

Tuesday in the Last Week after Pentecost

November 24, 2020

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

Year Two, Proper 29: Revelation 12:1–12; Psalm 96:1–8*; Luke 21:5–9*

One of the things I don't remember hearing while growing up Southern Baptist is the distinction between prophetic and apocalyptic writing. Israel's prophets were concerned with the events of their own time and place. One example from Jeremiah: Jeremiah said to King Zedeki'ah, "Thus says the LORD . . . If you will surrender to the princes of . . . Babylon, then your life shall be spared, and this city shall not be burned with fire, and you and your house shall live. But if you do not surrender . . . then this city shall be given into the hand of the Chalde'ans, and they shall burn it with fire, and you shall not escape from their hand."¹ He did not surrender. He tried to escape but was caught. He watched his sons be executed. Then he was blinded, put in chains, and taken in fetters to Babylon. Jerusalem was emptied of its people; its temple, palace, great houses, and walls were torn down.²

Apocalyptic, on the other hand, is the term given to visions, usually filled with symbolic images and events.

¹ Jeremiah 38:17–18.

² Jeremiah 39:6–10.

In the Old Testament, the Book of Daniel is apocalyptic writing. Daniel, for example, dreams a vision of four beasts,³ whose deaths “make way for the kingdom of God.”⁴ Scholars see echoes of this kind of writing in other Old Testament prophets.⁵

The Greek word “apocalypse” means “revelation.” It’s the word Simeon speaks to Mary and Joseph when he meets the infant Jesus in the temple, “a light for revelation for the peoples.”⁶ Today’s lesson from the Apocalypse or Revelation to John is very much part of the larger story of the last book of the New Testament. In the vision, the author who calls himself John (without further identification), of the woman and child, Christian writers see Eve and the serpent are facing off again.⁷ Eve represents the people of God, “her ‘male child’ is the Messiah.”⁸

³ Daniel 7:1–28.

⁴ *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocrypha: Revised Standard Version, Expanded Edition*, [1977], 1078, n.7:1–28.

⁵ *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, (ODCC) 2ed. (New York: Oxford University Press 1978), s.v. “Apocalyptic Literature,” 69.

⁶ Luke 2:32. Translation: François Bovon, *Luke 1: A Commentary on the Gospel of Luke 1:1–9:50*, trans. Christine Thomas, Hermeneia, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), 96.

⁷ Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 790.

⁸ Wilfred J. Harrington, *Revelation*, Sacra Pagina (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2008), 130.

The vocabulary and grammar of Revelation make clear that he was not the author of the fourth gospel. That said, the theology of the fourth gospel is known to him. Jesus' death on the cross, not his birth or resurrection, is Jesus' glorification to heaven and Satan's eternal defeat.⁹

Back in the day when I was in the third and final year of seminary, I was assigned to chant the last section of today's lesson, appointed for the Feast of Saint Michael and All Angels: "Now war arose in heaven, Michael and his angels fighting against the dragon; and the dragon and his angels fought, but they were defeated and there was no longer any place for them in heaven."¹⁰ The visions we heard today shape the rest of the narrative of this book.¹¹ God will intervene to save the mother and child.

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son,
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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⁹ Harrington, 130.

¹⁰ Revelation 12:7–8.

¹¹ Brown, 790.