."⁵

In the epilogue the Spirit inspires the churches to respond with eager joy to the Lord's announcement of His coming, looking for the response of the individual Christian (22:17). As the Kingdom of God and of Christ and as

² Cf. Richards, *Spirit* 36ff.

³ Cf. Vatican Council II, *Christus Dominus* 68.

⁴ Cf. Braun, *Jean* 75ff.

⁵ Kealy, *Apocalypse* 41-44.

priestly people (1:6) the Church is already present on earth but will be definitively established after the destruction of all the forces of evil.⁶ The image of the Kingdom also reveals the nature of the Church (1:6.9; 11:15.17; 12:10; 19:6-8); echoes of that Kingdom are also heard in 5:9-10; 6:9-11; 7:9-10; 14:1-5; 20:4-6. It coincides with the wedding feast of the Lamb, and consequently with the descent of the New Jerusalem, His bride. Furthermore, the reign of God are the souls of the martyrs (ch. 11), anticipating the new creation.

These “servants of our God” are sealed with the “seal of the living God” (7:2ff; see also 14:1; 22:4). On the other hand, “only those people who do not have the seal of God on their foreheads” are passible to apocalyptic harm (9:4). The redeemed are registered in “the Book of Life” (3:5; 13:8; 17:8; 20:12.15; 21:27); they have the heavenly citizenship: “Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they will have the right to the tree of life and may enter the city by the gates. Outside are the dogs and sorcerers and fornicators and murderers and idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices falsehood” (22:14f).

III. The Professing Church

The members of the Church are called “saints” (5:8; 8:3f.; 11:18; 13:7; see also Acts 9:32.41; Rom 8:27). Distinct are the “prophets” (11:18): together they are called “servants of God” (cf. 1:1; 2:20; 7:3; 10:7; 11:18; 22:9), underlining their relationship to God. Among themselves they are “brothers” (6:11; 12:10; 19:10; 22:9). Christians are those who have “returned” to God (cf. 9:20f.; 16:9.11). The churches are repeatedly called to conversion (cf. 2:16.21f; 3:3.19; 16:9); they are to remember the Gospel, having “the testimony of Jesus” (19:10) and listening to what the Spirit says (2:7.11) and keeping it (cf. 1:3). They keep the words of Christ (3:8.10) as well, and the prophecy of this Book (22:7.9.18f). Moreover, Christians are the offspring of the Woman, who is opposed by the dragon; he then “goes off to make war on the rest of her children, those who keep the commandments of God and hold the testimony of Jesus.” (12:17; cf. 2:9.13; 14:12), who fear the name of God (11:18) and profess the name of Christ (3:8). All these are “the righteous deeds of the saints” (19:8), the fine linen, bright and pure of the Bride. Christians avoid idolatry (14:4f; 17:2.4; 18:3.9; 19:2), ignore lies and are blameless (14:5). They “follow the Lamb wherever He goes” (14:4) as confessors (1:9) and martyrs of “the faithful witness” Jesus Christ (1:5; 3:14). He sees them under that heavenly altar (6:9) and as “a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their

⁶ Cf. Harrington, *Apocalypse* 45.

hands. They cried out in a loud voice, saying, "Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!" (7:9f., 14; see also 22:14). "They have conquered [the dragon] by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they did not cling to life even in the face of death." (12:11; see also 2:13; 14:12; 16:6; 17:6; 20:4; 22:14). In short, to be a member of the Church means to give witness (cf. 1:2.9).

IV. The Persecuted Church

The Church is a Church of martyrs because she represents Christ here on earth.⁷ Those men who are instruments of the dragon and his hierarchy turn perpetually against the One who has won the victory in love. The Church is seen in the perspective of martyrdom.⁸

The seven missives to the seven churches speak of tribulation, poverty, blasphemy, defamation, captivity, suffering and death (chs. 2-3). Also later we hear of prisoners (13:10), martyrs (6:9ff; 13:9), souls who come from the great ordeal (7:14), outright persecution (12:13ff; 13:7), blasphemy (13:1.6), and war (11:7; 17:14). The Church is tempted to apostasy by these hardships (2:2.6.10.14f.24; 3:10; 13:2ff.11ff). These trials can cause a diminution of faith and love (2:4.19f; 3:14ff), and even spiritual death (3:1). At the same time one has to praise the steadfastness and vigilance of the members of the Church (2:2f.19; 3:8).

Chapter 12 of the Apocalypse has been interpreted as referring to the Church undergoing severe affliction: the woman clothed with the sun symbolizes the people of God of the Old Testament which, having given Christ to the world, thereby became the Christian Church. She found refuge from the dragon's assault in the desert where she is cared for by God for all the time of her earthly duration; the male child is snatched away and taken to God's throne (12:5f.14) safe from the dragon's attempt to destroy the woman as described in 12:13-16.

And although the Church is under God's special care, the children of the woman on earth can feel the brunt of his spite. Satan through his instruments can make war on them; they will be persecuted and put to death (12:17). The beast is identified with the Roman Empire, Satan's tool in his warfare against the seed of the woman (13:7); a warfare which will entail suffering without resistance, calling forth the faith and patient endurance of Christians (13:9f.).

⁷ Cerfaux-Cambier sees in chs. 12-22 a history of Church persecution, cf. *L'Apocalypse* 102-235.

⁸ Cf. Comblin, *Apocalipsis* 243f.

From another aspect, the two witnesses of 11:3-13 are the incarnation of the testimony born to Christ by the Church in the presence of the Jewish world.⁹

At the moment when Christ died on the cross, all hostility against God imploded (12:10, 12): "Then I heard a loud voice in heaven, proclaiming, 'Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Messiah, for the accuser of our comrades has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God. Rejoice then, you heavens and those who dwell in them! But woe to the earth and the sea, for the devil has come down to you with great wrath, because he knows that his time is short!'" The opponent's time is running out and the total collapse of his mock-kingdom is imminent. The world loyal to him feels the fear of its despot; it revolts. This anxious and suicidal reaction is described in chapter 13. It is the theological history of the idolization of political power that sacrifices Christians in its wake.

In this context must be seen the third mythologized person of the Book of Revelation, that is, the figure of the "Great Babylon" (ch. 17), the cosmopolitan mistress, the Fortuna or Tyche of that hostile system. She is the personified history of opposition against Christ and His followers, against His Church. She is "inebriated with the blood of the saints and the blood of the witnesses to Jesus" (17:6). She propagates the untenable illusion "never to see grief" (18:7). The worldly cosmos and its worldly capital wants to be the place of definitive consolation and relief, a place devoid of tears and death. This inevitably causes war and clashes with the saints, who reject that world view.¹⁰ The Church becomes the *Ecclesia pressa*, the persecuted Church. The worldwide anti-church knows of only one goal, to destroy the Church of Christ. Observing the continuing struggle of the Church and the seemingly unrestrained attacks of evil men upon the righteous, the martyrs call out, with a loud voice: "How long, O Lord, holy and true, will you refrain from judging and avenging our blood on those who dwell on earth?" Rev 6:10. This cry of the martyrs who long for the consummation of history mirrors similar sentiments in the suffering Church on earth. We find difficulty in perceiving the vast extent of Her world mission and the painstaking process of making a people in Christ's own character, to praise Him forever. And God will not compromise His goals forever.¹¹

⁹ Cf. Harrington, *Apocalypse* 46f.

¹⁰ Berry sees in chapter 8 a description of the vicissitudes of the Church during the centuries which follow her establishment upon the ruins of the Roman Empire. The varying fortunes of the Church during these centuries serve to separate the good from the bad. This work of separation goes on through all centuries to be completed only at the last judgment. Hence, the vicissitudes of the seventh seal continue on to the end of the Apocalypse, cf. *Apocalypse* 86ff.

¹¹ Cf. Coleman, *Songs* 69ff.

V. The Triumphant Church

The Bride¹² (ch. 12:1ff.; 19:7f) and the Prostitute (ch. 17:1ff) confront each other: Babylon will fall into the abyss (14:8; 16:19; 17:5; 18:2.21), while the New Jerusalem will descend from heaven (21:2.9). Like in Jer 25:10 the silenced voices of bridegroom and bride become a symbol for the fall of Babylon, 18:23.¹³ God protected his faithful (11:1f; 12:13ff) in the desert of this eschatological time, in fulfillment of all the promises (chs. 2-3.7; 14:1ff; 19:1ff; 21:1ff.9ff). The Church will be the restored Paradise of God (22:1ff), in logical conclusion of human history that began in Eden (Gen 2:8.10.15).¹⁴ If the New Jerusalem embodies what the Church truly is, then Babylon would seem to personify what the church truly is not.

The image of the New Jerusalem conveys the beauty and grandeur of the Church, “the Temple of God”, whose pillars are those who have won the victory; in it stands the Ark of the Covenant (11:19), peoples render worship to God and the Lamb (7:15).¹⁵ A wealth of details describes the glory of the heavenly City: ranging from the richness of its walls to the fruitfulness of its waters (21:16-27; 22:1-2). God is in its midst (21:3); the divine nature of holiness characterizes the habitation of God’s elect. “That it is called a city, a community of shared dependence and responsibility, again reflects the corporate nature of the Church.”¹⁶

Jerusalem was an accepted figure of the people of God, a tangible sign of the covenant. To present a new Jerusalem was, in the concrete language of imagery, to proclaim the election of a new people, of a new covenant. The heavenly City reflects the divine glory; it is God’s dwelling place, His presence

¹² “She is the Mother of Jesus and of Christians – Eve and Mary, Israel, Zion and the Church all combined in an image of the spiritual essence of the covenant people of God. She is the female figure corresponding to the Holy City of 11:2.” Bauckham, *Theology* 128.

¹³ Cf. AA.VV., *Theologie* 664.

¹⁴ Cf. AA.VV., *Mysterium* 200-207.

¹⁵ Eschatological realities are made present in heavenly worship (from ch. 4 onwards); worship unites heaven and earth, past, present and future. The object is the One on the throne and the Lamb, heavenly and earthly voices blend in a cosmic choir (5:8.13; 6:9-10). The inimical inhabitants of the earth are also intent on worship: they are worshipers of the beast. Liturgy is the absolute focus of the Apocalypse. One must serve God or Mammon. John is sure that idolatry corrupts the created order. Divine worship prepares for and hastens the coming of the new heaven and the new earth; cf. Harrington, *Revelation* 30; on liturgy in Revelation, see also Prigent, *Liturgie*.

¹⁶ Coleman, *Songs* 151.

among His people (21:3, 10f). In it sorrow and pain will have no place (2:3f) because God has brought to an end all that made up a world of sin. All the elect of God are sons and heirs of God (21:7). The City has no temple: God Himself dwells there, and the Lamb – the glory of their presence pervades the whole of it (21:23). All men will joyfully serve the one God; they will celebrate an unending feast of Tabernacles, walking in the light of God and the Lamb. No one who is an object of God's displeasure will find a place in that City.

The Church in the Apocalypse is an eschatological reality of "already and not yet". She insistently makes supplication for the Lord's coming: "The Spirit and the bride say, 'Come'. And let everyone who hears say, 'Come'. And let everyone who is thirsty come. Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift. The one who testifies to these things says, 'Surely I am coming soon'. Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!" (22:17).

God's love for His people is symbolized by the beloved Bride. The focus is on the marriage of the Lamb, whose wife is decked out as a new bride (19:7; 21:2.9), eagerly calling for her "beloved" (22:17). One of the most significant moments described is the wedding feast of the Lamb (19:7.9), an occasion for great joy and exultation.¹⁷

The saints rejoice because the marriage of the Lamb has come (19:7f.). And those who form the bride of Christ have been redeemed by the blood of the Lamb (5:9; 7:14; 14:3f.). Her wedding dress is the sanctity of God's people. She will appear, glorious and without blemish, as a bride adorned for her husband (21:2). But before she can come to that she has to be purified by Him, cleansed of every stain: it is still the time of purification, which means for the members of the Church that all that matters is fidelity to Christ. He will reward them according as He finds them faithful.¹⁸

Conclusion

The Church in the Apocalypse is no vague personification, it is a living organism, made up of men and women, of beings who are not only human but fallen. The Church on earth, though animated by the life of Christ, is still the Church of sinners. That is why there is need of the repeated admonition: "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches." It is this awareness of the earthly dimensions of the Church, over against her overworldly destiny, that saves the Apocalypse from any hint of triumphalism. John's purpose is to support and encourage ordinary men and women who find

¹⁷ Cf. AA.VV., *Revelation* 24f.

¹⁸ Cf. Scott, *Revelation* 122.

themselves pitted against forces that seek relentlessly to crush them. These Christians were called upon to suffer patiently and to endure. The book of Revelation holds out no prospect of peace and triumph for the Church before the end; the two beasts, instruments of Satan, will carry on their warfare to the last. "Christ completed the work of redemption in poverty and under persecution. In the same way, the Church is called to tread the same path [...] with sinners clasped to her bosom, she is at once holy and in constant need of cleansing."¹⁹ And so, the Church is eagerly awaiting the final word to be spoken by the Lamb over time and history, because she remembers the words of the angel to the seer on Patmos: "Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb" (19:9).

Fr. Andreas Hoeck

¹⁹ Vatican Council II, *Lumen Gentium* I, 8.

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