

journal was able to point out last month the threat to the Italian economy; the writing has been on the wall for some time. A clue to where the future lies is given by the recent announcement of the closure of British Aerospace in Hatfield. Hatfield is, virtually, a one-industry town. British Aerospace is looking to the Far East as a manufacturing centre, with its British factories as assembly points only. British industry, or what is left of it, can only compete if unit labour costs are reduced or if there is massive investment combined with a single-minded training and education programme. Any steps in this direction have been systematically undermined in the past decade. The Germans are not to blame for that!

AJW

The Language of Likeness in the Apocalypse

Cornelia Cook

Sometime around the middle of the third century Dionysius of Alexandria gave his views on the Apocalypse of John. He said

Some indeed of those before our time rejected and altogether impugned the book, examining it chapter by chapter and declaring it to be unintelligible, and illogical, and its title false. For they say that it is not John's, no, nor yet an apocalypse (unveiling), since it is veiled by its great thick curtain of unintelligibility....

Many readers have no doubt entertained such views. Dionysius was not inclined to endorse them. He would not, he said, reject a book so highly thought of by many of his co-religionists. But he doesn't find it any more intelligible for all that. He goes on to say

... but, reckoning that my perception is inadequate to form an

opinion concerning it, I hold that the interpretation of each several passage is in some way hidden and more wonderful. For even though I do not understand it, yet I suspect that some deeper meaning underlies the words.

The book must be meaningful, then, because he doesn't understand it. That curious position may actually provide a clue to the way the book works. What the seer saw is spectacular. But more interesting is *how* he saw it—or rather how he says he saw it, in his book of the vision. The significance of *Revelation* lies, to a considerable extent, in how the seer *wrote* it.

The John who wrote the Apocalypse cannot be John who wrote the gospel: Dionysius proved that well enough. But the problem they faced is in some ways much the same: how to make the transcendent known, how to express it in earthly terms—in language.

The seer's job isn't to generate belief—or to depict the generation of belief—as the gospels had to. His job is to reinforce belief. He doesn't have to demonstrate that the man Jesus who came into human history is God. He has to demonstrate to the rest of men and women that that God who is Christ and his Father is everywhere in human history. To do this he employs a special kind of story—an apocalypse, by which I mean that genre of revelatory story characterised by the disclosure (to a representative of a time of anxiety or distress) of divine mysteries, heavenly truths, through the medium of a teller who is a seer, a narrator who has had a vision of or from heaven. The vision is presented in highly imaged, richly suggestive language. An additional structural element common to many apocalypses is an eschatological dimension—an inclusion in the vision of a fulfilment to come, establishing a relationship between present experience and the last things. Here, a relationship has to be found between the time of Christ's coming in Galilee and a world seemingly unchanged by—even hostile to—his message, and the time of his ultimate coming to make absolute the everlasting dominion of his indestructible kingdom everywhere. The New Testament paradigm for the combination of revelation and eschatological pronouncement is Jesus's speech to the disciples on the Mount of Olives in Mark's gospel (13:3–37).

When you hear of wars and rumours of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is not yet. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places, there will be famines; this is but the beginning of the birthpangs. [the passage prophesies trials, persecutions, the destruction of the temple] ... in those days

there will be such tribulation as has not been from the beginning of the creation which God created until now, and never will be...

...

But in those days, after that tribulation the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. And then they will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. And then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.

The passage in Mark, which itself derives largely from the Book of Daniel (esp. 7:13–14), gives us in brief space and clear, direct admonitory language, the story of the Apocalypse. It uses many of the methods of the Apocalypse (including the language and conventions of earlier apocalyptic writing). It is a lesson on signs and how to read them, a picture of present experience and of a future made from present experience (the prophetic element is confirmed here by reference to historical events already experienced by Mark's audience), it gives a picture of history, struggle and tribulation, and it affirms Christ's promise of salvation for those who believe. But it gives no time for these events—'But of that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father'—and it returns the audience to history, from within which to 'watch' and hope.

The dimension of apocalypse missing here is the detailed vision of the other world of the God who is before and after human history and the Christ who is both within and beyond human history. *Heaven*, or that kingdom which is the source of earthly creation, of human history and the place where all the mysteries are held, known and understood, remains unknown and inaccessible. Perhaps with Christ among them the disciples hardly needed to see heaven, though they obviously longed to understand it. Jesus spends a lot of time telling them in parables what the kingdom of heaven is *like*. But those parables are really stories of God's love and justice and mercy and how Christians should act: they are not travel guides to Paradise. John's listeners, who have embraced Jesus's message and are trying to live it out, are also given a story of what heaven is like, but not in the form of domestic moral fable: rather of spectacular vision, epic activity and detailed pseudo-concrete description. These visions are travel guides to Paradise.

The mysteries of God are hidden in heaven—human knowledge, understanding and medium of expression are earthly. In the heavenly

kingdom God reigns; on earth it is sometimes hard to get a glimpse of that fact. The seer who wants to witness to God's reign everywhere and to bring to an embattled people a sense of the closeness of God's being to *their* history has a tough job to perform in ordinary language. We can see this in the Apocalypse itself where the difference between the two worlds is dramatised. As Christopher Rowland says of John's chapter four:

The contrast between the hymns to the all-powerful God in heaven and lack of evidence of the divine will on earth must have been evident to readers of the Apocalypse.¹

He notes the 'antithesis' between the 'theological affirmation' and the 'historical reality', and says, 'the world above where God is acknowledged as lord and the world below where few acknowledge his dominion exist side by side, with little prospect of the dominion of the creator in heaven being accepted by those who inhabit the world below'. The seer acknowledges this gulf. He must be taken out of himself/his world—into the spirit—to see the heavenly truth. But his task is to bridge the gulf, and the ways in which he does that determine the shape, the progress and the strange language of the Apocalypse. That language which seems like no talk on earth—a language which characterises itself as the voice of thunder and the music of harps—is in fact a familiar language and the greatest significance of the Apocalypse is not so coded, arcane or unintelligible, but lies in the very workings of the book's language.

The unbridgeable gulf between the two worlds of 'above' and 'below', or 'heaven' and 'earth', seems to make a special language necessary. The seer for whom the heavens open must 'see'—must describe—something completely different from what he experiences on earth. How does he make this language? He makes a language equal to this task from ordinary language used in a striking and ultimately significant variety of figurative ways. There is the language of simple declaration or description. There is the language of names. There is narrative language used to dramatic effect.

... there followed hail and fire, mixed with blood, which fell on the earth; and a third of the earth was burnt up, and a third of the trees were burnt up, and all the green grass was burnt up. (8:7)

Descriptive language can be vividly pictorial:

I looked, and lo, in heaven an open door ... a throne stood in heaven, with one seated on the throne ... from the throne issue flashes of lightning ... And round the throne, on each side of the throne are four living creatures

Declarative language can easily shade over into the metaphorical: 'You are neither cold nor hot ... So, because you are lukewarm and neither cold nor hot, I will spew you out of my mouth'. Language easily becomes figurative in an encounter with the unfamiliar, exploiting its own metaphorical character in the pursuit of adequacy. So, in this excited account, there is abundant figurative language: simile, metaphor, symbols of various kinds, personifications, metonymy, epithets.

Language becomes significant, too, by forming patterns. In *Revelation* we find many sevens: letters, trumpet-blasts, seals, bowls; we find four creatures, four horsemen, four winds; we find the twelve tribes of Israel, twelve stars in the woman's crown, twelve foundations of the New Jerusalem, the twelve apostles of the lamb. One of the effects of such patterning is to draw the elements together so that we discover relationships between them; they become the basis for stories lying behind the images. The woman is at once mother of the patriarchs, mother of the leader of the apostles, prototype and source of the (also feminized) New Jerusalem, she is Zion and the new Church. All of that is possible—and optional. Another effect is to generate plot structure—the repetition of the sevens gives distinct sections to the book, just as the constant presence of *pairs* of oppositions—good/evil, earth/heaven, beast/Christ, Babylon/New Jerusalem etc. gives the book its theme, its shape, and constitutes its argument.

Repetition is essential to the way language forms patterns and is abundant in *Revelation*. A more complicated pattern-forming is a kind of syntactic development whereby words, patterns, or images accumulate significance from their relationship to elements that surround them, so that their repeated use carries an increase in significance. Just as the meaning of elements in a sentence grows as the whole construction assembles itself, so we read these elements incrementally, growing in awareness as we do so. We will see that the imagery of chapters 21 and 22 is all familiar to us from earlier occurrences but its meaning is greatly amplified and indeed *explains* more fully the significance of its own earlier appearance.

Let me look at some of this language and try to suggest why it is there. John describes his vision in 1:12–16 thus.

Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me, and on

turning I saw seven golden lampstands, and in the midst of the lampstands one like a son of man clothed with a long robe and one with a golden girdle round his breast; his head and his hair were white as 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, from his mouth issued a sharp two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining in full strength.

The images are actual, though symbolic. Lampstands. A man described in his clothing and features. Much of this description is accomplished through simile. His hair and his head are white—as white as wool or snow. His eyes are *like* fire, his feet *like* bronze, his voice *like* the sound of many waters, his face *like* the sun. To describe this man, then, it is necessary to reach out to and draw upon other—natural or non-human—elements of the world. (Those elements are here elemental and domestic). The images are all part of the picture of the man but they have a symbolic feel to them. And indeed as the book develops its vibrant colour symbolism we will understand that white associates itself with purity, with faithfulness, with triumph and joy; we will find that the voice which comes like or out of waters or thunder is divine; and much later we will find the seven stars and the two-edged sword used in judgment and in battle for the kingdom of God. But these things remain to be developed. Here only some things are explained (and only as far as is at this point necessary or possible). In 1:20 the *sevens* of the passage—the seven stars, lampstands, angels and churches—are resolved into a relationship of equivalence.

As for the mystery of the seven stars which you saw in my right hand, and the seven golden lampstands, the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.

By announcing that these images are metaphorical or allegorical—standing for and equivalents of other things—we are introduced to a fact about language: that it is metaphorical. And we are here led not only to see the equivalence but also to speculate on what is implied by this asserted relationship. We note what is alike in stars and lampstands (light) and what is different between them: one is celestial light and one is domestic light; one placed in heaven by the Creator, one fashioned for use by human hands. The use of metaphor begins to establish the idea of two worlds and to explain them.

A more elaborate passage of figurative language comes when the heavens open in ch.4.

... lo, a throne stood in heaven, with one seated on the throne! And he who sat there appeared like jasper and carnelian, and round the throne was a rainbow that looked like an emerald. Round the throne were twentyfour thrones, and seated on the thrones were twentyfour elders, clad in white garments, with golden crowns upon their heads. From the throne issue flashes of lightning, and voices and peals of thunder, and before the throne burn seven torches of fire, which are the seven Spirits of God; and before the throne there is as [it were] a sea of glass, like crystal.

Again similes abound—‘like jasper and carnelian’, ‘a rainbow ... like an emerald’. So do significant colours (white, gold) and numbers. Metaphor is there too—concretized into symbolic presence: ‘seven torches of fire which are the seven Spirits of God’. And finally there is a metaphor—something describable as (*hos*) a sea of glass (though what it *is* we’ll never know) which is in turn described by a simile ‘like crystal’.

Everything here is both itself and seen in terms of something else. This in itself suggests how often in our ordinary language-use we—through employing simile or metaphor or metonymy—express something in terms of something else. To understand or to show understanding we resort to the comparative or contingent functions of language. In doing so we acknowledge the metaphorical nature of all language, discovering that there is no absolute correspondence between words and things. One substitution of word for thing is ultimately as good as another because nothing absolutely describes itself. All language is, after a point, meta-language. The calculated construction of a meta-language exploits this. The Apocalypse, throughout, announces the kind of metaphorical (and in places metonymic), symbolic text it is by foregrounding these devices. The meta-language is ordinary language which grows ever richer by exploiting its recognition that all language is non-representational—is not the thing described but makes it known by analogy, comparison or contingency.

I noted above that everything can be seen to be in some ways *like* and different from something else. In order to arrive at more precise description or explanation we often—paradoxically—grow more complicated in expression. Take, for instance, the thing called ‘horse’. That’s the simplest way of saying it. But in Dickens’s novel *Hard Times* the schoolchildren are taught to define it as ‘Quadruped, Gramnivorous, Forty teeth; namely 24 grinders, four eye-teeth, and twelve incisive.

Sheds coat in the spring, in marshy countries sheds hooves, too. Hoofs hard, but requiring to be shod with iron' Now that may seem very precise but if we look at what the words mean it says it has four legs (which makes it like a dog or a camel), it eats grain, it has teeth which cut and teeth which chew, and it's sometimes shaggy and sometimes smooth. We *might* say: 'a horse: well, it's like a camel but lacks a hump, its as furry as a bear in winter and sleek as an otter in summer, if it nips you with its front teeth it's like catching yourself with the scissors but its back teeth grind wood like a pulping machine'.

The more we elaborate the more clearly we see this beast but the more remote the images are that cram our mind and inform our understanding from the plain unqualified essential thing that's there in 'horse'. And yet if we'd never seen one, 'horse' wouldn't help. And if we knew we'd met one once but had failed to understand just what it was or did or was capable of doing and we'd been trying to understand it ever since, 'horse' would at best afford a tantalising glimpse or memory of the thing—it wouldn't make it again fully present to us or complete our understanding.

Let's say the last position is something like the state of mind of a community for which John of Patmos writes. Maybe it's like the state of the seer himself—a state of passionate desire to *see* (God, heaven, the promises of Christ fulfilled) which leads him to think so hard about 'horse' that suddenly he's transported to Newmarket and all is revealed. How *can* he explain what he now knows? Well, by doing something like this.

I saw on a green grassy slope a brown creature of tall stature and graceful in all its movements, with four legs and iron-shod hooves, a flowing mane like water and black as coal and a black tail which it carried like a flag. Its muscles rippled like a lion's and when it neighed a bugle rang out. I saw it leap gazelle-like and run in fear but I also saw it pull a plow in obedience to a man.

Gradually he'd almost get there—but by virtue of getting further and further away—into pictures of wild animals and human occupations, surroundings, the nature that feeds the horse and the functions it performs. It might be that at last he could with confidence conclude: I saw a horse.

The pressure to explain something in terms of other things is a necessity in a work which claims to represent things wholly outside the range and reach of worldly experience and knowledge: the future, the

nature of God and his heaven, God's plan and humanity's role in it. But that's what John of Patmos has to do. So he makes a virtue of necessity. He knows what he believes has been revealed—by Christ's life and promises, by scripture and scriptural history and *its* promises, and—who knows—maybe even by a vision. He also knows in the present the anxious state of a people who ask 'when', and of less confident people who look at imperial persecutions, religious trauma (the destruction of the temple, etc.), a corrupt age of inequality and anonymity, and ask 'what' and 'why', and of believers or sufferers of persecution who like the martyrs in John's heaven, ask 'how long, O lord, how long?'. And so John builds a bridge between this world and the transcendent. He builds it through language. It is not the polysemous language of John's Gospel which collapses difference into oneness, or discovers an ineradicable presence of one meaning in another. It is not the *sacramental* language of John's Gospel. *This* John's language is blatantly metaphorical language and it most obviously and often builds its bridges by the use of simile. The centre span of his bridge is the word—and the concept—LIKE.

Look at one more example of how 'like' takes us from earthly experience, the familiar and repeated stuff of history, to a sense of cosmic activity, a divine influence in history. Take the fifth angel's trumpet-blow and the plague of demonic locusts. Out of the smoke from the bottomless pit come locusts.

Then from the smoke came locusts on the earth, and they were given power like the power of scorpions of the earth; they were told not to harm the grass of the earth or any green growth or any tree, but only those of mankind who have not the seal of God upon their foreheads; they were allowed to torture them for five months, but not to kill them, and their torture was like the torture of a scorpion, when it stings a man.

Like other images in the seven plagues section these are graphic images for representative natural disasters. They recall the plague of locusts in Exodus chapter 10 (as all Revelation's plagues recall the plagues of Exodus). The images convey what it's like to be in a locust plague except that here the insects don't eat the grass like locusts but sting men like scorpions. Their unusual—demonic—dimension, thus, is also *like* real experience. But the description of these terrible locusts widens.

In appearance the locusts were like horses arrayed for battle; on their heads were what looked like crowns of gold; their faces

were like women's faces, their hair like women's hair, and their teeth like lions' teeth; they had scales like iron breastplates, and the noise of their wings was like the noise of many chariots with horses rushing into battle.

Suddenly they seem unnatural; they are like horses 'arrayed for battle' (it's reading back from their armour-plated scales that suggests horses, as well as their noise, 'like ... many chariots ... rushing into battle'). Now they suggest not just natural disaster, but human enemies. This motif recurs immediately in the sixth angel's plague where real horsemen are loosed along the Euphrates.

And this was how I saw the horses in my vision: the riders wore breastplates the colour of fire and of sapphire and of sulphur, and the heads of the horses were like lions' heads, and fire and smoke and sulphur issued from their mouths. By these three plagues a third of mankind was killed, by the fire and smoke and sulphur issuing from their mouths. For the power of these horses is in their mouths and in their tails; their tails are like serpents, with heads, and by means of them they wounded.

These are probably an image of the feared Parthians —larger than life and more powerful than men *because* feared. So historical experience is evoked to give substance to a vision of divine intervention.² The judgmental calamities of the six plagues are vivid because they are *like* known disasters; they are convincingly divine because the likeness is also magnification.

A most evident use of likeness is the coded reference in chapters 13 and 14 to the treatment of Christians under the Roman imperium (probably in the era of Nero). The Beast from the Sea (possibly) persecutes the saints and conquers an empire. The Beast from the earth enforces emperor-worship and initiates economic persecution of Christians. The persecuting empire is *like* a beast—corrupt, inhumane, idolatrous and blasphemous. It is not *like* the redeemed who are truthful, chaste, and worship God. Christopher Rowland says

the seer removes the veil which hides the real character of the Roman state so readers can see for themselves what the situation is like ... when the emperor is set up as a god ... [the demand to worship him] can only be inspired by the Devil. Any religious compromise with such claims would be a denial of one's place within the people of God.³

The allegory of the beast and the saints has the effect of drawing the historical experience of persecution into a sense of the divine plan and cosmic battle of baddies and goodies. It makes the present time part of a larger dynamic and a scheme of redemption.

There is not only likeness *in* the Apocalypse; the book itself and its language are like others. I've just noted the echo of the Exodus plagues in chapters 8 and 9. These are among numerous echoes in *Revelation*—of Genesis, of the prophets, of the psalms, of the gospels and probably the Pauline letters—and of course of earlier apocalyptic literature—of Daniel and Ezekiel and Zechariah. *Revelation* is significantly like earlier apocalyptic literature. In being so it asserts its claim to be (curiously, not an arbitrary literary convention, but) a genuine visionary experience. If people are used to finding their revealed mysteries recorded as heavenly visions with an eschatological thrust in elaborately symbolic language, that's what they expect and place their trust in. In fact that's probably how they process information when 'in the Spirit'.

So the metalanguage of *Revelation* is not only figurative but also immensely allusive and echoic. It relies, therefore, on a hearer's knowledge not only of his own experience and world—lions, thunder, architecture, emperors—but also of a written history and a religious/literary (i.e. scriptural) heritage, and of liturgical practice. This is, in the end, yet another appeal to the reader's experience since these elements condition his or her acquired world view and sense of place and purpose in it. But it is an appeal to the reader to reach out from the present to its cause or its pre-figurings in order also to reach out of the present to its effects or aftermath—that is, to that which the present, along *with* past history, prefigures. *That* reaching out is at first a matter of reading—looking for the revelation—but it becomes a prescription for conduct through the sternly admonitory element in *Revelation* running from the letters to the Churches, to the consolation of the martyrs, to the final exhortations.

Blessed are those who wash their robes that they might have the *right* to the tree of life and that they may enter the city by the gates. (22:14)

That exhortation, in the light of the growing significance of figurative language and echoes in the book is now clearly understood to be not a summons to the laundromat but to a way of life, of fidelity, even of death.

Convention is here emphasized: the conventions of revelatory literature, the conventions of the symbolism of this individual book. We

agree to understand these significances. We agree to know what the symbols have meant. We also agree that convention and the very process of understanding through such agreement is fundamental to the workings of our language and our modes of understanding.

The text of *Revelation* is, we can now see clearly, a text which emphasizes texts. Not just intertextual like, say, Luke's gospel; not just interested in words like John's gospel. It is a text which emphasizes textuality *both* because it imitates, echoes, recalls other texts *and* because in it naming and writing are essential to earthly and divine activity alike. Writing is a mode of identifying and defining. This preoccupation is clear from the beginning. John writes to the Asian Churches about how he had a vision which told him to write a book. Before he even begins his writing he greets them with the Lord's self-naming, 'I am the Alpha and the Omega, says the Lord God who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty'.

This name is the most notable exception in the book to the predominance of simile. I am, says the Lord, the Alpha and the Omega. It is an assertion of identity—and here where the alpha and omega are the beginning and end (of the alphabet, of all conceivable words, of language) there is not just clever word—or letter—play, but a nearly non-metaphorical word. As Austin Farrer remarks, 'To deduce God's attributes from the letters of his Name was a way of saying they were founded in his very nature'.⁴ Only two other names approach such depth of significance in the book. The rider on the white horse in 19:11 is called 'Faithful and True'. And the name inscribed on his thigh, the name by which he is called, is 'The Word of God' (ho logos tou theou). This name, too, reveals a function—the function of revealing God. And it makes revelation in language itself almost a part of the divine nature. The words 'faithful and true' are echoed in 21:5 where God tells the seer to write his words, 'Behold I make all things new', 'for these words are trustworthy and true'. An identity operates throughout this, then: Faithful and True equals the Word of God; God's words are trustworthy and true. At this point in the story God says 'It is done', *Gegonan* (repeating 15:17) and repeats 'I am the Alpha and the Omega'. 'It is done' is not the expression of a termination, not a word of finality. It is unlike the *tetelestai* of John's gospel. It uses *gegonan* (from *ginomai*) which means both 'it is accomplished' and 'it is begun'. The word—in a word—gives a sense of perfection of the plan: that which is ordained is begun and is done. History—linear time from our perspective—akin to narrative time, is subsumed in the timeless completions pervading time of the Alpha and Omega.

Naming brings people into God's story. People have names, and

they have marks. The faithful of Philadelphia are assured, 'He who conquers, I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God ... and I will write on him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem ...'. Those who would urge an idolatrous marking associated with emperor-worship are themselves marked with the beast's mark and earmarked, as it were, for perdition. Those who are God's servants in the New Jerusalem, 'his name shall be on their forehead'. Naming also participates in the codes of the book: Babylon stands for Rome and the enemies of God and God's people. The New Jerusalem stands for God's kingdom and the vindication of God's new people, his saints. Christ has many names and epithets which signal his humanity (Son of Man, Root of David, Lion of the tribe of Judah) and his divinity: Son of God, Faithful and True, Word of God, the Bright Morning Star. The beast of the sea's oppositeness, his implacable evil, is simply expressed in 13:1 by the observation that it had on its seven heads 'a blasphemous name'.

Words, then, as names, are identities of a kind in God's story. And John's story takes as its starting and end points, and asserts its credibility through, his self-naming. John's book insists upon its truthfulness and fidelity by locating its generation in the space between his name and God's.

John's *Revelation* is written, as directed, as a book. In it John is given a book—the mighty angel's *biblaridion* (little book), and in it he learns of another book: God's book: the book of life (20:12). The book of life is the story of the histories of all human individuals, their deeds and deserts. We live, thus, in a text. The text of *Revelation* images that by being a text which, too, we temporarily live in, inhabit, decode as we continually decode our world. And just as John (temporarily) lives in, inhabits, and learns about—that is, is helped to decode—heaven.

The spectacular, and clearly contrived, world of the Apocalypse is thus *like* what is really in earth and heaven (but hard to understand in the case of earth and unknowable yet in the case of heaven). And it is *LIKE* what is in the book of life that is the heaven-and-earth totality which is God's being, God's plan, the endlessly story-generating alphabet of the Alpha and Omega.

We have seen how the unbridgeable gulf between the world above and the world below called forth a special language in *Revelation*. And we have noted that to describe something out of the normal scope of language John's method is to employ ever elaborating metaphorical structures of language. Interestingly this method actually makes present an ever-widening range of earthly experience and generates a growing sense that if anything (and everything) on earth can—and must—be

brought into the description to make the transcendent known, then somehow all of earthly experience is implicated in the transcendent. With this realisation a curious reversal of the process starts to happen.

Take the lampstand. We all know lampstands, an item of household furniture (and/or church furnishings). John's lampstands are in heaven—but still to the seer's sight they are lampstands. Then they are churches—and we understand something of churches by the comparison with lampstands *and* something about their relationship with God (because he holds them in his hand, he gives them their light, and they burn to him) and something about God's relationship to us. He, the source of light, the morning star, light of the New Jerusalem and the universe, gives us the churches/lampstands for our illumination. The churches do the work of God on earth as the lamp does that of the stars. Our lampstand, then, becomes more than an item of furniture—and through it we are brought to realise that God is in the world—the churches, the people, the humble household lampstand—only we weren't able to see it. And finally, in a further motion of the 'syntactic' development I mentioned earlier, we are in the concluding vision of the New Jerusalem no longer in our churches worshipping God, looking at our lampstands and seeing an inferior likeness to his stars. We are—for a moment—there among the redeemed worshipping at the throne, illuminated by God's light. We are in the midst of the vision, needing no interpreter.

There shall no more be anything accursed, but the throne of God
and the Lamb shall be in it and his servants shall worship him ...
And night shall be no more; they need no light of lamp or sun,
for the Lord God will be their light, and they shall reign for ever
and ever.

The lampstands, like the lion, the thunder, the fire, are manifestations of God. While belonging to our language by which we try to describe or to know God, they become also *his* language, making his heavenly being intelligible to and present among us on earth. In this way the God who rules the earth is known through the earth because he is present there. The God who shapes, directs, informs and gives meaning to history is therefore there, *in* history. Not after an end, because there is no end. History continues to be God's story. The kingdom of this world is become the kingdom of our lord and of his Christ. This vision is written and informs our experience and hopes. Language, then, becomes not a denial of God's presence in history, but a sign of his presence—of the Word of God in the words of men. The

recognition is one the transcendentalists latched onto, among them Coleridge who saw the world as the language by which God teaches himself in all things and all things in himself. To go beyond literal description to metaphor and simile is to discover the plenitude of meaning in God's creation and to find relationship, connectedness and a unity which consoles a view of the present historical moment as isolated, limited. The discovery *implies* strenuously that the historical moment can only be understood as part of a whole, and that whole (like the workings of a living language as opposed to lexicography) a dynamic thing.

The writer of John's Gospel, frustrated though resourceful in his use of words, tried to express a divine perspective. His Christ had all the meaning, *was* all the meaning, and had to push words to contain that meaning. He had to find in the limited linguistic medium the capacity to contain the unlimited Word. The writer of the Apocalypse finds the use of words fun, exciting, liberating. When the heavens opened he threw the dictionary away, for what he found was a sense of what words *could* mean in a richer, fuller vision. From an earthly perspective he finds words themselves giving glimpses of a world beyond, and as his sense of this grows and his words flow, his vision gains momentum, fullness, coherence.

If something means something here and something other or additional in heaven, the worlds remain apart. But they do so with a clear implication that if the lower can't comprehend the higher it can imitate or begin to discover it. What's more, the language the seer knows and uses (and writes his book with) is seen as part of a language God made, is, uses and writes *his* book with. The bridge built by the angelic witnesses, by Jesus's words to the seer, links the little book of John's, via the little book of the angel (and other books, scrolls, etc.) to the big book of life that is God's book. John has to fear that someone might try to add to or diminish his book. What is clear from the inexhaustibility of language in the book, which announces itself as only a glimpse of the whole divine story, is that there is nothing to be added to or subtracted from God's story. LIKE has become part of God's plan, and in an ingenious way the seer's writing has demonstrated itself to be part of God's words.

- 1 Rowland, Christopher, *The Open Heaven*, London, 1982, p. 425.
- 2 It may be noted that these horses whose destructive power is 'in their mouths and in their tails; their tails [being] like serpents' must be the original heads you lose, tails I win situation.
- 3 Rowland, p.432-3.
- 4 Austin Farrer, *The Revelation of St John the Divine*, Oxford, 1964, pp. 63-69.