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ST. JOHN'S PORTRAIT OF THE CHURCH IN THE APOCALYPSE

by DAVID EDWARD AUNE

IN Mr. Aune we welcome a new contributor to the *QUARTERLY*. He is a graduate of Wheaton College, where he specialized in Hellenistic Greek and New Testament, and has done advanced study in the University of Minnesota in classics, linguistics and ancient history. He has used his special studies to good advantage in this examination of the words and figures which are used to portray the Church in the Book of the Revelation.

IMAGERY is used throughout the writings of the New Testament to describe Christian realities, yet nowhere is the symbolism more rich, varied and complex than in the Apocalypse of St. John.¹ This is necessarily so, since the prophet sought to convey climactic realities which lay beyond empirical experience.² However, even empirical concepts such as the Church are deeply affected in their external presentation by the peculiarities of the apocalyptic genre of literature.

There is a sense in which it is more appropriate to single out the symbolical depiction of the Church in St. John's Apocalypse than that of other realities. Not only is it the explicit purpose of the author "to show to his [Jesus Christ's] servants what must soon take place" (Rev. 1: 1), but it is also implicit throughout the entire book that St. John is vitally concerned that the people of God will remain faithful to their Lord. The immediate object of this concern is the plight of the seven churches of Asia. The Apocalypse was traditionally written toward the end of the reign of Domitian (A.D. 81-96), whose attitude toward the Church is demonstrated by the observations of Eusebius:

Domitian, indeed, having exercised his cruelty against many, and unjustly slain no small number of noble and illustrious men at Rome, and having, without cause, punished vast numbers of honourable men with exile and the confiscation of their property, at length established himself as the successor of Nero, in his hatred and hostility to God. He was the second that raised a persecution against us, although his father Vespasian had attempted nothing to our prejudice.³

¹ Austin Farrer, *A Rebirth of Images: The Making of St. John's Apocalypse* (Westminster: Dacre Press, 1949), p. 17.

² A. Berkeley Mickelsen, *Interpreting the Bible* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1963), p. 322.

³ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, iii. 17.

In addition to John's own exile to the Isle of Patmos during the renewed persecution of Domitian (Rev. 1: 9; Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, iii, 18), at least one person, Antipas (Rev. 2: 13), had met death. The tone of the book would indicate that John expected an intensification of persecution, "with the prospect that a number of the weaker and less devoted among the church's members would fall away".⁴ It was therefore John's purpose to sharpen the already existing and obvious antithesis between the demands of the Kingdom of God in contrast with those of heathen Rome.⁵ Here we have no theoretical future battle between the sons of light and the sons of darkness, but rather the stark reality of a present historical situation in which the young Church found herself caught between the demands of God and the all but total opposition of society. John viewed this situation as becoming more and more intensified until the New Age should be ushered in by divine intervention.

The most common word for "church" in the New Testament, *ekklēsia*, is to be found twenty times in the Apocalypse, nineteen occurrences in the first three chapters, and a single occurrence in the twenty-second chapter. While some who hold that chapter 4 begins the description of future events find it significant that the term *ekklēsia* does not occur again until the New Age is ushered in (Rev. 21-22), they neglect the consideration of two important points: (1) the English word "church" is a more inclusive word than the New Testament use of the term *ekklēsia*,⁶ and (2) there are over a hundred cognate expressions which express the Church idea throughout the New Testament,⁷ and many of these are to be found throughout the Apocalypse, as our subsequent investigations shall attempt to demonstrate. All twenty occurrences of *ekklēsia* in the Apocalypse indicate a community or fellowship of believers which has been gathered from the inhabitants of a specific area.⁸ The word itself reveals little of the nature of the Church, with the result that its cognate expressions must be the more heavily relied upon.

⁴ Martin Rist, "The Revelation of St. John the Divine: Introduction and Exegesis," *The Interpreter's Bible*, ed. George Arthur Buttrick, XII (New York and Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1957), p. 354.

⁵ That these antithetical tendencies are part of John's general thought-pattern may be seen from his use of contrasting ideas such as light and darkness, life and death, truth and falsehood, etc. Another aspect of this tendency may be found in his unique use in the New Testament of the title "antichrist" (1 John 2: 18, 22; 4: 3; 2 John 7).

⁶ Paul S. Minear, "Church, Idea of," *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. George Arthur Buttrick, I (New York and Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962), pp. 607-8.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 609.

⁸ *Ibid.*

There is good reason to believe that the selection of seven churches as the object of John's composition is more in keeping with his figurative intentions than it is with a desire to reach that limited number of Christian communities with his message. The frequent use of the number seven is significant in that it is integral to the structure of the entire book.⁹ After discussing the frequent usage of the number seven in the Apocalypse, Rengstorf concludes: "In every instance, it is here the number of totality, and indeed essentially in the sense that it guarantees the perfection of the divine actions."¹⁰ M. H. Pope similarly concludes that "it is hard to say what the numerous symbolic uses of seven in the Bible have in common. Perhaps the simplest and most comprehensive generalization that can be made is that seven denotes completeness, perfection, consummation."¹¹ We would conclude, then, that since John designates "seven" churches, he is intending to convey his message not only to those seven churches of Asia, but also to the empirical people of God, the Church, as a whole.

Through the use of the following categories, we shall attempt to discuss the figurative language which John uses to depict his conception of the Church of God.

I. FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE STRESSING GOD'S INITIATIVE IN HIS RELATIONSHIP WITH MAN

One of the most common words in the Apocalypse which is used to designate the Church is *οι ἅγιοι*, "the holy ones," or "saints". This term is especially significant in that it not only maintains its force of emphasis upon the imputed holiness which believers derive from God, but also speaks of the holiness implied by their own moral actions. John primarily applies the term to Jesus (Rev. 3: 7), and to God himself in the Trisagion of Revelation 4: 8. By using the same phrase in 6: 10 (i.e., "O Lord, holy and true"), which he had already applied to Christ in 3: 7, John virtually equates Jesus with God with respect to those attributes. Properly, the quality of

⁹ Rist, pp. 360-62, and Nils Lund, *Chiasmus in the New Testament: A Study in Formgeschichte* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 1942), pp. 323-411.

¹⁰ Karl Heinrich Rengstorf, "Hepta, etc.," *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, II (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer Verlag, 1935), 629.

¹¹ M. H. Pope, "Seven, Seventh, Seventy," *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. George Arthur Buttrick, IV (New York and Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962), p. 295.

¹² Cf. Lev. 11: 44-45; 1 Peter 1: 15-16; Matt. 5: 48, and Luke 6: 46.

ἅγιος belongs to God, with all other applications of the term in a derivative sense. It is in this sense that the adjective is applied to both personal and material objects, by virtue of the relationship which they sustain to God. Jerusalem can therefore be referred to as τὴν πόλιν τὴν ἁγίαν (11: 2; 21: 2, 10; 22: 19). The substantival use of the adjective can also refer to angels (14: 10, and cf. Paul's use of the term in 1 Thess. 3: 13, and 2 Thess. 2: 10). While the primary use of the term "saints" refers to believers in their faith relationship to God, it also indicates their moral condition. Revelation 13: 10 and 14: 12, for example, speak of the ὑπομονή, or "patience" of the saints in the face of affliction. The phrase "the blood of the saints" (16: 6; 18: 24; 17: 6) equates them with those who have been faithful to the point of death. Revelation 19: 8 speaks of the righteous deeds of the saints, which are symbolically represented by John as the linen garments of the Bride. Because of their relationship with God, their prayers are effective (5: 8; 8: 3-4), and they are eventually rewarded (11: 18). As loyal adherents to the cause of Jesus, they are besieged by the forces of evil (13: 7; 20: 9), and consequently rejoice when those forces—symbolized by Babylon (18: 20=Rome)—fall. Attributively, those who take part in the first resurrection are "blessed and holy" (20: 6). In Rev. 22: 11, where John speaks of the present period just before the end, he makes this statement: "Let the one who is unrighteous continue to practice unrighteousness, and let the one who is righteous continue to practice righteousness, and the one who is holy (ὁ ἅγιος) let him keep himself holy (ἁγιασθήτω)."¹³

Two other metaphors which are used to stress God's action in the life of man are κλητός, "called," and ἐκλεκτός, "chosen, selected," both of which occur only once in the Apocalypse in 17: 14, and which are important for their connection with the people of God in the Old Testament, Israel. Throughout Israel's history as a nation, they were profoundly aware of the fact that they were the chosen people of God (Deut. 7: 7; Isa. 44: 1; Ezek. 20: 5). A New Testament passage which is apparently crucial for the understanding of κλητός and ἐκλεκτός is Matthew 22: 14, where they are differentiated.¹⁴ "For many are called but few are chosen." Both terms indicate God's initiative in selecting a people of his own, but in themselves carry no guarantee that each of the individuals within that group will remain faithful to the end.

¹³ Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, trans. William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1957), p. 9.

The noun βασιλεία, which is variously translated throughout the New Testament as "kingdom," "kingship," "sovereignty" or "reign," is found ten times in the Apocalypse, while the verb βασιλεύω occurs seven times. Just as the adjective ἅγιος was primarily applied to Jesus and God, so believers are said to constitute a "kingdom" in virtue of the fact that they shall share domination with Christ in his reign. Over against the divine claims of the later Roman emperors, John speaks of God as "king of the nations" (15: 3), and of Jesus as the "King of kings and the Lord of lords" (19: 16; 17: 14).¹⁵ Another important title of the Messiah is "the ruler of the kings of the earth," which is found in Rev. 1: 5. The idea of sharing sovereignty with Jesus is found in Rev. 20: 4, 6, where believers are said to reign a thousand years with Christ. Rev. 22: 5 speaks of the Church as reigning "for all eternity." Throughout the whole of the New Testament, it is only in Rev. 1: 6 and 5: 10 that the people of God are explicitly identified with a βασιλεία. According to K. L. Schmidt:

As the NT witness is plain and unequivocal in relation to the αὐτοβασιλεία of Christ, it is understandably reserved in its linking of the βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ with Christian believers. The only relevant verse in this connection is Rev. 1: 6 [*sic*. cf. Rev. 5: 10]: Christ ἐποίησεν ἡμᾶς βασιλείαν. It hardly need be shown or proved, however, that in this verse Christians may be understood as βασιλεία only in a derivative sense, i.e., as linked with Christ.¹⁶

George E. Ladd, discussing the usage of the term βασιλεία in these two passages, concludes that

... the people are so designated not because they are the subjects of God's reign but because they will share Christ's reign. "They shall reign on earth" (Rev. 5: 10). In these sayings, "kingdom" is synonymous with "kings" not with the people over whom God rules.¹⁷

This concept of sharing dominion with Christ is further underlined by the fact that the idea of "ruling nations with the rod of iron" is ascribed to individual believers "who are in the process of conquering and in the process of keeping" Jesus' works unto the end (2: 26-27), as well as to Jesus himself (12: 5).¹⁸

¹⁴ K. L. Schmidt, "Kaleō, etc.," *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer Verlag, 1938), III, 496.

¹⁵ K. L. Schmidt, "Basileia, etc.," *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. Geoffrey Bromiley, I (Grand Rapids, Michigan and London: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1964), 577.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, I, 590.

¹⁷ George Eldon Ladd, *Jesus and the Kingdom: The Eschatology of Biblical Realism* (New York, Evanston and London: Harper and Row, 1964), p. 259.

¹⁸ Both of these references are allusions by John to Psalm 2: 9.

This leads us quite naturally into another facet of our subject, the relationship between the Church considered as a corporate unit and the individual believers who make it up. When sovereignty is described as having been given to the Church (ἐποίησεν ἡμῶς βασιλείαν, 1: 6; 5: 10), it is significant that the aorist tense is used, stating the fact of the event or action involved. When this authority to rule is spoken of in relation to individuals, however, it is also worthy of note that the progressive present is used. In Rev. 3: 21, for example, we find that "I [Jesus] will allow the one who is in the process of conquering [ὁ νικῶν] to sit with me on my throne." Similarly in Rev. 2: 26-27 we find that "he who is in the process of conquering [ὁ νικῶν] and is in the process of keeping [ὁ τηρῶν] my works until the end, I will give him power [ἐξουσίαν] over the nations." The upshot of this is that only the Church considered corporately can be designated as "eternally secure," while the individual believers who make up the Church maintain their position only as they remain faithful to their original commitment.

John calls himself a participant (συγκοινωνός) in the affliction and kingdom and patience in Jesus (1: 9; cf. 2 Tim. 2: 12). Crucial for our consideration here are the concepts of "affliction" (θλίψις) and "patience" (ὑπομονή) which are linked to participation in the kingdom. This is grammatically apparent by the fact that a single article occurs before the three nouns which are connected by καί.¹⁹ It is therefore quite apparent that participation in the kingdom (i.e. the hope of eventual rule in triumph with Christ) is not possible apart from the ability to endure suffering for the cause of Jesus and his Gospel. In keeping with his sharply drawn conflict between the present dominance of evil and the claims of the Gospel, John describes the present sway of evil (i.e. Rome) in terms of the "kingdom of this world" which is eventually transferred to God (11: 15).

In both Rev. 1: 6 and 5: 10, the term "kingdom" is linked with the term "priests." Rev. 20: 6 adds that those who participate in the first resurrection shall be priests of God and of Christ and shall reign for a thousand years. Considering the application of the term "priests" to the Church, M. H. Shepard observes that

A corollary of the doctrine of the priesthood of Christ is the NT application of "priesthood" to the whole company of the faithful in the church. As the church is made one with its Lord, by the indwelling presence in its members of his Spirit, and by sacramental union and communion with him in baptism and eucharist, so the church shares

¹⁹ A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1934), pp. 785-86.

in the dignity and prerogatives of its Lord.²⁰

Perhaps the most important use of this term, however, is in its relation to the thought of the Old Testament. This is made apparent by the existence of some poorly attested variants of Rev. 1: 6 and 5: 10 which substitute the phrase βασιλειον ιερότευμα, a "royal priesthood," for βασιλείαν ιερείς, a "kingdom, priests," the latter of which is by far the superior reading. These variants apparently arose as attempts to harmonize the text of the Apocalypse with the Septuagint, where the former reading is to be found in Exodus 19: 6, and is a literal rendering of the Hebrew phrase *mamleketh kohanim*. John, however, has concatenated Exodus 19: 6 with Isaiah 61: 6 in order to make the two concepts of "kingdom" and "priests" more independent than they originally stood in Exodus. At any rate, these two terms are significant for our comprehension of the New Testament Church as a continuity of the Old Testament community of believers. One characteristic of the Apocalypse is that John seems not to be conscious of any distinction between the people under the Old Covenant and those under the New. Indeed, most of his imagery is drawn from the Old Testament or else the Judaistic interpretation of it, and as such the language which he used to describe Christian realities is permeated with typical connection of the Old Testament.

Another word which stresses the initiative of God is the word λαός, or "people," which occurs just two times in this connection in the Apocalypse (18: 4; 21: 3), as a description of the Church. The bond which this word bears with the Old Testament is made evident by the fact that in both instances the word is found within an Old Testament quotation or allusion. Rev. 18: 4 seems to have been drawn from Isaiah 48: 20 and 52: 11, where the prophet warns Israel against the sin and corruption of Babylon. The verse is then lifted out of its Old Testament context by John and applied to the new people of God, while the actual Babylon gives way to Rome. Rev. 21: 3 is also a composite quotation from several Old Testament passages (Lev. 26: 11 ff., Jer. 38: 33 and Ezek. 37: 27), the word λαός having been changed from the singular to the plural. According to Swete, "one important and doubtless deliberate change has been made in the terms of these prophecies; our writer has substituted λαοί for λαός—the many peoples of redeemed

²⁰ M. H. Shepard, "Priests in the NT," *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. George Arthur Buttrick, III (New York and Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962), 890.

humanity for the single elect nation, the world for Israel."²¹ This use of the plural, "peoples," refers to the consummation, when the kingdom of the world shall have become the kingdom of God (11: 5), and can be understood as a corollary of the Apocalypse's emphasis on the fact that the ransomed people are from "every tribe and tongue and people and nation," (5: 9; 7: 9; 11: 9). This new people, then, is made up of the elect of many peoples. The term λαός itself is, as has already been mentioned, intimately connected with the history of salvation in the Old Testament, and is connected with God's initiative in selecting a people of His own. It is therefore of the greatest significance that the term λαός was transferred from an ethnic people to a spiritual people of God.²² More than anything else, the use of Old Testament language by John with regard to the new people of God reveals the fact that fulfillment belongs to the very warp and woof of the existence of the Church.

One very interesting source of information about the doctrine of the Church in the New Testament may be derived from the use of the first person plural pronouns used throughout the epistles of the New Testament as well as the Apocalypse. There are instances, to be sure, when these are used in senses which would be of no aid to our study, such as the "editorial we." However, since the Apocalypse was written in the first person, and was, in addition, written to Christians exclusively (1: 1), whenever the pronouns referred to are used, they may provide a valuable insight into John's view of the Church. In Rev. 1: 5-6, John includes his audience in a short hymn of praise in which he says, "To the one who loves *us* (ἡμᾶς) and freed *us* (ἡμᾶς) from *our* (ἡμῶν) sins in his blood, and made *us* (ἡμᾶς) a kingdom, priests . . ." Here we plainly have the Church portrayed as a community who have shared in the redemptive work of Christ. Jesus is the subject of the two participles ("loves" and "freed") and the verb ("made"), thus placing the stress on the divine initiative in the redemptive event.

II. FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE EXPRESSING HUMAN RESPONSE TO DIVINE INITIATIVE

"*Ecclesia* may be viewed," according to Paul S. Minear, "from the standpoint of personal, communal response to God's action

²¹ Henry Barclay Swete, *The Apocalypse of St. John: The Greek Text with Introduction, Notes and Indices* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, n.d.), p. 278.

²² Hermann Strathmann, "Laos, etc.," *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer Verlag, 1942), IV, 56.

through Christ, a response which is empowered by the Holy Spirit."²³ In the Apocalypse, the particular type of response which John stresses may be typified by the command of Jesus to the church at Smyrna, "be faithful unto death" (2: 10). Most of the metaphorical language which is used in the description of the Church as a responding community revolves about the concepts of "faithfulness," "endurance," "witnesses," and the like.

The term πιστοί, "faithful ones," is applied to the believing community in only one passage of Apocalypse, Rev. 17: 14, where it completes the thought of the substantives "called" and "chosen" when it states that "those with him [Jesus] are called and chosen and faithful." Again we find that a single article with substantives joined by καί forms a single idea,²⁴ and that therefore the use of the word "faithful" serves as a completion of the concepts "called" and "chosen." Primarily the word πιστός is applied to Jesus, as the "faithful witness" (1: 5), "the faithful and true witness" (3: 14), and "the faithful and true one" (19: 11). The principal reason for applying this adjective to Jesus lies in connection with his faithfulness unto death in which he sets the pattern for his followers to emulate. This idea is further borne out by the description of Antipas, one of the specific martyrs that John had in mind: "Antipas, my witness, my faithful one, who was killed among you" (2: 13). It is already obvious that in John's thought the words "faithful" and "witness" are very closely correlated. Another word which is very closely related theologically to πιστός—in John's vocabulary at least—is the verb νικάω, "to conquer," "win a victory." The frequency of its occurrence throughout the Apocalypse affords another glimpse into the specific purpose for its composition. The verb is always used in the present tense when the subject is a saint who has not yet completed his course (e.g. 2: 7, 11, 17, 26; 3: 5, 12, 21; 21: 7). When these believers are viewed from the perspective of having been faithful to the end, then the aorist tense is always used (12: 11). John views the victory of Jesus as having two foci: the first is that which he won by his faithfulness in his earthly life and death and resurrection, and which is always found in the aorist tense (3: 21; 5: 5), while the second refers to the consummation of all things when Jesus shall be the ultimate cosmic victor, and this emphasis is found in the future tense (6: 2; 17: 14).

The word μάρτυς, "witness," is found in the plural in Rev. 17: 16, where it bears more than the basic meaning "witness,"

²³ Minear, p. 609.

²⁴ *Supra*, n. 19.

and must be translated "those who witnessed unto death."²⁵ In that sense, the word is actually very close to our English word "martyr," for which the Greek form is, of course, the etymological ancestor. Jesus, in the same passage which we have just quoted, is referred to as the faithful μάρτυς (cf. 1: 5; 3: 14). In addition to the martyr Antipas, the two witnesses of Rev. 11 also culminate their work for God by death (11: 2). John refers to himself as testifying (ἐμαρτύρησεν) to the revelation of Jesus Christ (1: 2), for which very reason he suffered exile to Patmos (1: 9). It was in the context of the Christian Church that the meaning of the word μάρτυς naturally changed from "witness" to "martyr." In the Apocalypse, however, the Christians "died because they were *martures* and did not become *martures* because they died."²⁶ Through the use of this noun the Church is pictured in its divine imperative as a witness to the world. That witness is much more than a mere discharge of duty, since its implication may spell out death.

The word δοῦλος, "slave," is used in the plural by John to refer to the Church quite frequently in the Apocalypse. In Rev. 19: 2 the word is used in such a way that it is a virtual equivalent of μάρτυς in the expression, "the blood of his servants." The word "servant" is almost colourless in our society, which is precisely why we have chosen to translate the word in almost every case as "slave." It is of great significance that the early Church thought of themselves as slaves of God. The primary reason for the use of the metaphor is the significance of total and unswerving allegiance to the Master, whose demands upon the believing individual are explicit, and whose property they are. The basic emphasis is one of obedience. While there is no reference to Jesus as the "servant of the Lord," the Christian use of δοῦλος must have been reminiscent of that title to many. John refers to himself as "his [i.e., Jesus'] servant John" (1: 1), while with the same breath he refers to the Church with the same noun. That the slaves of God are not inviolable is shown by Rev. 2: 20, where they are spoken of as capable of being beguiled into sin. In Rev. 22: 3, 6, they are said to "worship" Jesus after the consummation. In connection with this last statement, it is well to note that the verb δουλεύω is never found in the Apocalypse. There is, however, a verb which is closely related theologically, in that it entails subjection and implies

²⁵ Bauer, p. 495.

²⁶ Vernon H. Neufeld, *The Earliest Christian Confessions*, Volume V of *New Testament Tools and Studies*, ed. Bruce M. Metzger (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1963), pp. 30-31.

obedience: φοβέομαι, "to fear." In two lines of synonymous parallelism in Rev. 19: 5, the twenty-four elders cry "Amen, Hallelujah!" to which a voice from the throne replies:

Praise our God, all you his servants (οἱ δούλοι),

You who fear (οἱ φοβούμενοι) him, both small and great.

Here the substantival participle "you who fear" is used as a parallel to the word "praise," and as an implied synonym of "servants," in that the phrase "small and great" which modifies οἱ φοβούμενοι is parallel to the expression "you his servants." This equation is made more explicit in two lines of synonymous parallelism from Rev. 11: 18:

For rewarding thy servants (τοῖς δούλοις), the prophets and saints,

And those who fear (τοῖς φοβουμένοις) thy name, both small and great.

Here we find that "servants" and "those who fear" are perfectly synonymous. An important facet of the consideration of this mode of describing the Church is that these two participles (19: 5; 11: 18), are both found in the present, and imply continuity of activity. That the activity of fearing can also refer to the event of receiving and obeying the Gospel is evident in 14: 7, where the aorist tense is used when the angel announced to the entire world, "Fear God and give him glory, for the hour of his judgment has come"

III. FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE TAKEN FROM HUMAN LIFE

The New Testament taken as a whole contains numerous metaphors of the Church which symbolize it in terms of human relationships, primarily because the highest sphere of inter-personal relationships exist in the believing community's connection first of all to God, and then derivatively to each other. In Rev. 21: 3, the common Greek generic word for man, ἄνθρωπος, is used in the statement, "Behold the dwelling of God is with *men*." Since the evil elements have already been weeded out of human society, the kind of ἄνθρωποι which John has in mind is not man as he is presently, but rather man as he was intended to be at his creation, and as he actually will be after the consummation.

The concept of the Church as a brotherhood is expressed a number of times (6: 11; 12: 10; 19: 10), and primarily views the Church in terms of the relationship of individuals to one another. The importance of this concept is underscored when one recalls the statement of 1 John 4: 20-21:

If any one says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love

God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from him, that he who loves God should love his brother also.

The use of the term "brotherhood" (ἀδελφοί), with reference to the new community is analogous to the use of the term "people" in that just as the concept of an ethnic people of God was fragmented under the impact of the New Covenant, so old family ties were shattered by the ties of the new spiritual community. The term is therefore used ethically, and indicates that the closest bonds which men can have are those which are forged in connection with their belief in Jesus Christ. This idea is brought out in force in Mark 3: 35 by Jesus, when he says, "Whoever does the will of God is my brother, and sister, and mother." All those virtues which characterize the concept of human brotherhood are lifted out of their physical significance and given their highest application when applied by John to relationships within the Church.

Another significant metaphor for the Church is found in Revelation 12: 17 in the phrase "the rest of her offspring (σπέρμα)." The woman, who is part of the elaborate allegory of chapter 12, gives birth to a male child who, it is generally agreed, can be none other than Jesus himself. After the child had been caught up to the throne of God (12: 5)—a clear reference to the ascension—the dragon was thrown out of heaven (12: 13), and began to pursue the woman. In the concluding verse of the chapter we read, "The dragon was angry with the woman, and went off to make war on the rest of her offspring (σπέρμα), on those who keep the commandments of God and bear testimony to Jesus." Since the word for "offspring" here is σπέρμα, John is making an apparent reference to the Protevangelium of Genesis 3: 15, as well as to the repetitions of the Abrahamic promise (Gen. 12: 1ff.; 17: 15 ff.). The concept of "seed" in the New Testament has definite connections with the Old, a fact which is evidenced by Paul's frequent use of the term. By the use of a rabbinic argument Paul decides that since the word "seed" is used in the singular in Genesis 12: 17 then it must refer to Christ (Gal. 3: 16). The principle of corporate solidarity includes believers with Christ, then, as the legitimate offspring of Abraham (Gal. 3: 29). John, too, is not content to leave the word "seed" unmodified. He describes the σπέρμα as "those who keep the commandments of God," and "those who bear testimony to Jesus" (12: 17). Both of these qualifications are the necessary result of saving faith. Together they may well result in martyrdom.

One of the most effective images of the Church in the New

Testament is that in which the Church is pictured as the "Bride" of Christ. Rev. 19: 7-8 describes the anticipated union of Christ and his Church:

Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his Bride has made herself ready; it was granted her to be clothed with fine linen, bright and pure, for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints.

The same figure is also used in Rev. 21: 2, 9; 22: 17. Suffice it to say here that the marital figure of the Bride is to be identified with the Church, since in Rev. 19: 8 her garments are described as the righteous deeds of the saints. The metaphor itself combines the ideas of subjection on the part of the Church to her husband Jesus (*ἀνὴρ* used of Jesus, 21: 3), and the intimate fellowship or communion which they share.

IV. EXTENDED METAPHORS AND ALLEGORIES OF THE CHURCH

The nature of apocalyptic literature has necessitated the inclusion of this last and perhaps most important category for dealing with John's language about the Church. Under this heading we shall discuss such symbols as the Woman of Rev. 12, the two witnesses of Rev. 11, the seven golden lampstands, the twenty-four elders, the 144,000 witnesses and the innumerable multitude of Rev. 7, as well as the holy city itself, New Jerusalem.

John, in writing to the seven churches of Asia, makes elaborate use of the metaphor of the seven golden lampstands, which he explicitly identifies with the seven churches (1: 20). His use of the word "lampstand" emphasizes the local church in its capacity as a witnessing community, while the adjective "golden" speaks of the purity of their faith and witness (cf. 3: 18; 18: 16). The fact that Jesus himself walks in the midst of the lampstands (2: 1) means that he is first of all present in those communities, then that he knows their difficult situation, and finally that they as churches are corporate witness to one Lord. It is very possible that one of the lampstands may be removed from its place (2: 5), which undoubtedly refers to the faltering and obliteration of a community as a local and empirical manifestation of the Church of Christ.

The twenty-four elders are mentioned a number of times throughout the Apocalypse, and it would seem that they are derived by John from the Old Testament. In 1 Chronicles 24, the sons of Aaron were divided up into twenty-four orders, each of which was given a regular turn in caring for the worship of Yahweh. According to J. Barton Payne, "the twenty-four priestly courses continued

as the basis for rotating the priestly duties down into NT times."²⁷ Whenever the elders are mentioned in the Apocalypse, they are usually engaged in worshipping and singing paeans of praise to the Lamb (4: 10-11; 5: 8-10, 11, 16; 19: 4). The twenty-four elders function as representatives of the people, with the number itself being symbolic of the union of the people of the Old and New Covenant as represented by the twelve tribes and the twelve apostles. It is quite likely that John viewed the number twenty-four in 1 Chronicles as a typical preshadowing of the breakdown of the barrier between Israel and the Gentile world.²⁸

In the seventh chapter of the Apocalypse, we find the enumeration of the 144,000 witnesses, which also has its Old Testament connections. The sealing of the 12,000 witnesses from each of the twelve tribes sounds very much like the division of the twelve tribes into twelve corps of 24,000 men each (1 Chron. 27). Assuming this as the source of John's allegory, it must be noted that David had not ordered a complete census of the people, for in 1 Chron. 27: 23-24 the Chronicler observes that "David took not the number of them from twenty years old and under: because the LORD had said he would increase Israel like to the stars of the heavens." Just as the 288,000 of 1 Chronicles 27 do not include the actual number of Israel, so the 144,000 of Revelation 7 is not an exhaustive enumeration of the new people of God. It is most significant that the vision of John which immediately follows that of the 144,000 begins like this:

After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no man could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands . . . (Rev. 7: 9).

This is John's way of indicating that the original promise to Abraham regarding the great number of his progeny (Gen. 13: 16; 15: 5), was completely and literally fulfilled.

The identification of the 144,000 with the Church is further substantiated by an investigation of the biblical use of the number twelve. Rengstorf finds that the number is indicative of the completeness of the people of God, while the use of the expression "the thousands" emphasizes the magnitude of the community.²⁹

²⁷ J. Barton Payne, "First Chronicles," *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary*, ed. Charles F. Pfeiffer and Everett F. Harrison (Chicago: Moody Press, 1962), p. 386.

²⁸ Farrer, pp. 249-50.

²⁹ Karl Heinrich Rengstorf, "Dödeka, etc.," *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, II (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer Verlag, 1939), 324-25.

In Rev. 11, John speaks of "two witnesses" who have proved difficult of interpretation to many scholars. Our thesis is that they represent the corporate witness of the Church to Israel.³⁰ Their number, two, is apparently an oblique reference to the concept expressed in Deuteronomy 19: 15, where two or more witnesses are needed in order to substantiate a charge. The very fact that they serve God as witnesses (μάρτυρες) would indicate that they are fulfilling the primary task of the Church. The miracles which the witnesses perform are clothed in the language of the miracles of Moses in Exodus. This connection is confirmed by John's allegorical application of the word "Egypt" to Jerusalem (11: 8). This is an effective way of typically identifying the New Testament community with true Israel. When the two witnesses have finished their testimony, the beast will ascend from the bottomless pit and make war against them, conquer them, and kill them. This language is all used very obviously of the Church in such passages as Rev. 13: 1-8, where the beast, after rising from the sea,

was given a mouth uttering haughty and blasphemous words, and it was allowed to exercise authority for forty-two months [cf. the three-and-a-half days of Rev. 11: 9]; it opened its mouth to utter blasphemies against God, blaspheming his name and his dwelling, that is, those who dwell in heaven. Also it was allowed to make war on the saints and conquer them.

In Rev. 13: 15, it is said that those who did not worship the image of the beast were slain. The depiction of the witnesses as coming back to life and hearing the heavenly voice telling them to "come up hither!" (11: 11-13), refers to the resurrection which will occur at the Parousia. The number of parallels between the two witnesses and what is affirmed of the Church throughout the Apocalypse make their identification all but certain..

The entire twelfth chapter of the Apocalypse is given over to a symbolic narrative involving a momentous portent, "a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars" (12: 1). John describes the woman as being in the pangs of birth, with a great red dragon ready to devour her child at the moment of birth (12: 3-4). According to Swete, "the ancient expositors in general, beginning with Hippolytus and Methodius, understood the Woman with child to represent the Church, though some identified her with the Blessed Virgin."³¹ Dispensationalists would identify the Woman with Israel, from whom the Messiah came, and the "rest of her off-

³⁰ Swete, p. 134.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 148.

spring" (12: 17), with the Jewish Remnant.³² A number of very important clues to the proper identification of the Woman lie within the chapter itself. First of all we have John's reference to a "crown of twelve stars," which was upon her head (12: 1). The number twelve, as we have already suggested, has important symbolical significance for John, as its frequent use throughout the book indicates. Terry concludes that the number twelve is "the mystical number of God's chosen people,"³³ and Rengstorf states that the number twelve "has become the typical number of the completeness of an undiminished totality of the theocratic people"³⁴ The crown of twelve stars would then indicate some intimate connection with the people of God. Then again, the recognition of the significance of Genesis 3: 15 in the thought of the author must be seen. While the identification of the "rest of her offspring" with the Church is relatively simple, the identification of the Woman herself is more difficult. She is, in our opinion, neither the Israel of the Old Testament nor the Church of the New Testament—taken in their exclusive sense—but rather the people of God, which both transcends and includes these two concepts.³⁵

Yet another clue may be found to the Woman's identity when the position of the figure of the Woman in the structure of the Apocalypse is recognized. In harmony with the purpose of John to draw a strict antithesis between the Church and the world, he utilizes the figures of two women as symbols of this antithesis. In Rev. 17 we find a Woman who is antithetic to the Woman of Rev. 12, and who is called the "great harlot," with a description of her in 17: 3-9, 18. This figure is explicitly interpreted by John as "the great city" (=Rome), which has dominion over the kings of the earth (17: 18). The forces opposed to God are thus portrayed as a city, Rome, which is figuratively represented by Babylon in imagery drawn from the Old Testament.

Intimately connected with the symbol of the Woman and the Bride is the vision of New Jerusalem which John describes as "prepared as a bride adorned for her husband" (21: 2). While this expression is a simile, the metaphor itself is used in Rev.

³² C. I. Scofield (ed.), *The Scofield Reference Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1945), p. 1341.

³³ Milton S. Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1961), p. 291.

³⁴ Rengstorf, III, 324.

³⁵ Merrill C. Tenney, "The Revelation," *The Biblical Expositor*, ed. Carl F. H. Henry, III (Philadelphia: A. J. Holman Company, 1960), p. 475.

21: 9-10, where the connection of the Woman, the Bride and the City are also indicated:

Then came one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues, and spoke to me, saying, "Come, I will show you the Bride (τὴν νύμφην), the wife (τὴν γυναῖκα) of the Lamb." And in the spirit he carried me away to a great, high mountain, and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God

John, it would seem, has purposely used two synonyms for the word "Bride" (cf. 19: 7) in his language about the Church in order to create the following chain of association: Woman=Wife=Bride=City. When it comes to the figure of New Jerusalem itself, there are just three main references to it in the entire Apocalypse (3: 12; 21: 2, 10), with the entire twenty-first chapter being given over to its description. A passage which we have already mentioned, Rev. 21: 9-10, is crucial for our understanding of the figure, for if we equate the Bride with the Church, we must also equate New Jerusalem with the Church as well. According to John Wick Bowman, "the description of this city in Rev. 21: 2 as one like a 'bride adorned for her husband' makes certain its identification with the church, the true people of God."³⁶ In contrast with our modern concept of a city as a unit of buildings, markets and houses, the New Testament conception of a *polis* was quite different. According to Strathmann, "the usage of πόλις is, according to the New Testament, wholly and completely unpolitical. Πόλις means simply a united human settlement in contrast with deserted regions, fields, villages and individual dwellings."³⁷ Simply said, the emphasis is placed upon the human inhabitants rather than on the physical place. This is nowhere more clearly evidenced than in a comparison between Rev. 13: 6 and 21: 3. In the former passage, John describes the Beast as blaspheming God's "name and his dwelling (τὴν σκηνήν, which also may be translated as "tabernacle," or "tent"), that is, *those who dwell* (τοὺς σκηνοῦντας) *in heaven.*" Here there is an explicit identification made between the dwelling place and those who dwell there, with the former being the symbol of the latter. Then in Rev. 21: 2-3 we find this description:

³⁶ John Wick Bowman, "New Jerusalem," *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. George Arthur Buttrick (New York and Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962), III, 545.

³⁷ Hermann Strathmann, "Polis," *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament*, ed. Gerhard Friedrich (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer Verlag, 1959), VI, 529.

And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband; and I heard a great voice from the throne saying, "Behold the dwelling (ἡ σκηνή) of God is with men. He will dwell with them and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them."

Taking these two passages in conjunction, therefore, we have the following pattern of speech about the Church: New Jerusalem = God's dwelling (σκηνή) = those who dwell in heaven. There is also the statement in Rev. 3: 12—the same verse in which the first mention of New Jerusalem is to be found—that "he who conquers, I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God . . ." Note that this "pillar" is not erected in honour of the one who conquers, but is a metaphorical way of describing the position of the conquering believer in the city of God.

The result of this consideration is that the emphasis which John places on the Church and the World is antithetically symbolized by two cities, Babylon and New Jerusalem. The use of Babylon as a symbol for the hostile world forces is widely used in the Apocalypse (14: 8; 18: 2; 16: 9; 17: 5; 18: 10, 21), and the word πόλις is used with respect to Rome a number of other times (16: 19, 17: 18; 18: 16, 18, 19, 21; 18: 10). It seems that John is fond of drawing these contrasts through the use of symbols; first that of the Woman, then that of the City.

In considering the symbolic significance of the City, we must consider again the significance of the number twelve. In his vision of the New Jerusalem in chapter 21, John was first shown the twelve gates, upon which were inscribed the names of the twelve tribes of Israel, and which had twelve angels standing before them (21: 12), and then the twelve foundations on which were written the names of the twelve apostles (21: 14). The length and breadth and height of the city were 12,000 stadia (21: 16), and the wall was 144 cubits (12×12) in length (21: 17). Therefore the symbolical use of twelve as the number of the completeness of God's people renders the equation of the Church with the Holy City a virtual certainty. Interestingly enough, the twelve tribes are indiscriminately combined with the twelve apostles in the numerology of the city. This combination is an indication of the inseparable unity of the people of God and their essential continuity under both the Old and the New Covenants.

CONCLUSION

The incomparable richness of the figurative language which John applies to the Church serves to delineate his view of the people of God in a particular historical situation. Since John's immediate

concern is the survival of the Church in a hostile environment, he has emphasized the antithesis and the mutual exclusiveness of the people of God and the people of the World. It was that same concern which placed an emphasis on the faithfulness, the endurance, the witness and the eventual victory of the Church and the individuals in it over the forces opposing God. John's language about the Church, therefore, is primarily concerned with these themes. Although the character and subtlety of the World's opposition to the believer within the Church who has responded and is responding to the claims of the Kingdom of God upon his life may change from time to time and country to country, the basic antithesis remains constant. The real message of the Apocalypse, therefore, is no less relevant today than it was the day it was written, for Jesus Christ, no less than his apostle John, can have no greater joy than that his children walk in truth (3 John 4).

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