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THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES

Before looking more closely at the way Revelation communicates its message, we will look at the main features of its theological orientation.

GOD

A large part of Revelation’s theology is embedded in the titles it uses for God. ‘Alpha and Omega/first and the last/beginning the end’ has its biblical origins in later prophetic pronouncements of God’s uniqueness amongst the nations (see Isa. 41:4; 44:6; 48:12). But in this form the title makes strong connections with Greek philosophy and mysticism and its speculations about the divine name. ‘The one who is, who was, and who is to come’ (1:4; 1:8; 4:8; 11:17; 16:5) develops the understanding of the divine name (Ex. 3:14) in line with Jewish interpretation. But it

prioritizes the present reality of God, and expresses his future reality in terms of his coming to judge and save. ‘Lord God Almighty’ (1:8; 4:8; 11:17; 15:3; 16:7; 19:6; 21:22) is a translation of the biblical phrase, ‘Yhwh, God of hosts’ and emphasizes God’s actual control over events, in spite of appearances. ‘The one who sits on the throne’ draws on another prophetic image of sovereignty (Isa. 6, Ezek. 1), which relates God’s rule to its recognition in worship.

Strikingly (in the light of Revelation’s use of the OT) there is no language attributing human characteristics to God (anthropomorphism). Only twice does God speak (in 1:8 and 21:6); elsewhere others speak on God’s behalf (e.g. in 6:1) or the voice is disembodied (as in 16:17). Revelation’s language about God is primarily the language of transcendence. But this does not mean God is unconcerned with creation. God is worshipped as creator (4:11) with a rainbow around his throne (4:3; cf. Gen. 9:13–17). God’s judgement will involve ‘destroying the destroyers of the earth’ (11:18, cf. Gen. 6:11f.) and the final vision (Rev. 21) is of a renewed creation that is beyond the threat of evil.

JESUS

In the context of God’s transcendence and uniqueness, Jesus shares the language God uses for self-designation. Whereas the titles connected with ‘first and last’ are used separately by God and Jesus in chapter 1 (1:8 and 1:17), by the end they merge together and appear to be uttered by Jesus himself (21:6; 22:13). ‘As a way of stating unambiguously that Jesus Christ belongs to the fullness of the eternal being of God, this surpasses anything in the NT’ (Bauckham *Theology*, p. 57). The language of worship

reinforces this. In contrast to the angel who refuses worship (in Rev. 19 and 21) Jesus accepts it. And the language of worship of the lamb echoes the language of worship of God (Rev. 4 and 5) so that worship of the lamb leads to worship of God and the lamb together (5:13). Jesus and God are so closely identified that the future of God for humankind is the coming of Jesus.

The primary designation of Jesus is as witness. Although the lamb wages war and brings judgement, the high point of his victory is his faithful witness to the point of death (Rev. 12:10–11). If God is transcendent and at something of a distance, then Jesus is present as the one among the lampstands (1:12–20), the lamb who conquers by suffering (2:9–10).

THE SPIRIT

Two phrases are used in Revelation – the simple title ‘the Spirit’ and the puzzling phrase ‘the seven Spirits’. This second expression is closely connected with the lamb that has been slain and with the churches themselves. The seven Spirits are seven lamps (4:5, not ‘torches’, NRSV), presumably placed on the seven lampstands (1:12, 20). But they are also the eyes of the lamb that roam throughout the earth (5:6, cf. Zech. 4:5). The phrase comes four times, corresponding to the $7 \times 4 = 28$ occurrences of the word ‘lamb’. ‘The seven Spirits as the divine power released into the whole world by the victory of Christ’s sacrifice are the power of divine truth’ (Bauckham 1993a, *Theology* p. 114).

‘The Spirit’ occurs fourteen times, seven of these in the messages to the churches. It is the Spirit who makes the voice of Jesus known to his people. And it is the Spirit who equips them for faithful witness after the

pattern of Jesus (11:11; 19:10). This witness is manifest both within the churches and to the world at large.

THE FOLLOWERS OF THE LAMB

The followers of the lamb are soldiers fighting a holy war (Rev. 7; see under ‘Use of the OT’). They are to conquer, as the lamb conquers, through faithful endurance in times of suffering. However they will be conquered as well as conquering (13:7), but final victory belongs to the lamb and to the lamb’s followers. This victory came first through Jesus’ death and resurrection; it belongs to his followers during the end times of conflict, and it will be complete on Jesus’ return.

The followers of the lamb are also participants in an end-times Exodus. They follow the Passover lamb that has been slaughtered (5:6) to purchase their freedom as a kingdom of priests (1:5–6, Exodus 19:6). They have passed through a Red Sea of resistance to the beast (15:3–4), and the Exodus plagues fall on those who follow the beast (Rev. 16). But this vision is inclusive rather than exclusive – the fourfold phrase ‘tribes, nations, tongues and peoples’ combines Ex. 19:5 with Gen. 10:31. The people of God come from every nation, not in the sense of being separated out of them, but in the sense of comprising people from all nations.

Thirdly, the followers of the lamb are to be witnesses like Jesus to the truth about God. Jesus is the faithful and true witness (3:14) and his followers conquer by their testimony (12:11). The world is pictured as a courtroom, where the truth about God is on trial; the faithful and true witness finally becomes the faithful and true judge (19:11) who vindicates his faithful people.

