

- **Eschatology and Hermeneutics**
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## RÉSUMÉ

*L'eschatologie est un des chapitres les plus difficiles de la théologie systématique. Une des questions importantes est la suivante: comment interprétons-nous le langage eschatologique employé dans la Bible? L'auteur traite d'abord de la prophétie dans l'A.T. et du langage qu'elle utilise. La prophétie biblique n'aborde pas seulement l'avenir, mais aussi le présent et le passé. Dans les trois cas, le prophète s'adresse principalement à ses contemporains.*

*Ensuite il faut noter que des éléments d'eschatologie apocalyptique apparaissent progressivement dans la tradition prophétique. Cela se produit aux époques de crises nationales en Israël. Les croyants se demandent si Dieu est toujours le Seigneur souverain. Les premiers messages apocalyptiques proclament que l'histoire s'oriente vers un but final universel. Les auteurs apocalyptiques plus récents ajoutent beaucoup d'autres éléments. Le message relatif à l'avenir vise cependant toujours à influencer l'action présente. Le message n'est jamais censé fournir un diagramme des événements futurs (cf. Hal Lindsey, entre autres). Parfois l'avenir immédiat et l'avenir lointain s'entremêlent dans le même oracle. On peut aussi signaler le phénomène dit de la 'perspective restreinte'.*

*Le langage utilisé est celui de l'époque du prophète, y compris le langage poétique ou figuré. Peu à peu une imagerie cosmique se dessine en rapport avec le 'Jour du Seigneur'. Le Trito-Esaïe parle d'un monde nouveau, mais*

*il ne s'agit pas encore d'un monde parfait. Ce dernier apparaît comme un élément nouveau dans le message eschatologique du N.T. à propos des fins dernières. Parfois le thème du paradis est employé, mais pas dans le sens d'une simple restauration de l'ancienne création.*

*Naturellement, la question de l'interprétation du livre de Daniel est aussi abordée. Ce livre est nettement apocalyptique, mais certains éléments de la littérature apocalyptique plus tardive ne s'y trouvent pas.*

*On rencontre aussi un langage apocalyptique dans quelques textes du N.T. L'auteur s'intéresse en particulier à des images comme celle de la dernière trompette ou celle de la nuée. Devons-nous y voir des 'projections' ou des 'extrapolations'? (Hendrikus Berkhof). Ou devons-nous plutôt penser en termes de la séquence promesse-accomplissement devenant une nouvelle promesse-accomplissement . . . etc?*

*La dernière partie de l'article est consacrée au livre de l'Apocalypse. Diverses méthodes d'interprétation sont mentionnées (prétériste, historiciste, futuriste, par 'parallélismes'). L'auteur préconise cette dernière, en suivant la voie tracée par W. Hendriksen. Le langage de l'Apocalypse a ses particularités propres, en raison de son insistance sur la nature chaotique de l'histoire, sur la totalité de l'histoire, etc. Les images sont très vigoureuses. Jean utilise, entre autres, les techniques de l'accumulation, du contraste violent, du langage secret.*

## ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

*Der Themenbereich Eschatologie gehört zu den problematischsten Teilbereichen der systematischen Theologie. Eines der Hauptprobleme ist: Wie lesen und*

*interpretieren wir die eschatologische Stilsprache in der Bibel? Zuerst wird der Bereich der alttestamentlichen Prophetie mit seiner spezifischen Sprachbildung untersucht.*



*Prophetie beschränkt sich nicht nur auf Aussagen über die Zukunft, sondern behandelt auch Gegenwart und Vergangenheit. In allen drei Fällen wendet sich der Prophet zuallererst an seine eigenen Zeitgenossen.*

*Als nächstes wird festgehalten, daß innerhalb der prophetischen Tradition allmählich Merkmale apokalyptischer Eschatologie entstehen. Dieser Vorgang findet vor allem in Zeiten nationaler Krisen in Israel statt. Die Gläubigen sehen sich mit der Frage konfrontiert, ob Gott auch dann noch der souveräne Herr in Israel ist. Frühe apokalyptische Aussagen betonen, daß Geschichte sich auf eine universale Endzeit zubewegt, während spätere Apokalyptiker weitere Besonderheiten hinzufügen. Wichtig ist jedoch, daß die jeweilige Botschaft immer dazu dienen soll, das Verhalten der Rezipienten in der Gegenwart zu prägen. Die apokalyptische Botschaft ist nie als eine wörtliche Vorhersage zukünftiger geschichtlicher Ereignisse gemeint (vgl. dagegen Hal Lindsey und andere). Manchmal werden nahe und ferne Zukunft in derselben Aussage eng miteinander verwoben, und auch das Phänomen der 'eingeschränkten Perspektive' verdient Beachtung.*

*Die prophetische Sprache ist jeweils die zeitgenössische Sprache des Propheten. Diese Aussage gilt auch für den poetischen und übertragenen Sprachgebrauch. Langsam entwickelt sich eine kosmische Metaphorik im Zusammenhang mit dem 'Tag des Herrn'. Trito-Jesaja spricht von einer neuen Welt, die jedoch noch keine vollkommene Welt ist. Diese*

*ist auch das neue Element in der eschatologischen Botschaft des Neuen Testaments in Bezug auf die Endzeit. Manchmal werden paradiesische Bilder verwendet, doch diese sprechen nicht einfach von einer Restoration der alten Schöpfung.*

*Selbstverständlich wird auch das Buch Daniel behandelt. Dieses Buch ist eindeutig apokalyptischer Natur, aber einige der Merkmale späterer Apokalyptik fehlen.*

*Auch in einigen Teilen des Neuen Testaments begegnet uns apokalyptische Sprachbildung. Besondere Aufmerksamkeit in diesem Zusammenhang wird Metaphern wie den 'letzten Trompeten', etc. gewidmet. Handelt es sich hier um 'Projektion' oder 'Extrapolation' (Hendrikus Berkhof)? Oder sollen wir von einem Schema: Verheißung–Erfüllung ausgehen, das zu einer neuen Verheißung und Erfüllung, etc. voranschreitet?*

*Im letzten Teil des Artikels wird die Offenbarung des Johannes behandelt. Dabei werden verschiedene Interpretationsmodelle vorgestellt (präteristische, historistisch, futuristisch, 'Parallelismus'). Der Autor schließt sich dem letzten Ansatz an, darin dem Vorbild von W. Hendriksen folgend. Die Sprache in Offenbarung hat ihre eigenen Besonderheiten, was vor allem in der Betonung des chaotischen Wesens und der Totalität geschichtlicher Ereignisse begründet liegt. Es wird eine sehr kräftige Metaphorik verwendet. Unter anderem verwendet Johannes sprachliche Stilmittel wie extreme Kontraste, Anhäufung und Verhüllung.*

Some years ago I. Howard Marshall wrote an article in which he called eschatology a 'slippery word'.<sup>1</sup> The term is used in so many different ways that it has almost become meaningless. But it is not only the term that suffers from this slipperiness; the same applies to its content. This is largely due to the fact that Christians, including theologians, often read biblical messages about the future without giving proper attention to the question of hermeneutics. Biblical eschatology has its own, in some ways quite peculiar, thought patterns and consequently also its own peculiar language. But how should we read and interpret this

language? We shall first examine the difference between prophecy and apocalyptic.

## Prophecy

It is not necessary here to investigate the whole phenomenon of prophecy. It may suffice to mention some aspects that are of primary importance for a correct understanding of the difference between prophecy and apocalyptic.

Many people have a very one-sided view of *prophecy*. As soon as they hear the word prophet they think of someone who predicts the future. Now, it cannot be denied that the



future plays an important role in the proclamation of the biblical prophets, but it is by no means the determinative aspect of their message. Generally speaking, a prophet is someone who speaks to his contemporaries on behalf of God. In doing this he lets God's light shine on the history of God's people. All aspects of this history may be part of his message: the past, the present and the future. It goes without saying that his primary interest is in the *present*. His chief aim is to call the people of his own day away from their sins in order that they may serve God again in their worship and their daily life. But precisely with a view to the present prophets often speak of the *past* too. It is interesting to note that in the Jewish canon some of our so-called historical books (Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings) belong to the prophetic section of the canon, the *Nebiim*! These books do not present the usual national history of a small nation in the ancient Near East, but they look at the past Israel in the light of God's covenant with Israel, his redeeming actions and his purposes. But this reflection of the past serves one purpose only: to make the *contemporaries* of the prophet conscious of God as a living reality. The real focus is not on the past but on the *present*!

The same applies to the prophets' speaking of the *future*. Actually, the future plays a much greater part in prophecy than in the Torah, in the so-called historical books and in the wisdom literature. That does not mean that in earlier times there was no interest in the future. From the very beginning Israel's faith always contained the element of expectation and hope. The patriarchs were awaiting the day that their descendants would settle in the promised land; later on, their descendants, having been enslaved in Egypt for a very long time, escaped with only one hope in their hearts: to arrive in the land that God had promised to the fathers; after the entry into and the occupation of the land, they trusted that God would keep them there and bless them forever; afterwards God confirmed this expectation in the promise He gave to David: 'I will raise up your offspring after you . . . and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name. And I will establish his throne forever' (2 Sam.

7:12, 13). The people founded their hope for the future on these and similar promises and on the acts of redemption God had performed in the past. In the proclamation of the prophets, however, a change takes place. Although at times they still speak of the past, their interest in the future seems to be greater. Increasingly they begin to look forward to new acts of God. The basic reason for this change of perspective is that in their days Israel time and again breaks the covenant and follows other gods. The prophets lose all confidence in Israel's keeping of the covenant. More and more they begin to speak of judgment and doom. God hates not only the worship of other gods (Amos 5:26; 8:14), but also the empty ritualistic worship in the temple (Amos 5:21–27; 9:1–4) and the social injustice perpetrated against the poor and helpless (Amos 2:6; 4:1; 5:10–12). Therefore God will punish them and, if they do not repent, he will send them into exile. We hear these warnings in all the pre-exilic prophets, but it is of no avail. The people do not repent and the exile does become a reality. During the exile the prophets speak of a new future, of the restoration of the nation in the promised land. For his own name's sake (Is. 48:11; Ezek. 36: 22–25) God will redeem his people and a remnant will return. God will renew the covenant and its promises (Jer. 31). Post-exilic prophets such as Haggai (2:6–9) and Zechariah (1–8), and still later Trito-Isaiah (56–66) and Zechariah (9–14) repeat the same promises.

## Apocalyptic

Gradually we see various features of *apocalyptic eschatology* emerge. It is clearly surfacing in Trito-Isaiah, but elements of this kind of eschatology are also present in other parts of the prophetic books, such as Is. 24–27; Ezek. 38ff. (Gog and Magog); the beginning of the book of Joel (with its description of a plague of locusts); and in the visions of the second part of Zechariah and of the book of Daniel. In some of these passages eschatology takes on cosmic dimensions and the message about the future is portrayed in cosmic language. Apparently there is a gradual transition from prophecy to apocalyptic and so also a gradual change



in language and imagery. Paul D. Hanson<sup>2</sup> and others have demonstrated that this apocalyptic eschatology is not an entirely new phenomenon, but rather an *internal development* within the prophetic tradition of Israel. At first the apocalyptic message is not yet pseudonymous; rather, it is anonymous. There is not yet a developed angelology. Apart from Daniel there are no *vaticinia post eventum*. The temporal dualism of two ages is emerging, but the spatial dualism of heaven and earth is not yet apparent.<sup>3</sup>

Obviously, apocalyptic has its origin in the situation of crisis faced by Israel in the centuries after the exile. After the return to the land of the fathers city and temple have been restored. But it is by no means evident that the people have learned their lesson, for besides the worship of Yahweh there is still idolatry (cf. Is. 57:5ff.; 65:3f.; 66:3, 17) and there is still much social injustice (cf. 56:11; 57:1; 58:3ff.; 59:3f.). Apparently the return from the exile has not been 'the all-transforming turning-point to salvation that the message of Deutero-Isaiah might have led people to expect'.<sup>4</sup> It is therefore no wonder that the true believers have great difficulty in understanding God's way with his people. Apart from short intervals they remain subject to foreign heathen powers. God's covenant promises, given by exilic prophets and reiterated by post-exilic prophets, remain largely unfulfilled. God's saints suffer deeply from this silence of their God. They are the children of the 'remnant', but why does Yahweh not redeem them? Or is the world perhaps ending in destruction and will they share in this destruction? Is God really the sovereign Lord? It is these and similar questions that are answered by the apocalyptic writers. They try to show that there is order in spite of the apparent disorder; that God is King and that his plans will be fulfilled; that even though this world, this history and this earthly existence do not provide a perspective of true salvation, salvation is assured, for at the end of history God will put all things right in an act of redemption that transcends history. Apocalyptic therefore is not in disharmony with prophecy; rather it takes the prophetic tradition one step further by 'its vision of history

moving towards a universal culmination and of God as the Lord of the totality of history'.<sup>5</sup>

Later on apocalyptic thinking develops and many other features are added, such as special revelations, symbolism, pessimism, the shaking of the foundations, determinism, dualism, pseudonymity, rewritten history, etc.<sup>6</sup> But even this full-grown apocalyptic is still an 'heir of prophecy'. We see this in the book of Daniel, which is also part of the later development. I realize that there is much controversy about the date of writing. Does it belong to the sixth century (the general conservative position) or to the second century (the critical-historical approach)? I am inclined to follow Richard J. Bauckham who suggests 'the possibility of a developing Daniel tradition, which has its roots as far back as the exile in Jewish debate with and participation in mantic wisdom, developed in the Eastern diaspora and finally produced Daniel apocalypses on Palestinian soil in the time of Antiochus Epiphanes'.<sup>7</sup> This view also explains the ambiguous nature of apocalyptic. On the one hand, there is a very close relationship to the non-Jewish environment with considerable borrowing from it in the form of revealed secrets, symbolism, literary forms, etc. On the other hand, there is a clear connection with exilic and post-exilic prophecy, in particular Deutero- and Trito-Isaiah.

It is striking that the apocalyptic writers do not call themselves prophets. They are conscious of the fact that the prophetic voice has fallen silent (cf. Baruch 85:3; 1 Macc. 4:46). In this silence they act as the *interpreters of the prophets* for their own age, and they take the transcendent eschatology of the post-exilic prophets a step further.<sup>8</sup> In the New Testament some apocalyptic features reappear. John the Baptist is in many respects an apocalyptic figure. According to the Gospels Jesus at times also uses apocalyptic language.<sup>9</sup> When Paul speaks of the parousia of Christ (1 Thess., 2 Thess. and 1 Cor. 15) he again uses apocalyptic language.

## Interpretation

But how should we interpret the prophetic and apocalyptic message about the future of



Israel and the world, and about God's future actions? As we have seen already, the interest in the future is not merely for the sake of the future itself; the real point of concern is the *present situation of the hearers or readers*. Amos makes this quite clear: 'Therefore, thus I will do to you, O Israel; because I will do this to you, prepare to meet your God, O Israel' (4:12; cf. also Matt. 25:13). In our interpretation of prophecy and apocalyptic we always have to start from the intention of the original author and from what he wanted to communicate to *his* hearers or readers. Prophecy, also in the form of prediction, always served 'to influence the present action'.<sup>10</sup>

For this reason it is altogether wrong to read the pronouncements about the future as a kind of blueprint of future history or as history written beforehand. Such an interpretation is nearly always part and parcel of a fundamentalist and literalist approach to Scripture. A very clear example is found in the books of Hal Lindsey.<sup>11</sup> He collects all the eschatological passages of Scripture (of both OT and NT), combines various elements from various passages and thus tries to make a comprehensive and complete picture of the last phase of world history (which in his opinion has already arrived). With great precision he identifies the world powers of today: the Soviet Union (which in the meantime has ceased to exist!), Red China and the European Economic Community ('the ten horns of the beast'—but in the meantime the community has been expanded!). He finds indications of nuclear explosions and radioactive fall-out in these centuries-old pronouncements ('fire, smoke and brimstone'). The deadly sting of the locusts stands for the nerve gas sprayed from the tails of helicopters! Etc.

It is hardly necessary to deal at length with this type of interpretation. I restrict myself to a few comments. 1) This view fully ignores the basic character of biblical eschatology, namely that the pronouncements on the future are primarily directed at the *contemporaries* of the prophet or apocalyptic writer. What would be the use of references to political or martial realities of our twentieth century to the prophet's contemporaries in the eighth or seventh century

BC or in the first century AD? 2) Speaking of the far future prophetic pronouncements are always general and deliberately vague. Only sometimes when prophets deal with the near future does their proclamation become very concrete and specific (cf. for instance, Ahijah in 1 Kings 11:29–32 and Elisha in 2 Kings 7:1ff., 16–20). But even then the details given are usually few. *The fact that it will happen is more important than the way in which it will happen.* 3) In the case of a prophetic promise or an announcement of judgment regarding the near future the oracle often contains conditional elements, the fulfilment being dependent on the people's response to God. 4) As to the far future the prophet always restricts himself to a few general statements. He is not a fortune-teller or diviner, but a messenger who speaks on behalf of God and who relates only what God has shown him. Therefore his message looks more like a modern surrealistic painting than a Rubens or a Rembrandt or a Gainsborough. With a few long and powerful strokes of his brush the artist draws the outline of his painting. What he wants to communicate is quite clear, as long as the spectator does not look at it from too close, for in that case he may miss the message altogether. And it is this message that matters, not the details. To some extent all this also applies to apocalyptic, although here the picture may at times be rather detailed. In one of his books D. S. Russell uses the illustration of a photograph. 'As in photography, so also in the apocalyptic vision, when the focus is on eternity the immediate foreground lacks clarity and definition. Apocalyptic encompasses everything from creation to consummation, but because its focus is fixed on that consummation contemporary event lacks precision.'<sup>12</sup>

Another special feature of prophecy is that sometimes the near and the far future are intermingled in the same message. Apparently the two aspects were indistinguishable for the prophet himself. This phenomenon is often called 'restricted perspective'.<sup>13</sup> Caird speaks of a 'bifocal vision'. 'With their near sight they foresaw imminent historical events which would be brought about by familiar human causes; for example, disaster was near



for Babylon because Yahweh was stirring up the Medes against them (Isa. 13:17). With their long sight they saw the day of the Lord; and it was in the nature of the prophetic experience that they were able to adjust their focus so as to impose the one image on the other and produce a synthetic picture.<sup>14</sup> To use an illustration: I clearly remember that shortly after my arrival in Australia in the fifties I drove through one of the suburbs of Melbourne and at some distance saw the outline of a huge cathedral. I was surprised, because I did not expect such a cathedral in a suburb. But driving on I soon discovered that there were two different churches. For a time they had been in line with each other and looked like one huge church building! Thus in the Old Testament there is not yet a clear distinction between a first and a second coming of the Messiah. The coming of the Messiah is sometimes portrayed with the features of both suffering and glory. Likewise in the New Testament we see that in Jesus' prophetic discourse (Matt. 24, Mark 13, Luke 21) the picture of the destruction of Jerusalem and that of the parousia at times almost fade into one another.

## Language

Again our starting point should be that the author speaks primarily to *his* contemporaries and that he does it as *their* contemporary. Therefore he speaks in the language of his own time, in the thought patterns of that time and in images that are known to and understandable to people of that time. The speech of the prophet is further coloured by his own experiences and his own surroundings. This also applies to what he says about the future. He can express his vision or inspiration only in the language and images of his own day. The eschatological and messianic kingdom of peace (Is. 11:6–9) is described by the peaceful co-existence of animals, well-known at that time. The future restoration of Israel (in Ezek. 40–48) is described in the form of the temple and of ceremonies attached to the worship in the temple.

Prophecy frequently employs figurative and poetic language. At times it is poetry of the highest quality. In his opening oracle

Amos says: 'The Lord roars from Zion, and utters his voice from Jerusalem; the pastures of the shepherds mourn, and the top of Carmel withers' (1:2; cf. Joel 3:16). Predicting the Lord's coming in judgment Micah says: 'The mountains will melt under him and the valleys will be cleft, like wax before the fire, like waters poured down a steep place' (1:4; cf. Hab. 3:6). Sometimes they draw their pictures from ancient times and even use 'mytho-logical' images.

Awake, awake, put on strength,  
O arm of the Lord;  
awake, as in days of old,  
the generations of long ago.  
Was it not thou that didst cut Rahab in pieces,  
that didst pierce the dragon?  
Was it not thou that didst dry up the sea,  
the waters of the great deep;  
that didst make the depths of the sea a way  
for the redeemed to pass over? (Is. 51:9,10)

This is beautiful poetry, but the poetic language does not obscure the message. It is as clear as crystal: God will redeem his people, for his divine power never weakens. Isaiah continues: 'The ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with singing.'

Russell calls the literary form of apocalyptic one 'of poetry of a vivid and highly imaginative kind'.<sup>15</sup> But it is always of such a kind that the contemporary hearers/readers are able to understand the tenor of the message. Everyone would understand that a shepherd (2 Sam. 5:2) and a horn (Dan. 7:24) stand for kingship, that 'singing hills' (Is. 44:23) symbolize unspeakable joy and that 'falling stars' (Dan. 8:10; Matt. 24:29; Rev. 8:10) portend threatening events that will cause such an upheaval that the world seems to perish.

We see cosmic language gradually arise in connection with the 'Day of the Lord'. It is not yet present in the first occurrence in Amos 5:16–18. The universal character of this day of judgment is stressed in Is. 2:12ff., but here too cosmic language is still absent. In Zephaniah, who has been called 'the prophet of the day of the Lord', some traces of cosmic language become noticeable (cf. 1:7ff., 14ff; 2:2,3; 3:8). The post-exilic prophet Joel increasingly uses cosmic terms. Speaking of the coming Day of the Lord he not only calls it 'a day of darkness and gloom, a day of



clouds and thick darkness' (2:2), but also mentions portents in the heavens and on the earth: blood and fire and columns of smoke; the sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood, before the great and terrible Day of the Lord comes (2:30, 31).

When prophets (and apocalyptic writers as well) deal with the consummation of history the images increasingly acquire cosmic dimensions. Tristo-Isaiah even speaks of a new creation. 'I create new heavens and a new earth; and the former things shall not be remembered or come into mind (Is. 65:17). In the next chapter the final redemption is expressed in similar terms: 'As the new heavens and the new earth which I will make shall remain before me, says the Lord, so shall your descendants and your name remain. From new moon to new moon, and from sabbath to sabbath, all flesh shall come to worship before me' (66:22, 23; cf. Jer. 31:34–36). The majority of the exegetes are of the opinion that, in spite of the cosmic language employed ('create', 'new heavens and a new earth'), these promises do not yet speak of a consummation that transcends history. Although it is a new world, compared with the past (cf. 66:23), it is not yet a perfect world, for sin has not yet disappeared and death has not yet been conquered. We see that in the description of the new world: 'No more shall be in it [Jerusalem] an infant that lives but a few days, or an old man who does not fill out his days, for the child shall die a hundred years old, and the sinner a hundred years old shall be accursed' [another translation reads: 'he who fails to reach a hundred will be considered accursed'] (65:20).

In the New Testament these cosmic images return. In Jesus' prophetic discourse as recounted in the Synoptic Gospels we hear of earthquakes (Matt. 24:7), of the darkening of sun and moon and of stars falling from heaven (24:29). 2 Peter speaks of the heavens passing away with a loud noise and of elements being dissolved with fire (3:10). In particular in the book of Revelation cosmic language plays a great part (e.g., 6:12–17; 8:5). It is quite possible that the original authors took such cosmic language rather literally—although this always remains a debatable point when poetic language is concerned. However this may be, such

literalism is definitely no longer possible for people of this day and age. We know (a fact unknown in biblical times) that stars cannot fall upon the earth. But this does not really matter, for the cosmic language was not designed to give a graphic representation of future events or of a new world in the far future, but was meant to stress the supernatural and super-historical nature of the consummation.<sup>16</sup> The last chapters of Revelation clearly intimate that the consummation will transcend history. The new heaven and new earth of 21:1 are not a continuation of the old heaven and the old earth, albeit raised to a higher level, but the first heaven and the first earth have passed away. The new order not only transcends the present, but the eschatological deliverance is from the present sinful and decaying order into a new, sinless, and eternal order. Both sin and death have disappeared. 'There shall no more be anything accursed' in the new Jerusalem (22:3). 'God himself will be with men; he will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away' (21:3,4). Indeed, God makes all things new (21:5)!

### The language of paradise

In portraying the future the prophets at times recur to the language of paradise. In Is. 51:3 and Ezek. 36:35 the eschatological reality is compared with the garden of the Lord or the garden of Eden. In other passages the promised reality is depicted by means of imagery that is reminiscent of paradise (Is. 11:6–9). In the Revelation of John both the word and the imagery of paradise return again (2:7; 22:1, 2).

This kind of terminology in the prophetic writings has sometimes led to the idea that the *Endzeit* will be a restoration of the *Urzeit*. In particular in Lutheran eschatology this idea has played an important part. But it fails to do justice to the prophetic language and imagery. To the prophets paradise was the point of departure, not of arrival. Undoubtedly the idea of restoration contains an important element of truth. In the consummation God will most certainly also restore



his original creation, but at the same time he will bring it to a fulfilment that far surpasses the original starting point. The Reformed theologian Herman Bavinck stated with regard to the future of man: 'The *status gloriae* will not be a mere restoration of the original *status naturae*, but a reformation that transforms all *potentia* into *actus*.'<sup>17</sup> The same is true of all of creation. The new earth is not a mere renewal of the existing earth, but a 'transformation' will take place. Nature too will be elevated and all its *potentia* too will be transformed into *actus*.

Prophetic language makes this quite clear. Our present history began in a garden. The picture of the consummation, however, is not a tidied-up, neatly trimmed garden, but a city: the new Jerusalem. There God does not visit man occasionally (as in Eden), but he dwells in the midst of his people. 'Behold, the dwelling of God is with men' (Rev. 21:3). When in this context the imagery of paradise is used, it is not just a repetition of the old images, but the imagery is elevated to a higher plane. Again we read about the tree of life, but the riches of the new imagery by far surpass that of the original. In the new Jerusalem there is the river of the water of life (cf. the four rivers in Gen. 2:10) and the tree of life is on either side of this river. Some take it as a single tree, which has diverged into two branches.<sup>18</sup> Others take the word as a collective and think of whole rows of trees alongside the river<sup>19</sup> (cf. also Ezek. 47:12). But whatever interpretation one chooses, it is quite evident that this picture goes far beyond that of the original tree of life (Gen 2:9): the new tree gives twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit every month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.

## The Book of Daniel

In writings of the apocalypticists the imagery becomes much more vivid and intricate than in the prophetic writings. We read of strange animals or beasts, of mysterious numbers, of a schematic division of history into empires or other phases, of angels blowing their trumpets, of a war in heaven: Michael and his angels fighting against the dragon and his angels; etc. At times the imagery is so

foreign to us that we are not even able to understand it.

The book of Daniel is unquestionably of an apocalyptic nature. Apocalyptic elements already appear in the first 'historical' part, where we read of the strange dream of king Nebucadnezzar and its interpretation by the 'wise' man Daniel (ch. 2). The four visions in the second half of the book are fully apocalyptic. Many of the features that subsequently appear to be part and parcel of apocalyptic literature are already present here. At the same time there is a distinct relationship with OT prophecy, in particular as to the fundamental idea that God is the Lord of history and that there will be a consummation of history, brought about by God himself. Fundamental in this view is the notion 'that, when that consummation comes, there will be a judgment which will make manifest who are at God's side and who are at enmity with God.'<sup>20</sup> But the book is also different from later apocalyptic writings. However rich the imagery may be, there is yet a certain restraint. Many details that are common to later apocalyptic writings are absent. There is no description of the day of judgment and of all that precedes it. There is no indication of what the new kingdom will be like. There is no depiction of heaven or hell. Even some of the features which characterize late prophetic teaching about the consummation and which are present again in later apocalyptic writings are missing here. Eric Heaton mentions the following: the prophets' cosmic imagery (cf. Is. 2:12–21; 13:9–11; 24:21–23), their great battle scenes (cf. Zeph. 1:15f.; Ezek. 38, 39; Joel 3:9–17), their lurid descriptions of the fate of the wicked gentiles (cf. Zech. 14:12; Ezek. 39:12f.; Is. 34:1–4), their highly-coloured pictures of the final Kingdom as a Golden Age of peace, righteousness and prosperity (cf. Is. 2:2–4; 11:6–8; 65:17–23), and even their usual interest in the messianic leader of the New Age (cf. Zech. 3:8; 9:9–10; Mic. 5:2f; Is. 11:1ff; Jer. 23:5ff.).<sup>21</sup> In other words, the apocalyptic elements in Daniel are comparatively moderate. For this reason one has to be very cautious in one's interpretation. At any rate, the book should not be read as a time-table for the remainder of history. There is no need to seek profound



meaning in each one of the symbols or numbers employed. Here too one should constantly remember that the book primarily addressed the author's own contemporaries, his fellow-believers, whom he wanted to comfort and encourage in the days of oppression and persecution. The main thrust is quite evident: *God is the Lord of history*. Although a fierce battle is raging between the kingdoms of this world and the Kingdom of God, and the saints of the Most High are persecuted, the visions Daniel receives make it abundantly clear that one day God will intervene on behalf of his people. When that day will be, he does not know. The numbers he freely uses are not meant to calculate the exact date of the divine intervention, but they are used to underline the thought that the time is fixed and short. Once again we meet with the phenomenon of 'limited perspective'. Images of the contemporary oppressor are telescoped into the future and the oppressor assumes proportions of what afterwards is called the antichrist (cf. 8:9–14, 23–25; 11:29–41). The main message, however, is one of comfort for the persecuted saints. In his first night vision Daniel sees: 'Behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed' (7:13–14). This is the heart of the book: 'The saints of the Most High shall receive the kingdom, and possess the kingdom for ever, for ever and ever' (7:18). For ever, for ever and ever!

## The New Testament

Speaking about the future, the New Testament also employs much imagery. This is not surprising, for it is the only way to speak about a future that is unknown. So we read about trumpets (the last trumpet, 1 Cor. 15:52; angels that blow the trumpet, Rev. 8 and 9); about clouds (The Son of man shall come on the clouds of heaven, Matt. 24:30; 26:64); about a great banquet or a marriage feast (the parable in Matt. 22:1–14: the

marriage supper of the Lamb, Rev. 19:9); about a city with streets of pure gold and gates of pearl (Rev. 21); etc. Each time the question arises: to what extent should one take it literally? As to the streets of gold and the gates of pearl everyone realizes that there is no need to take these images literally; they speak of the overwhelming glory of the New Jerusalem. But what about the trumpets and the clouds? Are they meant literally?

Here too our starting point should be that the author primarily addresses his own contemporaries and always speaks against the backdrop of the Old Testament. What meaning would terms such as trumpets and clouds have had for people in Jesus' or Paul's or John's day? To those who knew their Old Testament *trumpets* were well-known instruments, which usually were related to religious or national ceremonies. The first and perhaps most awesome occurrence of the word, however, is definitely figurative. We read of a 'very loud trumpet blast', when the Lord descends on Mount Sinai and Israel is privileged to experience the divine Presence. Apparently this Presence is accompanied by 'a tropical thunderstorm, with great flashes of lightning and peals of thunder, trumpeting and echoing from peak to peak'.<sup>22</sup> Later on, Moses has two silver trumpets made. By means of them the people are called to gather at the entrance of the tent of meeting (Numb. 10:3), but in days of war they are also blown as an alarm (10:5ff.). The most common usage is reserved for the feastdays. 'On the day of your gladness also, and at your appointed feasts, and at the beginnings of your months, you shall blow the trumpets over your burnt offerings and over the sacrifices of your peace offerings; they shall serve you for remembrance before your God: I am the Lord your God' (10:10). Blowing the trumpet apparently has a multiple purpose: it may be a call into the presence of God, but also a call of alarm or to war; it may speak of salvation (on the day of Atonement), but also of pending judgment (cf. Joel 2:1); it always indicates that something important is going to happen. In the Book of Revelation trumpets are blown by seven angels (chs. 8 and 9). Undoubtedly, the trumpets here have the function of alerting people to the approaching divine



judgment (cf. Joel 2:1). When Paul speaks of the 'last trumpet' he also wants to say that something great and new and final is going to happen: 'The dead will be raised imperishable and we [who are still living] shall be changed' (1 Cor. 15:52). The emphasis is on the symbolic meaning of the trumpet and there is no reason to think of a literal trumpet; no more than in the case of the angels in Rev. 8 and 9.

*Clouds* play a part in the proclamation of Christ's return. This image too has to be seen and interpreted against the background of the Old Testament. At Sinai God is present in a cloud (Ex. 19:9; 24:16; 34:5; cf. also 16:10). The cloud covers the tent of meeting and the glory of the Lord fills the tabernacle (40:34). During all their wanderings in the desert the cloud of the Lord is upon the tabernacle by day (40:38; cf. 13:21). When the temple is dedicated by Solomon a cloud fills the house of the Lord (1 Kings 8:11). God reveals himself to Ezekiel in a great cloud with brightness round about it (Ezek. 1:4). Obviously, in the Old Testament the cloud is a phenomenon that accompanies the theophany. In the New Testament we encounter this cloud again in the narratives of the transfiguration and the ascension (Mark 9:7ff. and Acts 1:9). Once again the cloud is an intimation of God's hidden and yet real presence in the world. It is therefore not surprising that they are also mentioned in connection with the Second Coming of Christ: he shall return 'on the clouds'. Berkhof puts the question: Are they 'real' clouds? His own reply is: they are the 'most real' clouds imaginable, the clouds of the history of salvation, of Moses and Solomon and of the ascension. Naturally, they are not ordinary clouds; they are *the* clouds of *heaven*, but they do represent feelings that ordinary clouds evoke in people.<sup>23</sup> I wonder whether in this way Berkhof does not create a false contrast. The people of Israel in olden days and the disciples on the Mount of Olives must have seen something that to them looked like a cloud. On the other hand, Berkhof is undoubtedly right when he sees a surplus value in these clouds, the surplus value of the history of salvation and of the divine Presence.

Berkhof's interpretation is related to the

methodology he applies to the Jewish and Christian expectation of the future. He sees Israel's eschatology as the confession of God's faithfulness '*projected* on the screen of the future' (17/7). Likewise he regards the proclamation of the future in the New Testament as the unfolding and consummation of what is already present in Christ and in the Spirit. This present reality will one day reach its goal, in the face of sin, sorrow and death (19). After his discussion of resurrection, second coming, judgment and eternal life he calls them all 'projections on the screen of the future' of our present-day experiences with God in Christ and the Spirit (65). In his dogmatics *Christian Faith*,<sup>24</sup> following Karl Rahner, he uses the term '*extrapolation*' rather than 'projection'. 'Eschatology can only be in the form of an extrapolation from experiences of God which we acquire in our world and history' (522). In fact, this was the way in which eschatology evolved in both OT and NT times. Due to the first coming of Christ the NT knows of 'the tensional unity of present and future', whereby the latter is derived through extrapolation from the former (523).

I believe there is a great deal of truth in this idea of extrapolation. Indeed, what we already have in Christ and in the Spirit is a promise and an adumbration of the fullness that is still to come and that will be ours in the consummation. Paul calls Christ the 'first fruits' of those who have fallen asleep (1 Cor. 15:20, 23) and concerning the gift of the Spirit he says that it is the 'earnest', the down-payment (made by God), the guarantee of our full possession of salvation (2 Cor. 1:22; 5:5; Eph. 1:14). As a matter of fact, this is the way the entire Bible deals with the future. We see it clearly in the double phenomenon of promise and fulfilment in the Bible. The fundamental promises do find their fulfilment in history, but time and again the fulfilment itself becomes a new promise of greater things to come. There appears to be a basic pattern in the history of salvation. It can be represented in the following manner: A—B—C—D—E. A is the promise given to Abraham. B is the first fulfilment in the exodus and the entry into Canaan, a fulfilment that becomes a promise for further and greater fulfilment (cf. Heb.



4). C is the new fulfilment in the return from the exile, but the prophets tell the people of their time that this too is only a beginning and that there is a great deal more to come. D is the fulfilment in the coming of Jesus Christ: the redemption from sin becomes a reality. But even now there is still more to come. The final redemption is still outstanding: it will take place at the second coming of the Lord. Then the promised land will indeed become an inalienable possession (cf. Heb. 4:1, 9, 11).

Yet this development from promise to fulfilment, from a new promise to a greater fulfilment, etc., is not a gradually mounting line. Even in the history of salvation, which takes place within the context of world history, wholly unforeseen, entirely 'new' things happen, as God had already said through Isaiah: 'From this time forth I will make you hear new things, hidden things which you have not known' (48:6; cf. also 42:9; 43:19). The coming of God's Son to the world is such a new creative act of God. And so is Christ's resurrection and the coming of the Holy Spirit. Berkhof is well aware of this. In his dogmatics he points out that extrapolation is not the only term to be used in eschatology. The idea of 'discontinuity' has to be added to it. There is not a simple straight line of development from the first coming of Christ to his second coming and the subsequent consummation of world and history, but there will be a 'leap' (524/5).<sup>25</sup> These two elements (continuity and leap) are clearly expressed in the image of the return of Christ. This image denotes that one day Christ 'will be revealed in our experiential world as its secret and foundation', but it also indicates that this 'revelation will not happen as the unfolding of immanent forces, but as a new encounter-event in which humanity will meet on its way as its liberators the Son and in him the Father' (522). What we will experience then will surpass all God's works in the past and present. The last two chapters of Revelation make this abundantly clear.

### The Book of Revelation

This book has many features that are characteristic of apocalyptic literature. In fact,

the term 'apocalyptic' derives from the name of the book. The first verse reads: 'The "apokalypsis" of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants what must soon take place.' However, the book is not simply identical with the Jewish apocalyptic writings of the last centuries before Christ. There are some vital differences. Guthrie mentions the following points: the book is not pseudonymous; the focus is not on past history but on the present and the future; the author is more in alignment with the OT prophets in the denunciation of evil and in the moral exhortations to noble living; his spiritual grasp is quite different from the pedestrian and often gloomy approach of the apocalypticists.<sup>26</sup> The main difference, of course, is that Revelation is a Christian text. Redemption is no longer a matter of the future only, for Jesus has already procured salvation for his people by his death on the cross and by his resurrection. Central to the teaching of the book is that the Lamb which John sees standing, as though it had been slain, takes the scroll, containing the further development of history, from the hand of him who was seated on the throne (5:6,7). The future of history and the history of the future are in the hands of the Lamb!

Another remarkable feature is that the author not only uses the term 'apocalypse' but also speaks of his book as 'the words of the prophecy' (1:3). Evidently he numbers himself with the prophets of the apostolic church. 'He claims [his message] to be an authoritative revelation given through the medium of vision' and undoubtedly he interprets the visions he receives 'by the aid of the symbolism which had become established in apocalyptic literature and which was part of the furniture of the mind.'<sup>27</sup> But the message itself is determined by the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The Lamb is also 'the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, who has conquered' (5:5), and the four living creatures and the twenty-four angels sing a new song: 'Worthy art thou to take the scroll and to open its seals, for thou wast slain and by thy blood didst ransom men for God from every tribe and tongue and people and nation, and hast made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on earth' (6:9,10).



Beasley-Murray makes an interesting observation in reference to the words 'made known' in 1:1. The Greek verb is 'semaino', which in classical Greek was already used for prophesying the future, in the sense of giving 'vague' indications of coming events. Beasley-Murray believes that the author wishes to make clear that he does not provide photographs of heaven, nor do his descriptions of coming events constitute history written in advance. He uses 'sign language' to portray the invisible realities of the present and the future of man and his history.<sup>28</sup> Naturally, this 'sign language' also implies that the book is hard to interpret. This is most likely the reason why John Calvin wrote commentaries on all the book of the Bible, with the exception of Revelation!

Historically there are three main interpretations. In English we usually speak of (1) the *preterist*, (2) the *historicist*, and (3) the *futurist* interpretation. German theologians usually speak of (1) *zeitgeschichtlich*, (2) *kirchen-oder weltgeschichtlich*, and (3) *endgeschichtlich*.

(1) The presupposition of the first interpretation is that John addresses his contemporaries and limits himself to *his own time*. He observes that in the Roman empire of his own day and age the evil forces are preparing themselves to persecute and destroy the church. In fact, they are doing it already, for John himself has been deported to Patmos 'on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus' (1:9). According to this first interpretation there is no predictive prophecy in the book. It is meant both as a protest against the attempt of the forces of evil to destroy the church and as an encouragement for the persecuted congregations. Some present-day commentaries regard the book as a pamphlet of the Christian resistance movement, without denying, however, that there are also references to the far future.

(2) In the second interpretation the book is read as a *continuous story* of world history and in particular of church history, from the ascension of Christ to the day of his second coming. In symbolical language some of the most important events in the history of church and world are mentioned in advance. This interpretation is found throughout the history of theology. We mention a few names:

Tyconius (fourth century), Augustine (in a very moderate way), the Reformers (in as far as they ever dealt with this book; this kind of interpretation enabled them to refer to the papacy of their days as the antichrist), Bengel (19th century), and others.

(3) The third interpretation regards the book (at least from chapter 4 onward) as a symbolical description of the *final phase* of history. Revelation describes the great battle between God and the evil powers in the end time. It will be a chaotic time, a time of tribulation. God's judgments will be poured out upon the earth and God's own people will be persecuted. But in the end God will defeat all the powers of evil and establish his eternal kingdom. A more moderate futurist view is propounded by quite a number of evangelical exegetes of our day. G. E. Ladd holds that 'the seven letters are addressed to seven historical churches that are representative of the entire church. The seals represent the forces in history, however long it lasts, by which God works out His redemptive and judicial purposes leading up to the end. The events beginning with ch. 7 lie in the future and will attend the final disposition of the divine will for human history.'<sup>29</sup>

A remarkable combination of interpretations (2) and (3) is found in *dispensational theology*. Here the letters to the seven churches are read as representing seven eras in church history, from the apostolic age to the return of Christ.<sup>30</sup> Hal Lindsey calls the chapters in which he deals with the seven letters: a panorama of church history. Next he devotes a chapter to the rapture (on the basis of 4:1). Rev. 4 and 5 deal with the raptured church, which is already in heaven. Consequently chapters 6–19 do not deal with the church on earth, but describe the seven year period of the great tribulation and the fate of Israel at the hands of the antichrist. Rev. 20 speaks of the millennium that begins when Christ returns, accompanied by his saints.

Personally, I find none of these interpretations really satisfying. Each has some strong points, but in each case the weak points outstrip the stronger ones. (1) takes the historical situation of John's congregations seriously, but ignores the predictive element. (2) takes the future aspect seriously, but overdoes it, when it is too confident that it



can pinpoint concrete future facts. Interpreters belonging to this school of thought never really agree as to the precise episodes indicated by John. Nor do they explain why this survey of future history is restricted to Western Europe. Moreover, what would be the use of such a survey to the people of John's own day, for whom the prophecy was meant primarily? In (3) we encounter similar problems. It removes the book from its historical setting, but offers no answer to the question why this kind of book, dealing with the end of history, would be of vital importance to the apostolic church. The same also applies to the dispensationalist view.

I prefer a different approach. I believe we should take our starting point in the theme of the book, which is clearly stated in the vision in chapter 5: The outcome of history is in the hands of Jesus Christ, whom John sees standing before the throne as a Lamb, 'as though it had been slain', and who receives the scroll sealed with seven seals from the hand of God. In the visions that are given to John Jesus shows him that a great conflict is dominating history. The first manifestations of this conflict are already visible in John's own day, but it is a small beginning only. The visions enable him to trace this conflict between God's kingdom and the kingdom of evil through all of history.

In itself this view of history as being one great struggle between God and the forces of evil was not unique; it was shared by Jewish apocalyptic. But there is a decisive difference between Jewish and Johannine apocalyptic: it is John's Christology. His book starts with the vision of one like a son of man, standing in the midst of the lampstands (the congregations) and saying: 'I am the first and the last, and the living one; I died, and behold am alive for evermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades' (1:17-19). And the book ends with the wonderful picture of the new Jerusalem, where nothing accursed will be any more, for 'the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants shall worship him [God and the Lamb are seen as a unity]' (22:3). We find this very same christology throughout the entire book<sup>31</sup> and it is determinative for the book's view of history and the final outcome of history.

## 'Parallelism'

I feel rather attracted by the hermeneutical approach of W. Hendriksen, who regards Revelation as consisting of seven sections, each extending from the beginning to the end of the new dispensation.<sup>32</sup> The theme of the book is 'the victory of Christ and His Church over the dragon (Satan) and his helpers' (8). Hendriksen distinguishes the following seven sections: 1) Christ in the midst of the seven golden lampstands (chapters 1-3). 2) The book with the seven seals (4-7). 3) The seven trumpets of judgment (8-11). 4) The woman and the Man-child persecuted by the dragon and his helpers (12-14). 5) The seven bowls of wrath (15, 16). 6) The fall of the great harlot and of the beast (17-19). 7) The judgment upon the dragon, followed by the new heaven and earth (20-22). He goes on to state that the seven sections may be grouped into two major divisions: chapters 1-11 (the first three sections) and chapters 12-22 (the last four sections). Both major sections reveal a progress in depth or intensity of spiritual conflict. In the first major division we see the church persecuted, but also avenged, protected and victorious. The second major division shows the spiritual background of this struggle: it is a conflict between the Christ and the dragon (Satan), but Christ (and so his church) is victorious (23).

Each of the seven sections deals with the *entire history* after the first coming of Christ and ends with some aspect of the consummation. But it is no mere repetition. Each section looks at the history *post Christum natum* from its own peculiar perspective. There is also a degree of progress. 'The closer we approach the end of the book the more our attention is directed to the final judgment and that which lies beyond it. The seven sections are arranged, as it were, in an ascending, climactic order. The book reveals a gradual progress in eschatological emphasis' (35). This does not mean, however, that we should read the book as if it were dealing with the future only. The book is full of references to contemporaneous events and circumstances (44). In fact, the future is important because it illuminates the present, just as much as the present contains the key



to interpret the symbols that speak of the future.

## The language of Revelation

The language is commensurate with the nature of the book. 'The book of Revelation is a series of pictures. The pictures move. They are full of action. Everything is constantly astir. One picture makes place for another; and then another, and another' (37). In history a continuous battle is going on between God and the powers of evil. The whole world is involved. Even more, both heaven and earth are involved. Due to this immense struggle history has a *chaotic* character. This is true not only of the life of the individual human being, as in the Greek drama (Oedipus, Antigone, Orpheus), but also of humanity as a whole, yes, of all reality. The word '*all*' is a typically apocalyptic word. People are ransomed from *every* tribe and tongue and people and nation (6:9). The 144.000 sealed are from *every* tribe of the sons of Israel (7:4). The great multitude is from *every* nation, from *all* tribes and peoples and tongues (7:9). God will wipe away *every* tear ((7:17; 21:4). *All* who dwell on earth will worship the beast (13:8). *All*, both small and great, both rich and poor, both free and slave, are marked on the right hand or the forehead (13:16). Behold, I make *all* things new (21:5).

But the chaotic nature of history is only one side of the apocalyptic coin. The other side is that *God will conquer* all evil. The beast and the false prophet (19:20), and the dragon as well (20:10), are thrown 'into the lake of fire and brimstone'. The final picture is that of the New Jerusalem.

This chaotic reality of history and the perspective of God's victory are expressed by certain linguistic means. The phenomenon of parallel sections, each with its own peculiar perspective, reinforces the emphasis on the chaotic nature of history. So much is going on that it bewilders the reader. This is intensified by the fact that each section deals with the *totality* of history. But how does one express the idea of totality? How, for instance, does one express the idea that God's judgment of the world is of an all-embracing nature? Here the author uses the stratagem

of dividing the totality into phases. 'A third of the earth was burned up . . . , a third of the sea became blood . . . , a third of the waters became wormwood . . . , a third of the sun was struck . . . ', etc. (8:7–12). In the chapters 17–19 the destruction of Babylon is pictured in a similar repetitious vein. And yet it is not mere repetition. Each time a new facet is added. In addition, the almost baffling repetition prepares us for a final and definite judgment (20:11–15). The same effect is also produced by the ploy of repeatedly delaying the final phase of an event. When the seventh seal is opened by the Lamb, one expects the end. Is seven not the number of fullness? But—nothing happens. There is only 'suspense'. 'There was silence in heaven for about half an hour' (8:1). Next, the seven trumpets are blown. Again one expects the end to be near. The angel himself says, that there will be no more delay (10:6). And indeed, after the angel has blown the seventh trumpet the end seems to have come. Voices in heaven say that the kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ (11:15) and the twenty-four elders worship God. But suddenly in chapter 12 a new picture appears: the woman and the male child, persecuted by the dragon and his helpers. The same period of history is looked at again, but now from the perspective of the persecution of the church by satan and of the spiritual battle in the heavenly places which lies behind it. This constant changing of the perspective on history, while each time the same period is covered, confirms us in our opinion that the hermeneutics of 'parallelism' is the key that may open the door of Revelation.

## Imagery

It stands to reason that this chaotic reality of world history between the comings of Christ is best expressed in images. The power of images over concepts is that the former usually are multi-faceted and polysemic. Concepts are clean, expressing an idea in a very clear manner, but also delimitating its meaning. Images often convey more than just one precise meaning, because they carry all kinds of overtones and connotations. Quite



often there is a surplus of meaning, going beyond the strict meaning of the image.

All this is certainly true of the images used in Revelation. For this very reason we should be cautious and not 'trans-late' the images too quickly and too rashly into concepts. For instance, by saying that the word 'bride' stands for the Christian congregation and by replacing it, as soon as we encounter it, by the word 'congregation' or 'church'. Or by replacing the image of 'the great red dragon' by the word 'satan', or the image of the 'beast' by the antichrist. However true such interpretations may be, they take away the force inherent in the imagery itself. We must always begin by reading the imagery in its totality and allow it to make its own impression on us. Take, for instance, the rich imagery of Rev. 12: woman—sun—moon—seven stars—with child—pangs of birth—a dragon—heads—horns—diadems—tail—stars—heaven—earth—male child—rod of iron—throne of God—wilderness. All these nouns evoke a picture of something extraordinary and they arouse our emotions, even before we try to interpret them conceptually. This stirring of our emotions is enhanced when we notice the force of the verbs used in this same chapter: crying out—sweeping down—casting—the dragon standing before the woman—the woman bringing forth a male child—the child being caught up—the woman fleeing. Before we even understand what it is all about, we are gripped by the imagery. We feel that something of the greatest importance is happening here and that a momentous message is being communicated to us. Only now we can begin to 'trans-late' the images into conceptual meanings, but now the overtones and connotations stay with us and they prevent us from reading the message as an apparently simple statement of fact: there is a kind of struggle going on between the church and the satan. Allowing the imagery to sink in, we are overwhelmed by its turbulent motion and we realize that it is not just any kind of struggle, but a life-and-death struggle, in which we ourselves are involved. The images in Rev. 12 are not a set of slides, but they are really a 'movie', a moving picture. To quote Hendriksen again: 'The pictures move. They are full of action. Everything is con-

stantly astir. One picture makes place for another; and then another, and another'. We must open ourselves, our emotions and our minds, to the dynamics that are inherent in the pictures themselves and that are intensified by way they constantly change.

This constant changing of the pictures is another indication that Revelation should not be read as a report-in-advance of events that can be pinpointed by us, either because they have already taken place or because they are taking place in our own time. I agree with Hendriksen's conclusion 'that the seals, trumpets, bowls, and similar pictures, refer not to specific events or details of history, but to *principles* that are operating throughout the history of the world, especially throughout the new dispensation' (41). I would, however, prefer to speak of 'motifs' rather than of 'principles'. 'Motif' is a term used for a theme that is being developed in a dramatic, musical or literary composition. John's book of Revelation is such a literary composition, and the history it depicts may be called a dramatic composition. In a very colourful way John's visions lay bare the central motifs of world history between the ascension and the parousia. They signify not only human and satanic conduct, but also God's moral government. Being 'motifs' they refer to 'things that happen again and again and again' (42). This is also the reason why Revelation is always up to date. These motifs were not only in evidence in the John's own century, but also in the sixteenth. They are still present in our own day, and it will not be different tomorrow!

The language employed in the book is subservient to this dynamic message. Cromphout mentions three elements.<sup>33</sup> In the first place, the author makes much use of the technique of *accumulation*. One vision chases another, one calamity pursues another. In addition, within the various visions certain elements are repeated: hymns in scenes of adoration, warnings and exhortations in scene of judgment. It is interesting to note that the most frequent word is the conjunction 'and'. By this simple word the various elements within a vision are strung together. In fact, the visions themselves are likewise strung together. Usually the vision itself begins with 'and'. Modern translations often render the



Greek 'kai' by 'then', thereby creating the idea of a chronological order. But in the Greek text the visions themselves are just linked by this simple 'and', and so they almost merge into one another.

Secondly, the language of Revelation is a language of stark contrasts, death and life; curse and blessing; defeat and conquest. Two cities are set over against each other: Babylon/Rome and Jerusalem. Likewise there are two kinds of adoration: of God and the Lamb, on the one hand, of the dragon and the beast, on the other. Likewise two female figures: the woman and the great harlot. Throughout the whole book there are two levels: below and above, earth and heaven, and all events are related to both levels. The first vision takes place on earth; the last is a vision of heaven and earth which have become one in the new Jerusalem. All that happens between these two visions is a constant moving from 'above' to 'below', and *vice versa*. This is no doubt the reason why angels play such a prominent role. They are the 'mediators' between the two levels. From heaven they announce what is going to happen on earth. Even more, they set the events into motion, explain them and thus make us participants in the secret, invisible side of history.

Thirdly, the language of Revelation is a 'secret' language. In those days of persecution by the Roman empire certain things cannot be mentioned by name, but only in a language that reveals and hides at the same time. Rome is mentioned nowhere, but every 'insider' (and John's Christian readers are such insiders) knows what Babylon or the great harlot stands for. We no longer know precisely what John meant when he said that the number of the beast was a 'human number', the number 666 (13:18), but we may rest assured that his readers understood it and perhaps they chuckled when they read it.

Eschatology is an essential part of our Christian faith. The letter to the Hebrews speaks of faith as 'the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen' (11:1). Christian eschatology tries to intimate what these things hoped for and not (yet) seen may be. But it does so in the language of prophecy and apocalyptic, a language that requires responsible and meticulous interpre-

tation. We started with a reference to Marshall's article in which he called eschatology a 'slippery word'. There is even more reason to call hermeneutics, as it has developed in our century, a 'slippery word'. When we bring the two together, the road becomes so slippery that it is almost impassable. In this article I have tried to give a few hints that may help us to walk on this road without too many accidents for our faith and theology.

- 1 I. H. Marshall, 'Slippery Words: 1 Eschatology', in *Expository Times*, 89 (1977-8), 264-269.
- 2 Paul D. Hanson, *The Dawn of Apocalyptic*, 1975 and 'Apocalypticism' in *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, Supplementary Volume*, 1976, 28-34.
- 3 Cf. Richard J. Bauckham, 'The rise of apocalypticism', *Themelios*, Vol. 3 (1978), 10-23, especially p. 12.
- 4 Claus Westermann, *Isaiah 40-66*, 1969, 297.
- 5 Brian Hebblethwaite, *The Christian Hope*, 1984, 15.
- 6 Cf. Leon Morris, *Apocalyptic*, 1973, 34ff.
- 7 *Art. cit.*, 14.
- 8 Bauckham, *art. cit.*, 17, 18.
- 9 It has been said (Käsemann) that the apocalyptic note of futurity was entirely absent in Jesus' preaching, but James G. D. Dunn rightly observes that 'to set a non-apocalyptic Jesus between an apocalyptic John the Baptist on the one hand and an apocalyptic primitive Christian community on the other, is to strain the 'criterion of dissimilarity' beyond breaking point' (*Jesus and the Spirit*, 1988, 42).
- 10 A. Berkeley Mickelsen, *Interpreting the Bible*, 1963, 287, 295.
- 11 Such as *The Late Great Planet Earth*, 1970; *Satan is Alive and Well on Planet Earth*, 1972; *There's a New World Coming*, 1973.
- 12 D. S. Russell, *Apocalyptic: Ancient and Modern*, 1978, 25.
- 13 Mickelsen, *op. cit.*, 294ff.
- 14 G. B. Caird, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible*, 1981, 258. Caird maintains that in this bifocal vision the prophets were able to distinguish between two types of vision. In some visions this may be true, but it certainly does not apply to all (e.g., Joel 2).
- 15 Russell, *op. cit.*, 1.
- 16 Adrio König, *The Eclipse of Christ in Eschatology*, 1989, 207.
- 17 H. Bavinck, *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek* IV, 803.
- 18 Thus G. R. Beasley-Murray in *The New Century Bible Commentary Revelation*, 1981, 331.
- 19 Thus W. Hendriksen, *More than conquerors*, 1962, 206.



- 20 N. Porteous, *Daniel*, 1965, 14f.
- 21 Eric Heaton, *Daniel* (Torch Bible Paperbacks), 1964, 34/5.
- 22 George A. F. Knight, *Theology as narration*, 1976, 132.
- 23 H. Berkhof, *Gegronde verwachting* 1967, 25. E. T. A *Well-founded Hope*. Since the English translation is not available to me, I quote from the Dutch edition. The page numbers are given between brackets in the text of the article.
- 24 H. Berkhof, *Christian Faith*, 1979. The original Dutch edition was published in 1973. The sixth, revised edition is from 1990. There are no significant changes in the section on eschatology.
- 25 We also find the idea of a leap in other parts of Berkhof's dogmatics. Jesus is the fruit of a new and creative act of God (283). The legend of the virgin birth is an indication that Jesus, the Son by pre-eminence, did not arise out of the empirical human world, but is a new creation which man cannot bring forth but only receive (293). Likewise the resurrection of Christ is a creative act from God's side (308). Later on Berkhof uses the word 'leap' for the resurrection, which he calls a provisional leap (519). At this very point he also makes the link with the future. 'We live *after* the provisional leap in Jesus' resurrection, but *before* the definitive leap of our world that is guaranteed in it.'
- 26 Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, 1990 (1970), 967.
- 27 Beasley-Murray, *op. cit.*, 20–21.
- 28 *Op. cit.*, 51.
- 29 G. E. Ladd, 'The Book of Revelation', in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, 1988, IV, 174. Cf. Ibidem, *A Commentary of the Revelation of John*, 1972. Cf. also D. A. Carson, Douglas J. Moo and Leon Morris (*An Introduction to the New Testament*, 1992, 483), who also opt for a futuristic view, but do recognize that John pictures the eschatological climax against the backdrop of events in his own day.
- 30 Cf. Hal Lindsey, *There's a New World Coming*, 1973.
- 31 Beasley-Murray (*op. cit.*, 24f.) has shown that the Christology of Revelation, when compared with that of the other NT writings, is 'advanced'. 'Constantly the attributes of God are ascribed to Christ.'
- 32 This 'parallel' view is ably advocated and defended by W. Hendriksen, *More than Conquerors*, (first edition 1940), 1962. Again the page references are given (between brackets) in the text of the article.
- 33 Frans Cromphout, 'De taal van de Apokalyps', in *De sluier opgelicht? Apokalyptiek in oud en nieuw testament*, 1979, 38ff.